

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
October 22, 2023
Matthew 22:15–22

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. By your Spirit, open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom and truth; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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.

Perhaps some of you have seen the movie *Legally Blond*, or the Broadway musical that was adapted from the movie. The movie was made more than 20 years ago and stars Reese Witherspoon. She plays

Elle, a sorority girl who is obsessed with beauty and fashion. At the end of her senior year of college, she is dumped by her boyfriend because he is moving on to law school at Harvard and he aspires to become a Senator one day and he decides he needs a more serious person on his arm. Elle decides that to win her boyfriend back, she also is going to apply for Harvard law.

To everyone's surprise, she gets into Harvard, and eventually she is part of a team of interns for a prestigious professor who is handling a murder case. In the case the much younger second wife of a man is accused of the murder. Through a series of events, the professor is replaced as counsel to the woman on trial for the murder, by the law student Elle. Elle is cross-examining the daughter of the man who is murdered, and it is clear that she is out of her league. Until the daughter says she was home when the murder occurred but didn't hear the gun shot because she was in the shower at the time after getting her hair permed that morning at the salon. Elle again asks the daughter to confirm she was in the shower after having gotten a perm that morning. At that point, Elle knows the daughter is lying. Elle asks if the daughter has gotten perms before. She has. Elle says that the first rule of perm maintenance is that you cannot get your hair wet within 24 hours or it will deactivate the chemicals that keep the curls intact, and clearly the daughters perm is in good shape. The distraught daughter knows she is caught in a lie and admits that she was jealous and that she really intended to kill her stepmother who is almost the same age as her, but accidentally shot her father instead. The case is dismissed against Elle's client. The former boyfriend asks Elle to take him back and she rejects him. Fast forward two years and Elle is the speaker at graduation while the former boyfriend graduates with no honors and no job prospects.

It was the “gotcha question” that helped win the case. In this case, the “gotcha question” was having the person answer a question in such a way that the questioner could reveal they were lying. Sometimes gotcha questions are meant as traps. The question might be framed in a way that is disingenuous or designed to elicit a response that can be taken out of context or used against a person answering the question. Sometimes “gotcha questions” are unfair, biased, manipulative, and aggressive. Sometimes the question asked is a fallacy and when the person being asked the question answers it gives credence to the fallacy. Sometimes they are used to provoke a controversial response or to point out inconsistencies from the person answering.

Over the last several years, during political debates or congressional hearings we seem to get plenty of examples of gotcha questions. “Are you still as dishonest as you used to be?” Reporters frame questions that seem impossible for politicians to answer. Often the politician doesn’t answer at all or answers the question that they wish would have been asked. Or sometimes they talk themselves in circles, or they say the thing they shouldn’t and then they have to walk their comments back later.

Gotcha questions are nothing new. This is what we see with Jesus from the reading for the day. Jesus has been gaining some notoriety. He has entered Jerusalem and crowds are beginning to take notice. And because the crowds have taken notice, so have those in power. Jesus begins to disrupt the status quo (he even overturns a table or two) and questions the authority of those in power, specifically the religious leaders.

So, two groups, that normally would not be in partnership, gather together to question Jesus. The Herodians derived their authority and power from the Roman occupiers and are likely named after the Roman-installed leader of Jerusalem, Herod. The Pharisees, whose name derives

from “to be separated” wanted nothing to do with the Roman occupiers and were committed to purity and worship. They are associated with the commoners and average worshipers. But these two disparate groups declare a truce with one another so they may trap this upstart teacher. The question they ask is a gotcha question. Is it lawful to pay the poll tax that funds the Roman occupation? It’s a shrewd question. If Jesus answers, “yes” then the crowds that like what he is doing would be turned against him. If he says, “no,” then he will position himself against the Roman authority which never ends well. They have Jesus trapped.

At least that must be what they think. They have a perfect gotcha question. But of course, Jesus does not fall into their trap. Jesus asks if any of them have the coin with which the tax is paid. A coin of the Empire is offered to Jesus. This is the only coin that could be used for the tax. It is the currency of the Empire. Jesus asks whose image is on it. The image bears the likeness of the Emperor along with an inscription that identifies the divinity of the Emperor. Any Jew holding this coin is breaking the first two commandments, you shall have no other Gods before Me and you shall not make idols. Jesus ends the confrontation by telling them to “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Not only does Jesus not fall into their trap, but he offers a challenge to those that posed the question in the first place.

