

How many of you grew up with siblings? And were some of those siblings were close in age to you? I grew up in a family of six kids, and it went like: oldest sister, two years next one, two years next one, one year next one and so on, pretty much.

So when Christmas came around, sometimes it would be easier for a relative to buy identical gifts. However, this would cause another problem, because it was important that we knew whose toy was whose. Heaven forbid you play with the exact same toy that actually belonged to the other sibling. Things like that matter a lot for little kids. So to avoid fights and bickering, my Mom took to labeling toys by putting an initial on them somewhere so we could differentiate them from one another. An “E” for Emma or an “A” for Amelia. The toy is virtually the same in every single way, came out of the same kind of packaging, but the ones that had an “E” written on its tag was MINE, marked by me - and that changed it on a fundamental, molecular, atomic level! I had claim to it, and nobody else could!

This may seem kind of silly as an example, you know, kids can be kind of ridiculous. The sad thing is, though, as silly as this seems, I think we as adults can be kind of silly and ridiculous about the stuff we own and what we lay claim to. It taps into a question that we all ask at some point, that we all want answers to. And that big question is: *Who owns what?* ... And equally crucial, *how can we tell?*

These are very tricky questions, actually. I mean, it's simple when it comes to toys and just looking for that initial written on it somewhere - temper tantrum and bickering avoided. But what about land and property? Entire wars have been fought over this question. All because of these questions: Who owns what and how do we know?

Jesus had to answer these questions in Mark 12. If you don't have a Bible, you can help yourself to one in the back; Harbor provides Bibles for you to take home so you can read God's Word on your own so please take one if you haven't already. We'll also have the Scripture up on the screens.

We're picking up in verse 13, so read with me:

13 *Later the leaders sent some Pharisees and supporters of Herod to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. 14 “Teacher,” they said, “we know how honest you are. You are impartial and don't play favorites. You teach the way of God truthfully. Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay them, or shouldn't we?”*

Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said, “Why are you trying to trap me? Show me a Roman coin,[c] and I'll tell you.” 16 When they handed it to him, he asked, “Whose picture and title are stamped on it?”

“Caesar's,” they replied.

17 *“Well, then,” Jesus said, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.”*

His reply completely amazed them.

I'm going to be honest with you: this was one of those passages where I read it, and I was kind of like: "Okay... ? That's a nice story. Jesus wants us to pay our taxes, I guess?" But let's look at Jesus' answer a bit more closely: (verse 15-17). So first of all, Jesus knows that the Pharisees are trying to trap Him. And yet instead of calling them out, he reworks their (and in the process, *our*) understanding of authority and ownership.

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give God what belongs to God. (vs.17)

So we all know who Caesar is, on a vague level. He was the Roman Emperor, which means basically a combo of a god and a politician rolled into one - And as such, his face was on all the currency used in the Empire he ruled. If you look up on the screens, you can see a denarius, the coin Jesus was talking about, and there is Caesar's face, his likeness. In other translations, when Jesus asks them who they see on the coin, he asks whose *image* do they see. And the word for image in Greek is εἰκὼν, so Jesus asks whose *icon* is on the coin.

We're familiar with this idea of icons now, because we obsessively look at them all the time on our smartphones, right? If I pull mine up, there are all these symbols on here that "represent" something else. That's what an icon is. An image that reminds us that this is something that we can use but belongs to someone else.

We in the twenty-first century still use our money in a very similar way. On this bill, we see _____, which signifies that the US government ultimately is the distributor and authority in its use. You might say: "Hold it! Hold it! That money is my money to do with it as I please, fair and square! I earned it, that doesn't belong to the government. It belongs to me."

Well, yeah, kind of. You do earn money and you do spend it. But you can't do ANYTHING you want with it. If you decided to cut Washington's face out and then replace it with your face and try to buy some stuff with it at the mall, you'd get in trouble. Why? Because it's defacement of *government* property. In the same way that Caesar's money with his face on it belonged to Him, so does our money belong to the gov't.

So Jesus is basically saying, "If it has Caesar's face on it, his image, give it to him because it belongs to him. And give to God the things that have God's image."

But wait: Is Jesus promoting a government taxation plan? That's very unlikely. Jesus very clearly did not use governmental ends to achieve the purposes His Father sent Him to do. So what is happening here, exactly? What is Jesus really saying, then?

I think the key to getting at this is to look at the second half of his answer. "Give to God what is God's!" Jesus doesn't explain to us what he means by that. But the Pharisees who hear him say

this are amazed and marvel at his answer. So what ARE the “things of God” (vs. 17) exactly? What is he getting at? And why did his answer stump and amaze his questioners?

