

- **Gospel [Matthew 22:15-22](#)**

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

**First Things First
October 22, 2023**

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First things first. Our worship this morning, and our reading of this passage are taking place in a week of sad and traumatic events abroad and at home. The war in Israel, the bombing of a hospital in Gaza, the war in the Ukraine, the struggles of our democracy—not to mention the health challenges and losses we and our loved ones may be facing—it all weighs upon us, even as we gather here, an Easter people living transformed lives.

We can't help but have questions, like why is this happening, why does God allow this to happen, questions that may seem unanswerable.

But the Lord is with us, even here, even now, sitting with unanswerable questions. That old hymn says it so well,

*Tell me Thy secret, help me bear
The strain of toil, the fret of care
Teach me Thy patience, still with Thee
In closer, dearer company
... In peace that only Thou canst give
With Thee, O Master, let me live*

The Lord tells Moses, *“you cannot see my face directly, but I will put you in a place where you can see me as I pass by.”* And in this passage, Jesus shows us how to put first things first, how to see the Lord as He passes by.

Our passage today follows right after that difficult parable of about the wedding banquet for the King's son, that strange banquet that began with the slaughter of the A list guests who blew off the invitation, and ended with one of the invited guests being thrown into the outer darkness because he wore the wrong thing and had nothing to say when the King asked him about it. That parable ended with those lines we are probably still pondering, “Many are called but few are chosen.”

The Pharisees were more than pondering what does Jesus mean, they are moving into action, looking for a way to trap him, and stop him. By this point, they've decided either Jesus is a real crackpot or a serious danger, either a lunatic or a liar, because after listening to that last parable about “many are called but few are chosen,” they are now closing in with such an evil intent that Jesus calls them out, “You hypocrites,” he says. Outwardly righteous and pure, with an evil intent skillfully hidden. Later in Matthew 23, he says in verse 25 and 26

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence...First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside

also will be clean... on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

The words of the Pharisees echo the hypocrisy Jesus heard from Satan when he was out fasting in the wilderness, when Satan tried to tempt him. The third and final temptation was when Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and said in Matthew 4:9: "All these I will give to you if you will fall down and worship me." And Jesus answered, in verse 10, "Away with you Satan, for it is written, "worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

In a similar way, the Pharisees also seek to trap Jesus. First they lay on some flattery, yes, he's sincere, teaches the way of God in accordance with truth, yes, yes yes. Then they slip in the trick question one scholar called a "gotcha" question. Their question plays on two kinds of "law," civil law and religious law.

When asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, Jesus asked for a coin, a denarius. A denarius was a silver coin worth about 20 cents, used to pay taxes and also the standard payment for a day's work. the amount paid to the workers in parable of the vineyard.

Then Jesus asks, whose face is on the coin? The answer is obvious, it's the emperor, Caesar. And hence the famous line, "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar, and render unto God the things that are God's."

Then the Pharisees go away. And we are left with the question, “what does it mean to render unto God the things that are God’s?”

I assert we don’t have a problem rendering unto Caesar, what is Caesar’s—money, the things of the world—we got that. Our challenge is how do we render unto God what belongs to God? How do we tell the difference between what belongs to the world and what belongs to God. Maybe it’s about boundaries. Maybe it’s about keeping “First things first.”

Later on in this chapter, in verses 36-40, Jesus simplifies the law into one great commandment, “You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Will we see the Lord as He passes by?

When the Pharisee asked, “but who is my neighbor,” Jesus answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a parable so famous everyone knows the answer. The one who stopped to help a Jewish man who had been assaulted and left on the side of the road for dead after a priest and a Pharisee had passed him by, that stranger of a marginalized race, turns out to have been the good neighbor.

The good neighbor is whoever who loves his neighbor as himself. But these days that simple act of loving our neighbor as ourselves can seem complicated.

Blame can be so much easier, as if we have done something to solve the problem when we have found someone to blame for it.

Probably because it's so much easier to blame or shame someone who is different, the Great Commandment was given as a Commandment, not as a suggestion. Because sometimes it's hard work to render unto God the things that are God's. Sometimes we have disagreeable neighbors, difficult people, you know, those "Difficult people"??

God's law is, love 'em anyway.

Oh yeah it takes practice.

So how do we learn to love people no matter what?

The same way the pianist gets to Carnegie Hall—practice, practice, practice.

To render unto God what belongs to God, we turn away from false gods and fake answers, like drugs, alcohol and consumerism. And we choose to practice unconditional love. First Things first.

"First things first" is a slogan counselors and sponsors tell people who are trying to get sober. First things first, the sponsor says. Just don't pick up that first drink. No matter what.

First things first. Render unto the emperor what is the emperor's and render unto God, that what is God's. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Two

sides of the same coin. We can do this. We can practice. Together. One day at a time. First things first. Then we will see the Lord as He passes by.