

We continue today in our sermon series “Enemies of Gratitude.” Today’s scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew, and the enemy of gratitude is **greed**. First, a little context. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem, headed to the cross. He has had his triumphal entry, cleansed the temple, told some more parables, and is just a few days away from his arrest, leading to his death. Along the way Jesus’ authority continues to be questioned. Today’s text involves the first of three tests given to Jesus by the Pharisees and some supporters of Herod. They’re trying to trap Jesus over a question concerning paying taxes. Jerusalem is in Israel, which is a Roman occupied territory. “The Romans let the Jews have their temple worship, but they are taxed unfairly to support the Roman capital, and they enjoy a few rights, because they are not truly Roman citizens” (*A Lectionary Sermon Series*, Vol. 1, Brian Erickson). If you think you don’t like paying taxes, meet the residents of Jerusalem during Jesus’ time. There were several taxes but the ones mentioned in today’s text are poll taxes, which were based on the census and paid annually with one Roman coin, a denarion, which was a day’s wage. This poll tax and other taxes were often unfair and especially put a heavy burden on the poor. Another detail is that the Pharisees and the supporters of Herod did not see eye to eye on anything politically. It would be like having the Tea Party and Bernie Sanders in the same room. One would expect an explosion of arguments and emotions, especially when it comes to matters of paying taxes; nonetheless, what brings this unlikely partnership together is their one commonality: getting rid of Jesus. So they plan the perfect question to trap him and then send their intern disciples to ask it. If Jesus answers **yes**, then the Romans will snatch Jesus up for being an instigator or for breaking the law. However, if Jesus answers **no**, then he risks alienating the oppressed Jews, many of whom were his followers, and

the religious zealots in the crowd may just stone him for going against God's Word. It's a lose-lose situation for Jesus. So they all assume. This is where we pick up in today's story. Before we turn to God's word, let us first pray.

**PRAY.** Read Matthew 22:15-22 (Common English Bible). **READ.**

Jesus does it again. With integrity and without fear, he reverses the trap with another question to his opponents. But first Jesus calls out some of the Pharisees- to be clear- it's not ALL the Pharisees, just a few who are called out for their fake, insincere compliments. Imagine this conversation as a cartoon with the unspoken thoughts of the Pharisees and Herodians in a bubble. "Teacher we know that you are genuine (To be honest we think you are full of it), and that you teach God's way as it really is (though we might not believe it to be true), and that you aren't swayed by people's opinions (by the way, why don't you defer more readily to our authority?); for you show no favoritism (of course, everyone knows some people are inherently better than others)" (*The Christian Century*, Audrey West). Their inauthenticity is palpable, and Jesus calls their bluff, names their game and sees through their sarcasm to their evil motives, thus branding them hypocrites. Yet, "each line of this insincere speech speaks truth about Jesus: He is true, he teaches the way of God, and he shows favoritism to no one, unlike the 'hypocrites' who pretend to praise him" (*FOW*, Susan Grove Eastman). Jesus asks them, "Why do you put me to the test?," but it's a rhetorical question, as Jesus and those gathered there already know the answer. Then Jesus requests to see a Roman coin. This is a loaded and trapped request, as the Pharisees, who followed the religious law, weren't supposed to have any Roman coins on them due to issues of idolatry- you know that graven image commandment. This particular coin had inscribed

on it these words: “Tiberius Caesar, divine son of Augustus, high priest” (*FOW*, Spalding). Now the pockets of Jesus, the true Son of God, are empty, but in one of his opponents’ pockets, lies a coin with a graven image on it. Surely they were embarrassed, though we aren’t told. Nonetheless, the Pharisees have exposed their hypocrisy and complicity in front of the gathered crowd. I imagine Jesus might have looked this coin over as if he’d never laid eyes on a Roman coin before. He then asks, “Whose image and inscription is this” (v. 20)? They replied, “Caesar’s” (v. 21a). “Jesus’ question links the image and title on the coin with the tax, thereby both naming and limiting that which is due to the emperor” (Eastman). “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar” (v. 21b). Yet, with this answer, they can’t really accuse Jesus of not following the Roman law. And then Jesus completes his response with “and to God what belongs to God” (v. 21b). And now they surely can’t say that Jesus is going against God’s Word with this response. Ironically, engrossed in trying to entrap Jesus, they themselves were more concerned with their own power than they were with honoring God. Greed has a way of creeping in like that. Another way of thinking about what Jesus says to them is this: “Live **with** the emperor but live **for** God” (workingpreacher.org, Rolf Jacobson). The text tells us that after hearing Jesus’ response, they left. Maybe they heard the Psalmist words echoing in their minds and hearts as they departed? “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it” (24:1).