Sometimes Jesus says a lot by what he doesn’t say. As one writer says, Jesus “doesn’t say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and the secular, and that they require our equal fidelity. What he says is far more subtle and complicated: the coin is already the emperor’s—there’s his face stamped right on it—so give it to him. But *then* consider the much harder question: What belongs to God? What kind of tribute do we owe to God?”ⁱ

I find it fascinating that Jesus doesn't answer their question outright, but he calls them to a deeper question. A question about their identity and allegiance. He doesn't fall into their trap; he reminds them of a fundamental truth. From the beginning of time, from the creation story in Genesis, we know that we are made by God in the image of God. We bear God's image; it is imprinted on us.

Those that question Jesus carry a coin with a graven image with a confession that Caesar is Lord. Jesus could have accused them of blasphemy or disloyalty, but instead he calls them hypocrites. They have been carrying around a false image. They have forgotten who they are. They have forgotten whose image in which they are created. Jesus calls them to their senses and reminds them that, because we are stamped in the image of God, everything belongs to God. We cannot separate the secular from the sacred. The earth and all that is in it is because of God. Everything belongs to God. Everything.

And here, I don't think Jesus is trying to trap the people, to trap us. The primary point probably isn't whose image is on the coin, but rather whose image is on us. How we live our lives, what we spend our money on, how we spend our time, how we cultivate relationships, how we use our talents, skills, and privileges, all of it is a sacred act. All of it is within the realm of God.

We cannot isolate different areas of our life as if they do not reflect who we are as bearers of God's image. I think what Jesus' deeper challenge is that if everything belongs to God, then our private and public lives should cohere, our political life and our spiritual life should resemble one another. One writer says, "We can't isolate our political choices and actions, as if they don't reflect who we are as image-bearers of our Creator. They must not contradict each other. Which is to say: what is technically 'legal' isn't always compassionate. What is politically

expedient isn't always just, merciful, righteous, or life-giving. Our political leaders are not our gods. Our 'rendering unto Caesar' must always take second place to what we render unto God."ⁱⁱ

If the currency of the empire is the coin, the currency of God's kingdom is relationship. It is measured by how we love God, which is in turn, measured by how we love our neighbor. It is marked by humility, love, and service. It is marked by joy and compassion.

And if you are visiting with us today, let me assure you this next part of the message is not directed toward you. We are glad you are here, but I am now speaking to the members and regular attenders of the Oak Grove.

In a few moments, we will have an opportunity to make pledges for next year, not just as a financial contribution, but as an image of our whole selves. Many of you have pledged already, and I thank you for that.

I recognize this act is not a simple thing. My hope is that you have spent time in prayer and discernment about what makes sense for you. This is a personal decision, and no one will ask you what you have pledged. This is not a decision that should be made begrudgingly, or out of a sense of duty, or coercion. Rather, I encourage you to think about your decision to give out of a sense of gratitude and connectedness.

Because we belong to God, and to one another, we give to God that which is God's, namely ourselves. We take this sacred covenant between us and God, and we give our lives back to God, in our worship and our work. I believe the church, and specifically churches like Oak Grove, are needed now more than ever.

I am glad that I am a part of a community that gets to live out its life together. I am proud to serve and give to a church like Oak Grove. A church that has a vision for what the church and the world should be. I

am glad that I am part of a community that takes God's call seriously. That we are a joyful, inclusive, compassionate community of faith seeking to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. I believe in the purpose and ministry of Oak Grove. I think, indeed, Oak Grove is a place where we love God and change lives.

Oak Grove is a place where we can experience the love of God through the love of others and know that the other is welcome. Oak Grove is a place where we can be assured that God is for us, all of us.

Because we belong to God, and to one another, we give to God that which is God's, namely ourselves. And for that, I give thanks. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2787-what-belongs-to-god>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*