# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## "WHOSE IMAGE DO WE BEAR?"

**Scripture Lesson: Matthew 22: 15-22**

***This sermon was preached by Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, October 18, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.***

**Scripture**

**Paying the Imperial Tax to Caesar**

15 *Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.* 16 *They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.* 17 *Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"*

18 *But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?* 19 *Show me the coin used for paying the tax."They brought him a denarius,* 20 *and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"*

21 *"Caesar's," they replied.*

*Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

22 *When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.*

**Whose Image Do We Bear?**

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

A reporter recently reached out to me as they are thinking about doing a story on our upcoming Scottish Heritage Sunday, on November 8. And it reminded me of another interview, one I read about a few years ago. A reporter, interviewing a couple celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary asked the husband, "What's the secret to a long and happy marriage?"

The older gentleman replied, "When we got married, we made an agreement. I would make all the big decisions, and my wife would make all the little decisions."

The reporter asked, "And how has that worked?"

"Wonderfully," he said. "In sixty years, we've never had a big decision to make."

Of course, we all have decisions to make. The challenge, indeed, is knowing which ones matter the most. And goodness knows, families have responsibilities. Work makes its demands. Parents care for children, and adult children sometimes find themselves caring for aging parents. I dare say, there's not

a person among us this morning who doesn't have some kind of commitment, and some of our commitments are good and honorable – and some of them even function as expressions of our faithfulness to God.

But sometimes the demands that are placed upon our lives, our responsibilities, our loyalties, they pull us in different directions and offer competing claims. I think it's safe to say that the question is not so much whether we have decisions to make about what is important in our lives, the question is: what do we do with those loyalties? How do we sort them out? How do we prioritize them? For answers to those questions and others like them, we turn first to our lectionary reading this morning from the Gospel according to Matthew.

Jesus asked a question that sounds innocent enough: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Now, before we go any farther, we need to remember that at this time in history, the Roman Empire occupied the land of Israel and the tax in question was a very visible reminder of that occupation and the coin that Jesus asks to hold, it bears the image and inscription of the emperor. Both the tax and the coin represented an uncomfortable reality for the Jewish people. They were living under a foreign power, and that foreign power had authority over them.

And while virtually every Jew would have shared that underlying frustration, not every Jew was outwardly anti-Rome and it happened that on the occasion of this story two distinct Jewish groups which ordinarily were at odds with one another; namely, the Pharisees and the Herodians.

So, who were they? Well, for the purpose this morning, lets simply say that the Pharisees were historically more concerned with one's faithfulness to the Law of God in spite of the presiding culture, while the Herodians tended to be more favorably disposed toward Herod's rule, and, by extension, Roman authority. But they shared one thing in common: they each saw Jesus as a threat.

And so, at least for the moment, they set aside their differences, and as the old saying goes, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Together, they basically set a trap for Jesus. If, for example, Jesus says the tax should be paid, he risks alienating those faithful Jews for whom Roman rule is seen as an affront to God's sovereignty, but if he says the tax shouldn't be paid, he runs the risk of being accused of sedition, of being an enemy of Rome.

We notice that the Pharisees and the Herodians try to cover up their malicious intent with flattery. They tell Jesus that he is sincere and that he teaches the way of God truthfully, and that he does not show partiality, but Jesus sees right past their masquerade. He holds up a coin, "whose head is this, and whose title?" "The emperor's," they reply.

And then comes the answer, that divine directive that has echoed through the centuries: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

When Jesus answered the question that way, he actually exposed the limits of the question itself. What I mean is, the question they asked Jesus assumed that the world could be neatly divided into that which belongs to the emperor and that which belongs to God.

But what Jesus managed to do was to acknowledge that the things that belong to the emperor and things that belong to God can exist at the same time! Jesus' answer sort of hangs in the air, and we are left to wonder: So, what are the things that belong to God?

We've seen the coin and it belongs to the emperor, but on what has been placed the image of God? Well, that's easy. The bible tells that the image of God has been placed on us. So, to use the language of our New Testament lesson, we are the things that belong to God!