What is it that bears God’s image? Jesus’ answer amazed his listeners because they *immediately* knew what he was talking about. To get at this, I’m going to make you crack your Bibles open again, but this time we’re going back thousands years, probably longer, all the way to the beginning. The *beginning* beginning. Chapter ONE. If we look in Genesis Chapter one verse 27, we see this verse:

27 So God created human beings[a] in his own image.

In the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Made in God’s image: Human beings. **So denarius coins bear the image of Caesar and they belong to Him; and what is it in this world that bears the image of God? People. US! You are made in the image of God.** I am made in the image of God. We bear his image the same way a coin bears the image of a political figure. We are the currency of the King. When Jesus tells them to give to God what’s His, he is telling them, (and us), *YOU BEAR GOD’S IMAGE: YOU BELONG TO HIM.*

Jesus’ short answer puts everything back in its proper place. The question of whether taxes belong to Caesar is trivial when seen in light of God and all his majesty, power, and Sovereignty over us. But the Pharisees just couldn’t see it. They were so obtuse, so concerned with tripping Jesus up, they didn’t see that they were missing the forest for the trees.

I think we often see the Pharisees as the villains of the New Testament, like they’re the low-lifes, the nefarious and nasty people. You might think they’re maybe the NT version of the Westboro Baptist church picketing the funerals of war veterans and gay people. And the Pharisees are definitely not portrayed very nicely, that’s for sure.

But Pharisees were the religious rockstars. They knew their Scriptures backward and forward. Everyone in their day would have thought they were the upstanding and holy people of society, the good people. They thought they were doing what God wanted and they had a right to challenge Jesus. But by asking that question, they revealed something about themselves: they had forgotten they were made in the image of God.

They were too busy trying to destroy Jesus that they revealed their true hearts: they cared more about money, more about power, more about anger with the government, more about hatred of Jesus, that they forgot the most important thing, the central truth of their existence: they were made in the image of God, and they belonged to Him.

Now I don't think you all are Pharisees who are trying to take Jesus down a notch or trick Him or whatever. But I do think we can be like Pharisees because we also forget this truth in our own lives. We forget that we have been made in God's image and we are His.

I know that when I look at my own life, I'm more likely to live like everything is made in my image, like I'm a Caesar with coins made in my own image. But those coins are more like: My job. My accomplishments. My stuff. My apartment. My family. My friends. My future. Notice "my" over and over again.

And then when things in life go wrong, I sometimes find myself saying things like: "God, I did this thing and that thing, and I obeyed you. I'm a *good person!* Why are bad things happening to *me?! We are you taking stuff away from me?!*" **Have you ever felt that way? Like we paid our dues and now God is supposed to stop bothering us, or taking things from us that belong to us.**

Do any of you know that Beatles song, TaxMan? The chorus is: *If you drive a car, I'll tax the street, if you try to sit I'll tax your seat, if you get too cold I'll tax the heat, if you take a walk I'll tax your feet.* It's an exaggeration, but it paints a picture of the taxman being this greedy man taxing every aspect of our lives, taking everything that belongs to us. And the sad thing is, I think we can start thinking of God this way, that he's just trying to take this thing that's ours, and that thing that's ours, and what do we get in return?

And here's why: a lot happened in between Genesis Chapter One and Mark chapter 12. All this stuff (hold up Bible) sadly, this isn't a book full of people who are following God and giving themselves wholeheartedly to Him. A lot of these people, even the great people, messed that up somewhere along the way. **We rejected the privilege of being God's image bearers, because we thought we knew better,** and we wanted to make our lives in our own image, make things in our image, and say they belonged to us.

But nothing here belongs to us. **God is not the taxman because EVERYTHING belongs to God already, especially people, who are marked by His image. And He loves us, so much that He was willing to die for us - He doesn't want to take things away from us!** Sin leads us to think we're mini-gods who can stamp our faces on the things we want to show they belong to us, but they don't. And sin makes us see God as a taker and not a giver. **But the reality is: our lives belong to God, and He is a good and loving God who wants us to thrive and live fully!**

So if it's so hopeless for us, people who struggle in sin and brokenness, to return to being beings made in the image of God, what are we supposed to do? Where are we supposed to turn when it comes to seeing an example of what it actually means, actually looks like to be made in God's image?

Last month, John preached on Philippians chapter two, and he told us about how Jesus, who is a member of the Holy Trinity, equal to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, became a human, and by doing that, he submitted Himself wholly and completely to God. We just celebrated Christmas a couple days ago, that that's what we celebrated: God coming to dwell with us.

And if anyone had a right to power and worship, it was Jesus. He *was* God! When Satan tempted Him in the desert, those temptations were an attempt to get Jesus to *prove* His divinity by taking matters into his own hands and made stones into bread, test God's ability to stand, and get acclaim by bowing down to Satan, rather than submit to God in his life, and ultimately in his death, when he was crucified. **He understood that as a human being, he was made in God's image, and He humbled Himself before God, submitting himself wholly and completely.** He never forgot that He belonged to God.

We forget this all the time; we get caught up in the same kinds of questions that the Pharisees asked: Who does our money belong to? Our home? Our family? Our land and our property?

