

Image is Everything!

21st Sun. after Pentecost – 10/18/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 22:15-22 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 20-21, **“And Jesus said to them, ‘Whose image and inscription is this?’ They said to Him, ‘Caesar’s.’ Then He said to them, ‘Give back, therefore, to Caesar, the things belonging to Caesar and to God the things belonging to God.’”**

Introduction

- ✘ We’ve all heard the common expression, “Image is Everything.” In fact, just last week I saw a post on the *Next Door* app from someone here in the Ft. Lupton area, a comment regarding one of the political candidates on our current ballot that asked, “How could anyone ever trust a man who tucks in a starched shirt and wears a belt?”
 - ➔ To that person, it makes no difference, the substance or the content of what a candidate believes or stands for or intends to do if elected, because his entire character and reliability and value – no matter how unfair or petty it is – is determined, apparently, by the “image” he portrays in wearing a starched, tucked-in shirt and a belt!
- ✘ So, if “image is everything” to you or me, that means that truth and reality are not important; that you and I actually believe that we can achieve our goal – getting elected, making the sale, gaining influence – or maybe even being saved - if we portray the image that we are good. A little schmooze, a glad hand, the right clothes and saying the right words (whether we believe them or not) is all that matters. Just make folks think that you are or you have what they want, and the result will be the same, even if you don’t mean a word that you’re saying. Sadly, that is the way a major portion of our world thinks and operates in most corners of society.
 - ➔ And Scripture has a word for people who live by this philosophy. It’s an ugly, but honest word that Jesus uses in verse 18 of our text today: “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites?”
- ✘ You see, Jesus’ enemies came at Him, as verse 15 says, with only one purpose, “to entangle” and trap Jesus. So they put up a false image of flattery, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully...”, but that is not what they actually think about Jesus.
 - ➔ Yet Jesus sees right through the false image. So, ironically, he turns the tables. He shows His opponents – and us today – that the right and honest image of God and His truth is everything!

I. The wrong ‘image’ obscures everything.

- ✘ The Pharisees and Herodians before Jesus here in Matthew 22 were motivated by their false; their evil image of the world. These two groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, had very little in common, except that they disliked and distrusted each other. The Herodians were secular officials of the Roman authority who swore allegiance to King Herod’s dynasty. And the Pharisees considered themselves to be the religious guardians of Jewish tradition and God’s Law who hoped for a messianic kingdom that would one day overthrow Rome’s influence and occupation of Israel and Judea. They were each other’s opponents, except for when it came to Jesus.
 - ➔ In this text, we’re told that they joined forces to figure out a way to trap Jesus. They believed their plan was foolproof. It used the Jewish laws and traditions as one jaw of the trap and the authority of Rome as the other. They figured that no matter which way Jesus would answer their trick question, they would be able to get rid of Him!
 - ➔ If Jesus says you should pay taxes to Caesar; He loses credibility with the Jewish people, who consider any submission to Roman authority to be against the will of God. And if He says it

is wrong to pay taxes to Caesar, then the Romans have a justified reason to get rid of Jesus for the Jews. And why do they both want Jesus gone? Because they believe He is a threat to their religious and their political security.

- ✘ The general population of the people, you see, have begun to take a real liking to Jesus. The things He is doing and teaching is turning the Pharisees' and Herodians' worldviews and images in the public's eyes upside down. They both portrayed a corrupt image of power, influence and forced obedience. These false images promoted fear and submission among the common folk.
 - ➔ But now, in Jesus, they see standing before them, the image of the invisible God. Not only is He good, but He is God in human form – the very essence; the very source of all that is good, right and true.
 - ➔ The Pharisees and Herodians though, see only the image of evil; a threat to their control and power over the people.
- ✘ But before you and I might be tempted to jump to a sense of superiority at how blind these two groups are, I think we should take a good look at the cause of their misguided jealousy.
 - ➔ Because, you see, you and I, like them, were born with an equally corrupt image; the sinfully broken image of God; meaning that our nature is evil at the core as well.
- ✘ Our problem, of course, goes back to the time when Adam, who had been created in the image of God, took the serpent's advice, and along with Eve, wanted to be like God; wanted to be his own judge of what is good and what is evil. So ever since that time, all of mankind – Cain, the Pharisees and Herodians, you and I – have been born with our knowledge of good and evil turned inside out.
 - ➔ That's why, now in the New Testament, when good takes on flesh and God walks among men in the flesh of Jesus, He seems to be turning everything backward; He is perceived as a threat to all that has been wrongly presented as good and right. Jesus even preached about this, saying, "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (Mt. 19:30) and "Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mk. 10:44).

