

“What are the things of God?” Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar's.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Do you think that today's reading is about politics, or about taxes? It is about neither of these. It is about something much more important for each of us, it is about our relationships with the Triune God. About where our ultimate allegiance lies.

We read about the Pharisees and how they plotted against Jesus, trying to entangle Him in His words. They were clever. Clever indeed. The way they posed their question was well thought.

Remember, they all lived under the rule of the Roman Empire. From time to time there were rebellions and attempts to overthrow this oppressive power. Many of Jesus' contemporaries believed that their promised Savior, Messiah, will come as a political leader, who would free them from the Romans and would restore their own kingdom.

Now in this context the Pharisees asked their question. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” It is not a simple question. It is a loaded question. Whichever way Jesus answers it, the Pharisees would have caught Him.

If Jesus answers ‘yes’, then everyone would know that He is not the promised Savior, that He is not going to free Israel from Romans. That His allegiance lies with Rome. Then His popularity among the people would drop.

On the other hand, if Jesus answers ‘no’, then He has got into even greater trouble. Then the Pharisees could hand Him over to Romans with many witnesses affirming that He was inciting people to riot against the Caesar.

As we can see, the question was cleverly devised. But we also need to understand that this wasn't their real question. The Pharisees weren't concerned about taxes or politics. What they truly were concerned about was this Jesus.

Put it this way, Jesus was their problem. They didn't want Him, but they couldn't get rid of Him either. As we can see, they had the same problem that people have these days. What to do with this Jesus? What to do with the fact that He did things that no human being would be able to do? What to do with all

His claims, that He has received all authority, all power in heaven and on earth? What to do with His command to follow Him and to keep His Commandments?

These are questions that every human being needs to answer. One way or another. But first, let's see what Jesus replied to the Pharisees. He knew what they were up to. So He said: "You, hypocrites, show me the coin for the tax." "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"

They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them: "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they left him and went away.

What did Jesus say that ended this conversation? The question that the Pharisees asked forced Jesus to reveal where His allegiance lies, with Romans or with His own people. That was, we could say, a political choice.

It was like asking today, where do you stand politically, on the left, or on the right? Where does your allegiance lie? But Jesus refused to play their game. Instead He reframed the whole conversation.

If we had to put the essence of what Jesus said in different words, it could be something like this. "Give the temporary authorities what is due to them, obey them according to the laws of the land. Be loyal to them.

But remember, that your ultimate allegiance and your ultimate loyalty belongs to God. Give to God the things that are God's." And they left Him and went away. Why? Because Jesus had exposed what the real problem was.

What was it? The same as today. They didn't want to listen to God, they didn't want to listen to Jesus. His opponents wanted to be good and moral people, sure. In fact, the Pharisees were exemplary citizens.

But they wanted to be good and moral on their own terms. Apart from Jesus. Their ultimate allegiance was to themselves, and not to the Triune God. And they were blind in respect to their sinfulness and their need for savior.

As we all are. Do you want to know how the Bible explains what sin is? It is our condition where we don't know God, don't want to know Him and reject Him when He speaks to us through His messengers.

Indifference to our Creator and Redeemer. Rejection and anger when we are told that our God wants to be with us. This is essentially about the 1st Commandment. Who knows what the 1st Commandment is about?

It is about our God giving Himself to us. "I am the Lord your God." The Triune God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit desires to be your God. Are we even capable to comprehend the greatness of this message! He wants to be with you. Each one of you! Let this truth sink in... He wants to bless you, He wants to restore you back in relationships with Him.

He wants to make you wise. He wants to have you with Him, when He comes to restore the goodness of His creation, and to bring forth New Heavens and New Earth, our eternal home. He is talking to you!

He offers to you so much that our words can't express it. And in return He expects that ... you will trust Him and will respond to His love. That's it. That you will love Him back with all your heart, and mind and strength.

I admit that this probably is one those confusing things we struggle to understand. How can I love God more than anything? How can I love Him more than my spouse? Or more than my children? How is that even possible? Have you struggled with these questions? They are good questions.

Our problem begins when we hear the word 'love'. Right away we think about emotions and feelings, about all these good things we associate with the word love. And that's why the 1st Commandment may sound confusing.

We need to clarify this, for this is very, very important. Love of children is different from love of your spouse, right? Love of parents is different from love of friends, right? Love of country is different yet. As is love of God.

