

Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

“Imitators of Christ”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus’ words about giving “*to the emperor*” and “*to God the things that are God’s*,” remind us that we are people with a foot in two kingdoms. We are not either-or; rather, we live within the complexities and contradictions of civic life while also aspiring to the things that are God’s.

Within Matthew’s gospel narrative, Jesus has entered Jerusalem to “*Hosannahs*” and upon entering the temple grounds, he has also driven the money changers from the temple. It is Holy Week, and while he was teaching, the Pharisees and Herodians approached Jesus with a question about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. If Jesus approved the paying of taxes, he would offend the religious nationalism of the Pharisees, and if he disapproved the paying of taxes, he would offend the Herodians, who were loyal to Herod and Roman rule.

Typically, people arrived at the temple from different regions and nations to pay the annual temple tax, a tribute tax to Rome. The only money allowed inside the temple grounds for this tax-offering was the Jewish Shekel. To pay this tax, people would exchange the everyday Roman Denarius for the Jewish Shekel at the temple entrance because the Denarius was not allowed on temple grounds.

So, upon hearing the Pharisees and Herodians’ question, and sensing their malice, Jesus said, “*Show me the coin used for the tax.*” Jesus was in a sense saying, “Show me the money!” They then presented him with the one coin they should not have had on them – a Roman Denarius. This coin revealed that they too participated in the Roman economic system. It revealed that they were not above the tax, but that they too also used the Denarius in everyday life.

As all of us know, coins are often engraved with the image of emperors, kings, queens, and politicians. In the case of the Denarius, it bore the image of Emperor Tiberius, and was inscribed, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of divine Augustus.” In other words, this coin, engraved with the name “Caesar, son of the divine Augustus,” broke the first commandment against no other God than Yahweh, and against graven images.

By calling them “hypocrites” Jesus was revealing that the Pharisees and Herodians were no different than all people who participate in the systems of this world. The word “hypocrite” was literally an actor who wore a mask, an actor pretending to be something they really are not. The

Pharisees were pretending to be righteous and nationalistic, and the Herodians to be loyal to Herod and Rome, while remaining Jewish. The coin proved their participation in an oppressive economic system by the foreign occupying Roman government.

By calling them “hypocrites” – actors and pretenders – Jesus was saying they were not the holy leaders that they “appeared” to be. They were not imitators of God; they only appeared to be. Jesus’ words remind us that life is not about pretending; life is about using all our gifts both in the everyday of the secular world and for the God whom we follow each day.

Paul wrote as much to the Thessalonians, “*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution, you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*” The Thessalonians were not play-acting or pretending, but under persecution, they lived as imitators of Jesus Christ. They lived as the image of Christ so that others saw Christ in them. God’s image was inscribed upon their hearts and in their words guiding them in daily life.

Indeed, Paul writes, “*For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known.*” Theirs was a living witness in imitation of Christ. When we imitate the compassion, love and justice of Christ, Christ’s image and word become known through us. Imitating Christ leads to unity in our shared humanity with all people, giving hope and knowledge of “*the things of God,*” “*in every place,*” helping to overcome discord, oppression, and war.

Yet Paul doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say, “*you turned from idols to serve a living and true God*” – “you turned from worshipping graven images of Rome, the emperor, and money to serve the living and true God.” Paul is declaring that in their imitation of Christ, Christians make known the invisible God because the image of Christ is engraved upon their hearts.

Paul hints at what imitating Christ looks like by describing their “*work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope.*” When we work in faith, labor with love, and steadfastly give hope to others, we become the image of Christ as faith, love, and hope for others.

Yet, Jesus’ words to the religious leaders, “Show me the money,” also reveal our participation in this world’s often unjust economic systems. Though our offerings bear images of the powers of this world, of governments, leaders, and nations, Jesus’ words also challenge us to participate in this world through faith by overcoming images that degrade, oppress, and dehumanize others. Imitating Christ, we use our resources to justly support our nation, this world, and all peoples.

Since antiquity there is one place to which emperors, governments, and nations have sought to gain access – to human hearts and minds. By saying “*give to God the things that are God’s,*” Jesus is declaring that our hearts and minds – the totality of our very being – are to be in service to God. We serve not as actors, but as human beings who have been created in God’s image. Like the words we will sing in a moment, “*Take my life, that I may be consecrated, Lord, to thee; take my moments and my days; let them flow in endless praise,*” by imitating Christ, we give wholly of ourselves to the holy things of God with our time, talents, and financial resources. Jesus and Paul are lifting us – our vision, hearts, and ambitions – upward toward the God who loves all the world so that we might live unreservedly in this world.

Don’t pretend to be a cultural Christian; rather, trust that in imitating Christ, Christ’s forgiveness, love, and transformation will flow outward from you to all people.

Whose image and inscription are engraved upon on your heart? Be imitators of Christ. Give of yourselves to this world so that through you Christ might transform this world.

At the end of your life, what will be the image and inscription written about your life? Bear his image in your hearts and upon your actions. Be imitators of Christ.

In this world of darkness, tears, and war, he rescued you from death so that you might rescue others with works of faith, labors of love, and steadfastness of hope. Amen.