

Allegiances
(Matthew 22: 15-22)

- Our passage today is a continuation of the Pharisees' challenge of Jesus. They have questioned his authority which then placed them in a situation which must have been hard on their pride—when Jesus answered their question with a question of his own, they could not answer as they wanted because they feared his audience of followers. They did not dare admit to knowing the source of Jesus' authority because it would negate all they stood for. Following that challenge Jesus proceeds to tell parable after parable, each of which is an indictment against them and their use of legalism. Their anger grows over these return challenges of Jesus of their authority. These interactions in the Temple courtyard only serve to increase their determination to find a way to discredit or destroy Jesus and thus eliminate the threat he poses to their status. Direct challenges did not work so they seek some allies and begin their plotting. This is where we are in the story today. The narrative which describes this effort is found in all three of the synoptic gospels. It is located by all of them in the Temple courtyard where Jesus is teaching to the gathered crowds visiting Jerusalem, many of whom believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah who will deliver them from Roman oppression. They would view any support of the Romans by Jesus as a betrayal. In this plot to discredit Jesus, the Pharisees have teamed up with a group called the Herodians. We know who the Pharisees are—those legalistic religious leaders who are obsessed with the Law, tradition and their interpretation of both. The Herodians are just what the name suggests, supporters of the Roman puppet king Herod who sits upon Israel's throne purely at the whim of the Roman Emperor. These two groups are not natural allies. The Pharisees believe that they as God's representative should have final authority while the Herodians are totally invested in the Roman occupation which is their source of power and authority. But they find a common purpose in the attempt to discredit Jesus who recognizes the authority of neither group. They come up with a question for Jesus, not because they want an answer, but because they think that no matter whether Jesus gives a positive or a negative answer to the question, it will discredit him with those

who are his followers or it will put him into direct conflict with the Roman authorities. They send a group of their disciples along with the Herodians to Jesus with the question, but before asking it, they begin by praising Jesus. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one." This seems to be an attempt to flatter Jesus and perhaps lull him into thinking that they are truly seeking to have a question answered. They are presenting themselves to Jesus as seekers of the truth who will accept his judgment. Jesus, they say, we know you will tell us the truth no matter what. Of course, they believe that no matter what Jesus says it will be offensive to someone and lead to his loss of credibility. They want Jesus to declare a position, so this flattery is designed to back him into a corner so that he has to choose one of the options they give him. Then comes the well known question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The emperor's tax was a tax the citizens of Israel paid to the Roman emperor which supported the armies which oppressed them. Jesus' first response indicates he realizes this is a test, a way to try to trap him. He knows exactly what they are trying to do. He begins again by calling them hypocrites. Those of you who came to the presentation of Biblical coins earlier this summer got a look at one of these coins used to pay the tax at the time of Jesus. We are told in Scripture that these questioners produced a denarius which was the coin used to pay the tax. The denarius was a silver coin of a certain weight which made its value a known quantity as opposed to many of the locally produced coins. Because of this the religious leaders liked to receive it in payment. They provided moneychangers in the gentile area of the courtyard to convert those coins into ones which could be brought into the Temple itself. On one side of the coins was stamped an image of Tiberius Caesar, who was considered divine by the Romans. The title of the image read: Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus. Remember the commandment: Thou shall have No graven images." The fact that a coin with a human image on it, much less one which named that human divine was produced in the Temple courtyard validated Jesus' charge that those who brought the question were hypocrites. The other side of the coin declares that Tiberius was a high priest. No such coin should have

been available in the Temple at all. That it was available discredited the questioners, not Jesus. But the coin was quickly brought to Jesus, who as usual posed a question of his own, "Whose image and whose title are there?" The image and title are given on the coin are named. And then the answer to the question comes as one of the well known quotes of Jesus which may also be one of the worst understood sayings which are recorded. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." I grew up hearing the King James translation: Render therefore unto Caesar those things which are Caesar's. Even today that is a quote that many know, even if they don't know the context for it. Those who brought the question we are told were amazed by Jesus' answer and they went away, at least for a time. They had not succeeded in getting Jesus to give an answer which could be used against him with either the Romans or those who were his followers. This quote is often taken to mean that the material possessions we have are to be separated from our spiritual lives; that Jesus doesn't care what you do with mundane things like money. It is also used as a basis for separation of church and state, for declaring that the church should not be involved in political matters. Initially looking at the first clause of Jesus' statement indicates that the tax should be paid, since the emperor's image and inscription are plainly on the coin so that it would fall under the group of things which belong to the emperor. That is how the Pharisees and Herodians understood the comment. But then there is that second clause: "and to God the things that are God's." In reading Scripture it is really important to pay careful attention to any second or conditional clauses. This statement by Jesus is no different. Considering Jesus' own grounding in the teachings of the Jewish tradition, what are the things which Jesus would have considered to belong to God? The answer to that might be seen when reading from Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." Those who challenged Jesus went away without understanding that Jesus had indeed given them the truth. He had not compromised or allowed for compromise in his answer. And the answer was not one that they would have liked if they had understood him. If we read the statement from the viewpoint of Psalm 24,

then Jesus has just affirmed the all-encompassing claim of God upon absolutely everything. Since God created it all, no matter what humans did to change the shape or stamp an image upon it, everything belonged to God. Instead of indicating that a separation or compartmentalization is alright, Jesus is actually declaring that there should be a whole hearted and absolute allegiance and commitment to the reign of God here and now. Earlier in the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus has already told his followers: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave with either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” So it is highly unlikely that in this answer Jesus is describing a compromise that allows the division of human loyalties neatly between God and the emperor. So what is the message today when our money bears the inscription in God we trust? Does that inscription solve this dilemma for us? What do we need to take away from this well known quote? It seems to me that whatever we render unto Caesar, or to the retirement fund, or even to the offering basket here at church, we can never forget this: we belong entirely to God. We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our allegiance. The coin of our realm bears the image of dead presidents, but each of us bears another image. Our king said: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” We must never forget to render unto God the things that are God’s.” Each and every day we need to consider whose image is stamped on our hearts; to whom are our thoughts and actions paying allegiance.