Jesus didn't get caught up. He knew that His life and everything in it belonged to God. He had an advantage being the Son of God, but he offers us His hand - He didn't leave us high and dry to fight through this struggle of surrender on our own. Because He fully surrendered to God's plan for His life, because he was the perfect human being, fully man and fully God, he gives us access to this new life, to a transformation to being the whole beings made in the image of God we were meant to be.

The only way we can truly be restored in our image is through belief in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. But this doesn't mean that once we put our faith in Him suddenly everything surrounding submitting to God falls perfectly into place. We can't do it without God's presence in our lives, but we need to take some steps ourselves in the right direction as we follow Him. So what are we supposed to do? What does it look like to live in the truth that we are made in God's image?

One: We thank God for making us in His image. Let's just stop for a minute and think about what a privilege that is, how beautiful that is: God, the creator of the universe and everything in it, decided to shape us into creatures different from the rest of His creation in that we bear His image. It's hard to know what that means: It probably doesn't mean that God is a bi-ped with a long white beard like we see in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel - **but we do have attributes of God built into us - Love, creativity, emotions, spirit.**

But sometimes we fail at thanking God for making us in His image. We live in a culture, that makes us ungrateful for the way we're made: we hide our true emotions and feelings; we hate our bodies and the way they look; we wish we were made differently. Instead, why don't we try thanking God for making us, creating us out of His own hand in His own image? I know we're going into the time for New Year's Resolutions, and there's nothing wrong with trying to get

into better shape, but **let's be a little kinder to the way God created us this coming New Year. Let's thank God for making us in His image.**

Second, We need to see *other people as made in God's image and belonging to Him.* This is a tough one, even tougher than the first, I think. When we hate other people, or see them as less than in some way, we forget that despite their faults, despite their sins and their warped selves, they are made in the image of God. When you make this more concrete, you realize how visceral your response is: the men who carried out the ISIS attacks in Paris were made in the image of God. Both Hillary Clinton AND Donald Trump are made in the image of God. And yet how often do we have hateful thoughts or say nasty things about these people? How often are we unable to see through all the garbage and see how people are made in the image of God?

On another level, we need to protect that image of God when we see it being denied. Online and on the news, we see Syrian refugees across the world being driven from their country and denied basic human rights of food and shelter and the right to worship and live without persecution.

People around the world, made in the image of God, are being treated worse than most pets in the United States. That is not what God wanted for His people.

I was reminded of this a few months ago when I was taking my dog out. I live in an apartment complex that allows pets, so there are lots of dogs there and we have to clean up after them. There's places to throw out the bags, canisters set aside for that purpose, but I'd often just throw it out in the dumpsters because they're on the way back inside the building. But then once, when I was taking Dori out, I saw a homeless man rifling through the dumpster for bottles and cans to redeem for a few dollars, and it gave me pause: he was picking through garbage and I had never thought about how I made that more disgusting because I was too lazy to clean up after my dog the right way. And I also never bothered to say "hello" or "good morning" to these people, either - I would to other people who lived in the building, but not to these men I'd also walk past. It's not like my neighbors in my apartment building are made more in God's image than the homeless man digging through the dumpsters. And yet, that's how I unconsciously viewed this person.

So we need to remember that other people are made in God's image, and live in light of that, reaching out to others, giving them dignity, giving them help and hope. How would you treat people, especially people you don't know or who our culture sees as outcasts, in light of the truth that all people are made in God's image?

Finally, we remember that we belong to God. **How would our job and careers change if we worked knowing that the work we produce and the money we make aren't truly ours, when it comes down to it? If we remembered that our work is God's?** We'd probably work a little harder and probably more joyfully, knowing that our work doesn't reflect us and our worth, but is an act of worship and reflection of God, and the qualities He imprinted on us.

And on another level: how would our spending and our view of our finances change if we remembered that we belong to God? Now, I'm not here to tell you that owning stuff is bad. I own lots of stuff. I buy lots of stuff. We need to own stuff in order to function in today's society. **But if I sat down and made a list of stuff that I bought and then crossed off the things that I think were necessary, or somehow were a blessing to myself, to others, to God, I think that would end up being a very short list.**

There's this kind of weird attitude to purchasing things, a gross phrase that I find myself saying at times, too, and that is: "I deserve this." Commercials totally tap into this sense of entitlement. There was this one ad that kept coming on over and over this holiday season that said: "Everyone deserves more data this holiday season. From VERIZON!" I mean, does anyone *DESERVE* data? That sounds so ridiculous. But that's what we think: I deserve these new shoes. I deserve this new TV. I deserve this new car.

Maybe instead we should be a bit more thoughtful, both in what we spend our money on, and on the purpose these things we purchase serve. If we think we're buying stuff because we deserve it or are entitled to it?

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees question, to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's seems simple, but it could really change our lives if we submit ourselves to living our lives in light of that truth. We need to remember this truth and live it out every day: **We are God's image bearers, his precious coins, and we belong to Him.** Let's pray.