II. The true and correct image puts things right!

- ✘ Yes, Jesus turns the tables on everything regarding the false images portrayed by the Pharisees and Herodians, and on things for you and me as well.
 - ➔ As is often the case, these opponents of Jesus didn't even realize how entirely flawed their "trick" question was to Jesus. When they asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (v. 17), they thought they were presenting themselves in a good image; as "good, law-abiding" citizens and faithful religious leaders.
 - ➔ So, Jesus takes what they think of as their squeaky clean images and He shines the mirror of God's truth; that is Himself, in front of them. He invites them to pull out a coin for the tax that they are talking about and asks, "Whose image and inscription is this" (on the coin)? (v.20) The Greek Word He uses is εἰκών (ikōn) – where we get our English word "icon" – and it refers to either an artistic "image or likeness" or a "physical embodiment or visible manifestation of an invisible reality." In His wisdom, Jesus intends to get at both sides of that meaning for εἰκών (ikōn).
- ✘ First, He points to the artistic image of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar. The inscription around the outside of the coin, in Greek, read, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus." So, just as that coin declared, any good, Roman citizen was supposed to adhere to the belief that Caesar was "divine", meaning he was a "god."

- ➔ The Pharisees despised the very idea of that, so if Jesus said, “pay your taxes” then they had a valid argument for accusing Jesus of heresy. The Herodians, on the other hand, were good Roman citizens, so if Jesus said, “don’t pay taxes to Caesar” they had a valid argument to have Jesus arrested as one breaking the Roman law.
- ✘ But Jesus frustrates this attempted misuse of the concept of “image” with a genius two-part answer. When they identified the image on the coin to be that of “Caesar”, Jesus – knowing that the idea of Caesar’s image on the coin meant that it was therefore marked as belonging to him – told them, “Give back, therefore, to Caesar, the things belonging to Caesar...” (v.21).
- ➔ This turned his enemies’ vision of the world entirely upside down. For the Pharisees, to ask Jesus “Is it right?” (v. 17) was the same as asking, “Is it pleasing to God?” They assumed that to give anything to Caesar would be to give to him what should rightly belong to God. But Jesus astounds them by showing that there actually are things that, according to the will of God, legitimately belong to Caesar. So, to give Caesar what is rightly his, then, is to serve God!
- ✘ You see, God is at work even in the secular authority. In today’s Old Testament Reading, Isaiah points out that the pagan king, Cyrus, in spite of all outward appearances, is used as one of God’s instruments in history to bring about what is ultimately good for His people. Think also of how, when Pontius Pilate brags that he has the authority either to release Jesus or let Him go, Jesus tells him, “You would have no power over Me if it were not given to you from above” (Jn. 19:11).

III. God uses the right “image” for our salvation.

- ✘ In the second part of Jesus’ answer to His opponents, He directs them, and us to “...(give back) to God the things belonging to God” (v. 21). So who, or what, is He referring to that “belongs” to God?
- ➔ This is where Jesus now brings to mind the second meaning of the word εἰκών (ikōn), which is a “physical embodiment or visible manifestation of an invisible reality.”
- ✘ Jesus here is pointing them and all of us to Himself, as Colossians 1:15 uses the word εἰκών (ikōn) and says that Jesus “is the image (ikōn) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”
- ➔ And what did the inscription over Jesus say while He hung nailed to the cross? “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The irony is that while the title “King of the Jews” seems to be too high for this battered and bloodied man, the reality is that the title is much too low! Jesus is not merely “King of the Jews” but “King of kings and Lord of lords!” As Colossians 1:16 continues, “For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through Him and for Him.”
- ➔ You see, it’s Jesus who used King Cyrus to deliver His exiled people from captivity! Jesus granted Pilate the authority to be able to order His own crucifixion. And then, when His enemies had “successfully destroyed” Jesus at the cross, it’s then and there that He said, “the Son of Man is glorified” (Jn. 13:31). That battered and condemned man; that is where the ultimate εἰκών (ikōn) of the invisible God is revealed.
- ✘ Because you see, my dear Christians, it is in that image of God nailed to the cross, that you and I see all of this world’s reality turned right side out again; even through our sin-distorted eyes. For we, who are born of the flesh of Adam; we who want to be like gods, deciding for ourselves what is good and what is evil; we, like the Pharisees and Herodians, would also like to compartmentalize God and pit His religious and secular activities against each other.
- ➔ But it’s there on the cross that Jesus has taken the condemnation we deserve and paid entirely for our guilt, why? To redeem us; that is to pay for and buy us back from sin, death and

devil; to claim us rightly as His own beloved children. That means that, by the blood of Jesus, you and I, friends belong to Him!

➔ So, when Jesus says, “...(give back) to God the things belonging to God” (v. 21), He is calling each and every one of us by the Gospel of His shed blood to stop resisting and give in to His rightful claim upon our hearts, minds, souls, and selves so that our entire being might be re-created in the perfect and glorious “image” of God at Christ’s return, as He intended from the very beginning.

Conclusion

✕ You see, “Image really is everything” when it comes to the ultimate truth and the eternal reality of our relationship with God. When troubles come and doubts arise; when our conscience accuses us, “image is everything;” the image of Jesus, the King of the Jews, hanging on the cross for us!

➔ In that image you and I see what the God of the universe has done to make us His own! As Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?” Amen.