

**GIVE BACK TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S**

Our Scripture Lesson today is an INTERESTING one. It begins with THESE words: *Then the Pharisees went and plotted to ENTRAP Jesus in what He SAID.* Now, they had BEEN plotting against Jesus for some time. TWICE they had tried to TRAP Him, but they FAILED both times. And NOW, they're at it AGAIN. But NOTICE that THIS time, they don't send in their FIRST-STRING players. It's NOT that they think Jesus is an easy MARK; they KNOW better than THAT. It's that they want to find a way to KNOCK Him off His pedestal **WITHOUT** risking their OWN reputations. You see: TWICE Jesus has made the Pharisees look BAD, and they are TIRED of walking around with EGG on their faces.

SO, the Pharisees send their DISCIPLES, their *Pharisees-in-TRAINING*, their young men with NO reputations to protect, their young men with nothing to LOSE. The Pharisees have designed a question to TRAP Jesus and TRAINED these young men to use it AGAINST Him. FIRST, they have to SET Him UP. So, they say to Jesus: *Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with TRUTH.* Now, they don't BELIEVE that, of course, but it's THEIR way of getting Jesus to LOWER His guard, so that they can BLINDSIDE Him with their QUESTION. And ONCE they FLATTER Him, they ASK Him: *Tell us what you THINK: IS it lawful to pay TAXES to Caesar, or NOT?*

Now, the BEAUTY of this question is that it offers Jesus only TWO choices: YES or NO. And IF Jesus says YES, He will offend His own PEOPLE, who HATE paying taxes to Caesar. But IF Jesus says NO, the Roman soldiers will ARREST Him for SEDITION. SO EITHER way, they figure, Jesus LOSES and the Pharisees WIN! AND, even if Jesus DOES find a way OUT of their TRAP, it will be those young men, those APPRENTICE Pharisees, who get humiliated, and NOT the Pharisees themselves.

JESUS, however, does NOT say YES. NOR does He say NO. FIRST, He says: *WHY are you putting me to the TEST, you hypocrites?* THIS, of course, brings the whole issue to a HEAD. JESUS knows what they're UP to, and makes SURE that everyone ELSE does as well! BUT, Jesus can't stop there. IF Jesus says nothing MORE, it looks like He's trying to AVOID their QUESTION. SO, He says: *Show me the COIN used for the tax.* And they bring Him a DENARIUS.

Now, a DENARIUS was a SIGNIFICANT coin in those days. It was literally a DAY'S wages, maybe \$100 or more in TODAY'S money. BESIDES that, a denarius had ON it an image of CAESAR, and was inscribed: *Tiberius Caesar, august son of the DIVINE Augustus, high priest.* Well, the JEWS found BOTH the IMAGE of Caesar AND the INSCRIPTION to be extremely OFFENSIVE. For one thing, the *10 Commandments* FORBID making graven images, so they HATED having an image of CAESAR on their coins. For ANOTHER thing, the JEWS didn't believe that Caesar was DIVINE. They would not accept his CLAIM that he was a GOD. Well, the disciples of the Pharisees BRING Jesus a DENARIUS. And MY question is: *WHERE did they GET it?* ONE of them MUST have had that denarius in his POCKET! And WHERE are they standing as they have this conversation? They're standing in the TEMPLE! So, WHY have they brought a GRAVEN image into the TEMPLE, of ALL places? Well, I'm SURE it's because they're SO used to CARRYING these coins that they don't think TWICE about bringing them into the Temple, which just proves that Jesus is CORRECT when He calls them hypocrites! They care MORE about their MONEY than about the *10 Commandments*, or GOD!

And THEN Jesus asks: *Whose HEAD is this, and whose TITLE?* They answer Him: *Caesar's.* So Jesus says: *Give, therefore, to CAESAR the things that are CAESAR'S, and to GOD the things that are GOD'S.* Now, the WORD that's translated here as GIVE, ACTUALLY means in Greek, *to give BACK.* So Jesus is REALLY saying: *Give BACK to Caesar the things that are CAESAR'S.* And this COIN bears the image of CAESAR, doesn't it, AND his inscription? PLUS, it was minted in his MINT. It circulates at HIS pleasure. SO, if he wants it BACK, give it BACK!

