

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They 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.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

- This story has puzzled commentators, because it leaves us with no clear way to interpret Jesus’ words.
- It is interesting to note that the attempt to entrap Jesus is by opposing foes: Pharisees and Herodians.
- Pharisees are part of the religious community and wanted an independent state

- Herodians were political, supporters of Herod Antipas and, apparently, the Roman occupation
- Jesus' answer to their question is very open-ended
- Since the coin is Roman, it could go back to Rome – a support for taxes, it might seem
- Or, the idea of giving to God what is God's could be understood by the religious community that nothing goes to Rome, since all things belong to God
- While Jesus cleverly avoided a direct answer to the question, which disappointed the two competing conspirators, he might have disappointed his disciples, too, as it does not seem an obvious answer to how one deals with the governments of this world.
- I assume Matthew is not interested in answering the tax question nor did he include this story about Jesus to tell us how clever Jesus was. He is interested in having us contemplate “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”
- So, for us, what are “the things that are the emperor's”?
- I would propose they are the things that are vital to the powers of this world. These “vital things” are not

necessarily physical things. Mostly they are what fulfills a person's desire for wealth and dominance and fame.

Physical things are the outward signs of this desire.

- If these are the emperor's things, what are God's things?
- Matthew knows that Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." And, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles."
- What Jesus was saying, and what Matthew wants us to know, is that our intent, where our heart is, makes all the difference in determining to whom what we do, say, and give belongs.
- The things of this world will never satisfy our hearts – we humans always seem to crave for more, we never have enough. Being caught up in this craving too often turns our service into an offering to the emperor.
- If we want peace of mind, if we want to enjoy life to its fullest, if we want to stop the cravings that keep our lives feeling like they are out of control, then our hearts must be set on God.
- And, when our hearts are set on God, then all that we do will be done to the glory of God, and our service will be giving "to God the things that are God's."

- Setting our hearts on God is how we break out of the cravings of this world that too often control our lives.
- Setting our hearts on God is easily said, but doing so takes practice, and practice, and practice.
- It is my hope, that setting our hearts on God is what we practice each week here in worship and as we support of the ministries of our church.
- The discipline of attending worship regularly; of sitting here seeking to be aware of God’s presence; allowing ourselves to be challenged by the teachings of Jesus; trying to welcome all – especially those we disagree with – and share God’s love with them; giving, intentionally, of our time, talents, and resources. These are just some of the ways we practice setting our hearts on God, which is how all our living becomes a returning to God the things that are God’s.

This is what I want you to take home with you this week and think about: Each year you are asked to make a pledge of what you plan to give to the church. Many, if not all, of you sitting here are “pledgers”. While your giving makes the ministries of this church possible, more importantly it is helping you to set your heart on God – here in worship and in your life the rest of the week.

The more you give of your time, talent, and resources, the more your heart will be set on God (which sometimes, when you are preparing your giving, might have you question how you could have pledged that much). The more your heart is set on God, the more content your life will be and the more the world will learn of God's unconditional love— which is the purpose of the practice. So, as we move into this Stewardship season, ask yourself, on a regular basis: Is my heart set on God? Does what I say and what I do bring glory to God?

I am praying, as you dwell on these questions and seek to answer them in the affirmative, you will grow in faith and come to understand that all that you are and all that you have are gifts from God, that you are God's, and that, with a joyous heart, you will continue to give – time, talent, resources, and, especially, love – accordingly. For then your heart will truly be set on God and the world will learn of God's love. Amen.