

“Whose head is this and whose title?” Matthew’s Jesus is asking a loaded question. And Matthew’s story is reaching a boiling point.

Just days ago, with crowds of people cheering, Jesus rode triumphantly into the Temple where he turned over money-changers’ tables. Then he challenged the political authorities and the religious leaders cooperating with Roman authorities in a series of three parables.

The first parable stressed the practice of opening our perspectives to God. The second offered a spectacular discrepancy between God’s actions in the world and human actions. The third parable led the Temple priests and elders to unwittingly pronounce judgment on their own self-protective actions. Clearly threatened, the Temple priests decide to send a group of their followers with the Herodians to see what might be done about this trouble-maker, Jesus.

The Herodians are Jews who are more heavily influenced by Greek thought than the Pharisees. The Herodians and the Pharisees both want independence for the Jewish people. But they are pursuing very different avenues; so different, in fact, that these two groups rarely want anything to do with each other.

The Pharisees, who want to restore the kingdom of David, are more closely aligned with the occupied Jewish commoners, although some of them have been compromising with the Empire. The Herodians hope to restore the Herodian dynasty to the throne in Judea, and their power comes through collaboration with the Roman occupiers. These two rival Jewish factions have declared a temporary truce to deal with Jesus, the upstart rabbi. And together, they have crafted an ingenious trap.

After flattering Jesus rather inelegantly, they ask if he thinks it is lawful to pay the imperial poll tax to Caesar – one of the taxes that funded Roman occupation. The poll tax is one of the most hotly contested topics of the day. Posed as a “yes” or “no” question, the Pharisee’s disciples and the Herodians assume that Jesus will have to choose one of only two answers. If he says “yes, it is lawful,” the collaborators imagine that the crowds will turn on Jesus and eliminate the threat. After all, the crowds who cheered him into the

Temple are sure that Jesus is there to overthrow Caesar, not to support him in any way.

On the other hand, if Jesus says, “No, it is not lawful to pay the tax,” then he will have set himself in direct opposition to the Romans, which has proven to be a health hazard. A previous anti-tax revolt that took place during Jesus’ childhood left the countryside bristling with crosses holding the bodies of dead and dying revolutionaries.

So, they figure, they’ve got him trapped. They are completely unprepared for what comes next.

Jesus sidesteps the “yes-or-no” framing of the question entirely and instead answers by asking for a coin. Like the coin on the cover of your bulletin, the denarius used during Jesus’ time on earth featured the face of the ruling emperor, Tiberius, with an inscription that read: “Tiberius Caesar, son of God, Augustus.”

Pharisees considered the coin with its graven image to be idolatrous and should *not* be carrying one. They had found ways to pay the tax without handling the coin. For one of them to hand Jesus the coin would have been quite shameful. And so, most likely a Herodian was carrying the coin, in which case the Pharisees would still feel the sting of shame for having chosen unworthy allies.

By simply saying, “Show me the coin,” Jesus gives the first part of his answer.

The second part of his answer comes in the form of a question. Now, I have no idea why the NRSV translation we heard this morning reads: “Whose head is this and whose title?” Matthew’s Greek used the word “eikōn” that means “image.”

True, the coin shows just the emperor’s head and so this may seem trivial. Here’s why it matters: Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, is teaching a group of divergent Jews.

“Whose *image* is this and whose inscription?”

What his Jewish audience heard, especially the Pharisees, was Jesus evoking basic and essential Torah: Jewish teaching.

First century Jews would have heard echoes from Deuteronomy and Exodus: “I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,

where you lived as slaves. You are to have *no other gods before me*. You are *not to make for yourselves a carved image* or any kind of representation of anything in heaven above, on the earth beneath or in the water below the shoreline.”

And if the forbidden image of Tiberius weren't enough, the coin also carries a claim about the Emperor: “Tiberius Caesar, son of God, Augustus.” The combination of the image and the inscription mean that any Jew in possession of one of these coins was breaking the first two commandments.

And that leads to the third and final part of Jesus' answer: “Then render the things that are Caesar's to Caesar and the things that are God's to God.” With that closing line, Jesus left an encoded answer to the Jews that any Roman or Roman sympathizer could not find objectionable. Roman authorities would be satisfied to hear Jesus telling the Jews to pay their taxes.

However, the Pharisee's followers and even the Herodians would have made a different connection. They would have recalled a line from Genesis: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in *our image*, in the likeness of ourselves’...” Image, *eikōn*, is the word used in the Greek translation of Hebrew scripture called the Septuagint. And the Jewish author of Matthew's Gospel chose the same word from Genesis to put on the lips of Jesus.

That's the connection for us to make as well. God makes each one of us in God's own image; each one of us is an icon, a likeness, of God. Every person ever born or ever will be, bears God's image. We are made to be the children of God and to show the world that all people were made that way.

God made us bearing God's image to serve God's creation. And because we bear God's image, we are compelled to act as God does. We do *not* bear the image of any Caesar who dominates, intimidates or murders people to serve themselves. We bear the image of the One God who awakens, nurtures and invigorates people to serve the abundance of life that God desires for all of creation.

So, what does it mean for us to render to Caesar or to God? At the time, Jesus probably held a fairly realistic opinion about paying that hated tax. If pressed, he likely would have been more aligned with the Pharisees than with the Herodians or the Romans. Refusing to pay led to death and because Jesus tended to prefer life over death, he may have accepted paying the tax as part of the cost of staying alive under Roman rule.

The larger truth is that God has the ultimate rule over all creation. And so, we render our entire lives and everything under our care to God, who is the true owner anyway.

The Pharisees and the Herodians in Matthew's story seem to have forgotten this truth. And yet, Jesus does not denounce or reject them. They need reminding. So, Jesus calls them *hypocrites*, a word that refers to actors. In first century usage, hypocrites are simply people acting like someone or something that they are not. That is to say, they have become like people wearing a mask, an *image*, do you see, that is *not* their true face.

This group of fearful hypocrites have tried to trap Jesus, the one who bears the image of God *perfectly*. Acting as God does, Jesus answers by forgiving them and redirecting them toward their primary identity. Jesus reminds them that they, too, bear the image of God and are inscribed as God's children and stewards of God's creation.

Bearing that image and title, even in our own less than perfect ways, liberates us to also act more like the God that we see in Jesus.

We – you and I – are also God's children who forget our true faces from time to time. We forget that everything that we are, our bodies and minds, all our relationships, all the resources available to us, *everything* is on loan from God and rightly belongs to God.

So, as a reminder of how to render to God what belongs to God, I'll give you the closing words of one of my favorite Gospel bluegrass songs:

“In these trials of life I find  
Another voice inside my mind  
He comforts me and bids me live  
Inside the love the Father gives.

“In your love I find release  
A haven from my unbelief  
Take my life and let me be  
A living prayer my God to thee.”

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