But THEN, Jesus continues: *AND give back to GOD the things that belong to GOD, or the things that bear GOD'S image!* And WHAT is it that belongs to GOD? Well, a BETTER question might be: *what DOESN'T belong to God?* Since everything DEPENDS upon GOD, everything must BELONG to

God! More to the POINT, however, is the recognition that **WE** belong to God. Just as the COINS bear CAESAR'S image, so **WE** bear GOD'S image! THAT is one of the very FIRST and most IMPORTANT convictions in the entire Bible. We find it in the very BEGINNING of the very FIRST book of the Bible, Genesis: *SO, God created human beings in GOD'S image. In the image of GOD, God created THEM. MALE and female, God CREATED them* (Gen. 1:27). So, IF it is appropriate to give **back** to CAESAR what belongs to CAESAR, namely the coins that bear **HIS** image, then it's ALSO appropriate to give **back** to GOD what belongs to GOD, namely OURSELVES, for WE bear **GOD'S** image.

Well, WHAT does it LOOK like to give OURSELVES back to God? FIRST, let me tell you what it does NOT look like! A man named Wilbur Rees once wrote a tongue-in-cheek PRAYER for HALF-HEARTED Christians, Christians willing to give **back** to God only a LITTLE bit of their lives. LISTEN:

*I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please,  
NOT enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,  
but just enough to equal a cup of warm MILK,  
or a SNOOZE in the sunshine.  
I don't want enough of God to make me love a black man,  
or to pick beets with a migrant.  
I want ecstasy, NOT transformation.  
I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth.  
I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack.  
I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.*

You see: TOO many people these days, at least in OUR culture, are making HALF-HEARTED commitments to God. But the Book of Revelation is very CLEAR. It says: *God DESPISES half-hearted commitments. God APPRECIATES hot. God UNDERSTANDS cold. But God SPITS OUT lukewarm* (Rev. 3:16)! And WE can understand that, don't we? I like HOT coffee and I like ICED coffee, but I HATE coffee that's been sitting on the counter for an hour -- lukewarm coffee. And NOBODY likes lukewarm, not even GOD! God wants our FULL commitment, our COMPLETE commitment, our VERY best!

SO, what does it LOOK like to give **back** to God our very BEST? Well, THAT depends upon WHO God is calling us to BE, and WHAT God is calling us to DO. And THAT is DIFFERENT for EVERYONE! In just over a week, a group of us are going on a *Mission Education Trip* to Mexico. And one of the mission sites that we will be visiting is called *VAMOS!* And *VAMOS* was started by two friends and mentors of mine, Bill and Patty Coleman. Well, Bill and Patty went and witnessed the POVERTY there, just as WE will be doing, but THEY decided that they just HAD to DO something about it. SO, after much thought and prayer, they GAVE up their home, and life, in Vermont to go live in MEXICO and work with the Mexican POOR. And WHEN they did, they FIRMLY believed that THEY were fulfilling God's CALL. And I believe they were TOO! THEY were giving THEMSELVES **back** to God, AND giving their very BEST. And I ADMIRE them immensely for it! And before those on our mission trip return, THEY will admire them also. Yes, that's how Bill and Patty gave themselves BACK to God. But that's NOT what ALL of us are called to DO, because for EACH of us, it's DIFFERENT.

June Carter Cash, for example, gave HERSELF back to God by devoting herself to her husband, Johnny Cash. She HELPED him through his years of DRUG abuse! Johnny once said: *If she found my pills, she flushed them down the toilet. And find them she DID; she searched for them relentlessly!* You see: SHE was living out her commitment to her MARRIAGE, and in the PROCESS, living out her commitment to GOD. That's what it MEANT for June Carter Cash to give herself **back** to God.

