

Jesus didn't come to quibble over taxes, but to reclaim all of humanity for God.

Jesus didn't come to quibble over taxes, but to reclaim of humanity for God. This is clear in Jesus' words found in the Gospel of John, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

I recently planted grass in my

backyard, spending some money and several days of hard labor. Once I finished, I stood back to admire my work. After a few weeks the lawn was looking spectacular. Unbeknownst to me, my two boys also thought the grass was amazing, and decided that it was perfect for a game of tackle football. As soon as I saw the results of the game, I became very frustrated at the divots and scrapes from their fun. I made it clear that protecting the grass was more important than anything else. Like the Pharisees, I was more concerned about the things I owned or controlled than the people God placed in my life.

Jesus is not coming to save my coins, my grass, or my car. He is coming to save people which includes my family and my children. This is God's true stewardship. May we always know the image we bear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nate Furness is the senior pastor of the Napa Community Seventh-day Adventist Church. He attended Pacific Union College and graduated from Southern Adventist University. In 2001, Nate started his ministry as an elementary teacher. He completed his masters in theology from La

Sierra University and has been a pastor since 2006. Nate lives in Fairfield with his wife, Jennie, and their two sons, Alex and Anders. You may find his weekly services on YouTube or by going to the website www.napacomm.com. Nate's hope, in his personal life and in the church community, is that we will reveal Jesus by loving one another.

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The STEWPOT

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MADE IN HIS IMAGE: STEWARDED GOD'S PEOPLE

Matthew 22:15-22 (NRSV)

BY NATE FURNESS

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So, they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

When I was 16 years old, I traveled with my older sister all over Europe. We brought backpacks, a Eurail pass, and just enough money to see us through, traveling

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STEWARDSHIP is a total lifestyle. It involves our health, time, talents, environment, relationships, spirituality, and finances.

to several countries and staying in youth hostels along the way. Upon arrival in each country, we would immediately find an American Express concession and exchange our U.S. dollars for local currency. We exchanged hundreds of dollars to purchase groceries, pay for lodging, and collect souvenirs.

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I remember being intrigued by the money from each country; some bills were vibrant with color, and the coins had a variety of shapes and weight. No matter the variety, all of the currency had one thing in common: they all portrayed images of their leaders and named the country authorizing their use.

During Jesus' time, Jerusalem was occupied by Rome. With this occupation came the expectation that assimilated communities should use Roman currency, whose coins were clearly marked. They had the image of Caesar stamped on them. Implicit in the Romans' occupation was control over Jewish lives, including the requirement that the Jewish people pay Roman taxes. Paying taxes was a major issue for the people.

Hoping to trap Jesus, some Pharisees and Herodians asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Another way to ask this question would be, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar who oppresses us, beats us, and controls us?" In addition to the religious implications, this question of taxes underscored the modern issue of separation of church and state.

The questioners hoped they were putting Jesus in a no-win situation. If he answered that one should not pay taxes, then he was a threat to the State; if he instead said they should pay taxes, then his credibility was liable to falter within the Jewish community.

As usual, Jesus didn't answer in the expected way. He asks for the coin which was used for paying taxes. On one side of the denarius was the image of Caesar, cast with the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus;" on the obverse was the image of Pax the Roman Goddess of Peace, with the inscription "High Priest." To the religious Jewish community, the denarius would have represented a "graven image." The images on the coin clearly elevated Caesar to the position of a god, which was unacceptable to true believers.

Like the money my sister and I used in Europe, the images on the bills and coins demonstrated who owned the currency, a process continued from the ancient world's leaders, who placed their images on their countries' coins to signify their sovereign ownership. Just like others, Caesar placed his image on the coin as a demonstration of his power and control of the coin and the community.

When the coin is brought to Jesus, he asks, "Whose head is on this coin?" To this simple question they quickly respond, "Caesar." Jesus replies, "then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." Jesus is telling the Pharisees to give back to Caesar what he already owns.

This plain yet powerful response gives us a clue as to what this passage is really about. If the image on the coin reveals its ownership, then what is it that belongs to God? In other words, where can one find the image of God? According to scripture, humanity is made in the image of God, so humanity belongs to God. We are cast in his image. Note Genesis 1:26-27:

God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Jesus' claim is not for coins, nor for those things that the moth eats and rust destroys. Jesus' claim is for people—people who show God's image and therefore belong to him, because they are made in his image. Every human being is marked with the image of God. So then, what belongs to God? You belong to God, I belong to God, we all belong to God. We are marked with his image.

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