But that's not how we usually first think of ourselves, is it – as being created in the image of God, as being a "child of God?" We tend to think of ourselves as men or women, students, adults, neighbors, members of this or that organization. We are fans of our favorite teams. And beyond that, we are often identified by our responsibilities – responsibilities to our families, our employers, our communities, our nation.

The point that Jesus is making here is not that there is something inherently wrong with being identified by the things that are important to us. The point is that none of those things reflect our truest identity. What's more, none of them have the right to claim us, certainly not to command us.

Consider our Old Testament lesson this morning. Pharoh has become increasingly fearful of the Hebrew people, and he worries about their growing numbers and about the possibility that they might become a threat to his power. So, he issues a terrible command to the midwives: that when the Hebrew women give birth, the midwives are to kill the baby boys. The midwives are thus placed in a terrible position, where obedience to Pharoh would require their disobedience to God. Thankfully, they chose to honor God rather than Pharoh, and they chose to protect the lives of those innocent children. Simply put, they feared God more than they feared Pharoh.

Of course, our decisions are not always so clear-cut. I mean, if we were faced with the kind of decision that the midwives had to make, surely, we would know what was right in the eyes of God, and I pray we would have the courage of our convictions. No! Our decisions are usually more ordinary and far less dramatic, but still the underlying question remains: what happens when the legitimate demands of life begin to crowd out the One to whom our lives ultimately belong?

What happens when our jobs become the measure of our worth, or when our possessions become the source of our security, or when our schedulers become so crowded that God ends up getting nothing but leftovers?

Friends, it is altogether possible for us to give our support to good things but to do so in ways that make them ultimate things. And whenever that happens, we need to hear these words from Jesus again: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's."

John Calvin understood this passage within the larger framework of our Christian life in the world in the sense that we Christians are no different from non-Christians in that we to have some very real

responsibilities. We are called to be respectful of authority and to fulfill certain other civic obligations. For Clavin, we dishonor God if we pretend that the various duties of life do not matter. Oh, far from being an escape from the world, our Christian identity calls us to live in the world, albeit under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Which means that, at the end of the day, we are to give unto God our time, our abilities, our relationships. We are to give to God our possessions, our opportunities, our vocations. The span of our years, oh, we give them to God, because they belong to God!

Participating in the ministry of the church, sustaining the worship of God, teaching the faith to our children, these are not merely obligations, they are the living expressions of what it means to give to God the things that are God's.

It is very fitting today after the 11:15 service of worship we would enjoy a reception, celebrating James and his twenty years of ongoing ministry here at First (Scots) and James, we haven't told you yet, but the Session wrote twenty more years into your Terms of Call!

Twenty years represents countless hours of preparation, who knows how many conversations, prayers, and encouragement. Who knows how many difficult days, how many joyful days, the gift of 20 years' worth of walking alongside young people and their families is immeasurable.

James's twenty years of service definitely gives us an occasion to express our gratitude, but it is also an invitation for us to reflect upon our own calling. How might God be asking each of us to use the time, the gifts and the opportunities that we have been given? Jesus asked the question: "Whose head is this, and whose title?" and the answer was obvious: "the emperor's!" But when people look at us, is the answer just as obvious? Do they look at us and see right away the image of God in which we have been created?

When they watch how we spend our time, our days, when they look at our calendars and how we tap our debit cards. When they watch the way we treat our neighbors, are they given any reason to know that before we are anything else, that we are children of God?

If someone were to look at us from across the living room, across the restaurant, across the boardroom, or the courtroom, and if they asked themselves (in a manner of speaking): "Whose head is this, and whose title?" Would they know that in life and in death we belong to God?

By God's grace, may be give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor, fulfilling the responsibilities of this life with faithfulness and integrity. But may we also always give to God the things that belong to God: our gratitude, our gifts, our service, our very lives.

For we bear God's image. In all that we say and all that we do and all that we are, may our lives be continually given to God, the one to whom our lives have always belonged.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.