There are elements in our love that are out of our control. We are not in control of our feelings and emotions. Sure. But there are elements that we are in great control of. We are in control of our commitment, or faithfulness. We are in control of our allegiances. We are in control of our obedience.

And this is what the 1st Commandment is about. This is what David and Jessica just promised on behalf of Marlee. That is, – their allegiance to the Triune God. To obey Him more than to anyone else. Commitment and faithfulness to Him over everything else.

It is not about our feelings or emotions. It is about our decisions and actions, about our allegiance to God. I'll give you a few examples. 2nd Commandment. God commands us to use His name properly. How can we do that?

When we bring all our worries and thanks to Him in prayer. When we pray for ourselves and others. When we deliver the message of the Triune God to others and when we speak as His messengers on behalf of Him. We can do that. Or if our allegiances lie somewhere else, we will not do that.

3rd Commandment. Our Lord commands us to celebrate the Sabbath day. He commands us to come in His presence here in His house and to rest, to listen to Him and to receive His gifts. We can do that, right? Unless our allegiances lie somewhere else, then that's where we will be.

4th Commandment. Our Lord commands us to obey authorities. Parents, government, those in charge, pastors. Unless they expect us to do something that is against God's will. We can do that. Or do we have other allegiances?

6th Commandments. Our Lord gives us the gift of sexuality and marriage. And He tells how to receive and enjoy it properly. We can do that. Unless our allegiance lies with promises of sexual promiscuity. Then we desire what our eyes see, and we need to have it, and we need it now.

We could go through all the Commandments much more in details. What I wanted to illustrate, that the 1st Commandment is something that we can and should strive to keep, if we want to be Christians.

It is not about feelings. It is about allegiance. About loyalty to God. About listening to Him and obeying Him more than anyone else. What do you do, if your family thinks that praying and reading the Bible is stupid?

Or if your spouse or friends think that to spend Sundays in God's presence is a waste of your holidays, or that to tell people about Jesus is just too much. Or if your colleagues want to slander your bosses and wants you to join in.

Or if they offer to make a good money by being dishonest, or if the most charming person offers you to have sex with them? What do you do? In situations like these you can show where your allegiance lies, who do you listen and obey. As you can see, the 1st Commandment is given to us to keep it.

Besides, can you see how rich and joyful it makes our lives? Our ordinary lives and choices are not ordinary anymore. Instead, with every decision, with every daily action we can express our love to the One, to whom we owe everything.

This is, why Christians should be the most joyful people. For our entire lives are filled with daily expression of our love towards our God, as we seek to do what pleases Him, and even more, – what we do here obeying our Lord, will have eternal consequences.

Now, the last thing. There is something in this text that Jesus didn't put in words, but what is assumed. Remember, He said 'what image is on the coin', and then 'give to Caesar what is Caesar's'.

But then He said, – 'give to God what is God's'. What are these things that are God's? It is quite simple, and you all know the answer. What image was on the coin? Caesar's. Whose image is on you? Or, in whose image are you made?

That's right. Every human being is made in God's own Image and likeness. You are God's. He created you for Himself. But in our case, for Christians, there is so much more.

We are not only created in God's Image, dear and precious in His eyes, but God Himself has rescued us from the apathy and indifference of our sinful condition, and has restored our relationships with Him. He has reclaimed you.

He has redeemed you, so that you may be ... that's right, His own! So that we may belong to Jesus, now and forever. In our baptism, and we just witnessed one of them, the Triune God Himself writes His name on us, and reclaims us

forever. This is how God deals with us. He always comes to us first. He invades in our self-centered life, He breaks the spell of our sinful condition, He opens our eyes and ears, He speaks to us and His Spirit creates new hearts in us.

He reveals everything that He has done and does for us, and He gives Himself to be your God, your Savior. Just think about it... Now, how do we give God what is His already? How do we give Him ourselves? Yes, He expects our allegiance to Him. But He has given His to us already. He has bound Himself to us by becoming one of us.

What can we do? We can only respond by rejoicing, be celebrating, by receiving His gifts, and by promising Him our allegiance, our loyalty and our faithfulness. For we know that we already have His. This is so good.

Nothing and no one will change it, nothing and no one will separate us from our God. When the Last Day comes, His divine will will happen here on earth as it is in heavens, and we will be there when it finally takes place. We'll be His forever. Amen.