Some people have used this text and Jesus’ response to conclude that Christians shouldn’t mix religion and politics. No, Jesus isn’t talking about separate spheres of existence here. In addition, Jesus isn’t really talking about taxes either. What if Jesus is warning them and us to beware of these

idolatrous relationships we get ourselves caught up in? “Give to God what has God’s image on it. This is bigger than a tax, bigger than a picture on a coin. This is a question of what/who belongs to God” (Erickson). To whom do we belong? Take a look at any person. Whose inscription is on them? It’s hard to ignore the connection to God’s words in Genesis chapter 1 “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (v. 26). Can’t you just see Jesus’ eyes rising to meet those of his opponents confronting each of them with an unspoken question floating in the air: “And you, my friend: Whose image do you bear?” No wonder they walked away! That’s a lot to process. Another way of asking that question is, To whom do we belong?” “Sometimes it seems like we belong to Caesar. Taxes, legal restrictions on our freedoms, imprisonment if you engage in civil disobedience. Or, perhaps we feel that our job owns us. Or our families. Sometimes, we even feel owned by our possessions, addiction, debt, plight in life, etc. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it: ‘Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind’” (workingpreacher.org, Clayton Schmit). As Christ’s disciples we’re called to be a “different kind of people whose lives bear witness to Jesus in ways that the world finds astonishing, perplexing, and unrecognizable. I have this art piece that reminds me of this call daily. It reads, “See God in everyone.” It’s real easy to say these words yet it’s hard to live them out. The truth is that we all belong entirely to God, and we all bear God’s image. We’re created and claimed by God; therefore, how we treat one another matters to God. Where we spend our allegiance matters to God. “The coin of our day bears the image of dead presidents, but each of us bears another” (workingpreacher.org, Lance Pape). Yes, the image can be sometimes hard to recognize. “When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has

left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear, what you do, the company you keep, your addiction” (*FOW*, Richard E. Spalding). No wonder greed often creeps in. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: God’s image of love, forgiveness, peace, generosity, etc. stamped on us in a permanent way. Just like the Pharisees who are stuck in a world that violates the ten commandments, we’re as well. Yet, even in our complicit behavior, the God in Christ whose image we bear is a God of endless and sacrificial love as well grace upon grace.

One year for Christmas my grandparents gifted me and my brother, who is 13 months younger than I, a gumball machine. I was four and he was three, and my parents weren’t real big on giving us gum, so they hid the gumball machine in the hallway linen closet. My mom had no clue that I had seen where she had hidden it. She thought it was out of sight, out of mind but I had other plans. One day while everyone was napping, the story goes that I engineered several chairs stacked oh so carefully to aid me in climbing the shelves of the linen closet and reaching the gum ball machine on the top shelf. I managed to eat every last gumball in that machine and there were a good many of them. Then I went into my parent’s room, waking them up, proclaiming that my brother had eaten all the gumballs. My parents said it was hard to keep a composed face as I had an array of colors evidenced around my mouth that painted a different picture. I had completely thrown my brother under the bus for something he didn’t do- only because I wanted those gumballs all to myself. Greed even creeps in at a young age, doesn’t it?

“There’s something deep inside most of us that cringes at the suggestion that what we have doesn’t belong to us” (Erickson) or that God should love the people we don’t. All we have to do is look to some stories in the Bible to see that greed happens among us. The Israelites were hungry and complaining in the wilderness, and God provided them manna with specific instructions not to take more than they needed because God would supply their daily bread; however, they were greedy and didn’t trust and took more than they needed. Well, you may know the story. The manna spoiled before they could enjoy it the next day. Later they made a golden calf to worship instead of God because they were impatient and ungrateful. Instead of thanking God for what they have, they can became greedy and made a graven image to worship. Fear often leads right to greed. It’s sad that some of us treat our stuff better than we do bearers of God’s image...all of humanity, from the biggest criminal to the holiest saint. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he tells the people that they must put to death their sinful nature regarding greed which can amount to idolatry (3:5-7). Let’s face it- we live in a world where there’s a competition for lords. There’s a fine line of when our emperor or our money or our stuff becomes our god. A synonym for greed is covet. Moreover, one could think of greed as “deeds of coveting.” Greed gets caught up in the currency of Caesar. Jesus leaves us with some things to think about. Where do you recognize your own selfishness and greed (Les Gardner- evotional on 10/18)? How does it keep you from seeing God in everyone and practicing gratitude?

As an image-bearer of a loving, forgiving, and gracious God, maybe what we owe God is the very grace and generosity He extends to us? “The tender compassion of God for God’s children is the product of our commerce, the

inspiration for all the giving back to God we do. Baptism is the watermark of our true currency” (*FOW*, Spalding). And in the waters of baptism we’re marked; we’re claimed as children of God. Therefore, as Christ’s disciples, our first loyalty...our commitment is to a kingdom that will remain long after earthly empires rise and fall. So let us give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give back to God what is God’s. After all, whose image do you bear? Amen.