OR, take the great basketball player, David Robinson, of the *San Antonio Spurs*. When David RETIRED from basketball, he could have done any NUMBER of things. He could have gone out and made a LOT more MONEY, and REMAINED in the spotlight. But David had ALWAYS devoted himself to working with KIDS. So WHEN he retired, he joined the staff of *Oak Hills Church* in San Antonio, Texas. And THAT'S what giving himself **BACK** to God LOOKS like for David Robinson.

There are SEVERAL people here TODAY, whom I KNOW are giving themselves **BACK** to God by DEVOTING themselves to their FAMILY and to their CHURCH. They haven't done ANYTHING that WE would label GREAT, but they ARE great! And their GREATNESS lies in their continuing

FAITHFULNESS, year after year after year, to WHATEVER needs to be done to support their FAMILY and their CHURCH. They have **devoted** themselves to raising their children as **GOD'S** children. They are GENEROUS in their FINANCIAL support of the church. They give of their TIME and TALENT to hold various church positions. And maybe they sing in our choir or teach in our Church School, or support our church's MISSION and outreach projects. PLUS, they nurture their own FAITH continually. And THAT'S what it LOOKS like for **THEM** to give themselves *back* to God.

Well, WHAT does it look like for **YOU**? Maybe for YOU, giving yourself **BACK** to God means making YOUR company a place where Christian VALUES inform your planning for the FUTURE, your day-to-day operations, your personnel policies, your customer relations, and your philanthropic giving. You see: it's DIFFERENT for ALL of us! God calls EACH and every ONE of us to our OWN ministries, where WE can make a DIFFERENCE because of OUR particular TALENTS and SKILLS, INCOME and personality. SO, we need to be constantly LISTENING for what GOD is calling us to DO with our lives, and then STRIVING to DO it. As the old GOSPEL song says: *I'll GO where you want me to GO, dear Lord, and I'll BE what you want me to BE.* And THAT'S what it LOOKS like to give ourselves *back* to God. It's letting GOD, rather than OURSELVES, set the AGENDA for our LIVING.

However, letting GOD take control of our lives is NEVER easy! THIS world and ITS values are like a big MAGNET trying to continually pull us AWAY from God. And therefore, the ONLY way that we can SUCCEED in giving ourselves **BACK** to God is by beginning EACH and every day with a DECISION to DO just that, as well as a PRAYER for the STRENGTH to ACCOMPLISH it. People in *Alcoholics Anonymous* know EXACTLY what I'm talking about! They are well-aware that their struggle is NEVER over. They CANNOT commit themselves to being SOBER for the next YEAR. They can ONLY commit themselves to being SOBER for that next DAY, or maybe just the next HOUR, or MAYBE even just the next 5 MINUTES. Well, I believe that all of US are the SAME when it comes to committing ourselves to GOD and to GOD'S values and God's KINGDOM! And SO, we need to CHOOSE, EACH and every day, to give ourselves *back* to God. It is ONE day at a time when it comes to giving *back* to God what BELONGS to God, which is the very BEST of our TIME and our TALENTS, our SKILLS and our TREASURE. And THAT'S how we can FOLLOW the command of Jesus, when He says: *Give therefore to CAESAR the things that are CAESAR'S, and to GOD the things that are GOD'S.* It's something that we ALWAYS need to be WORKING on. And I hope and pray that we WILL, for we are MADE in the IMAGE of God. We NEED to be giving ourselves **BACK** to God! And, we will NEVER have true happiness and PEACE until we DO -- until we BEND our lives to GOD'S purposes. AMEN.

**PLEDGE PROCESSION:** As OUR way TODAY of giving ourselves back to God, I would like to have us all bring forward TO our Communion Table our *Time and Talent Pledge Forms* AND our financial *Pledge Commitment Cards*. We can also bring today's offering envelopes, and place everything into the plates that are on Communion Table. And during our Pledge Procession, there will FIRST be an ANTHEM by our choir -- and THEN, as THEY bring forth THEIR pledges, WE will be singing hymn # 494. Join me at the TABLE, at this CENTER of our worship life..... AMEN.