
The Things Which Are God's

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 18 October 2026

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 • Matthew 22:15-22



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

When Jesus started his ministry, he surprised and disturbed a lot of people. Many of the Jews, particularly the Pharisees and the scribes, had a lot of fixed ideas about what God wanted from them in terms of observances and practices. They had developed detailed codes of behaviour which they enforced on their fellow Jews. These codes or rules were based on the Ten Commandments and the laws given by Moses, but over time they began to become important for their own sake, and not because following them was truly Godly worship. So when Jesus started stripping away the layers of later additions to what had been God's laws, they were disturbed, distrustful, and often condemning of Jesus. They had doubts about Jesus from the start, and so they liked to test him, by asking him questions that they thought would show him up, or catch him in a falsehood or contradiction.

So it is with today's Gospel reading. The Jews are under the Roman occupation, and the Romans exacted taxes and duties from the Jews, which of course the Jews didn't like paying. Some Jews had revolted in the past and tried to avoid paying what the Romans demanded; this had usually not ended well. So there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the Romans, and the Pharisees were not above trying to get Jesus in trouble with the authorities, in order to get him out of their hair. Hence the question they asked him: is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

But they found it was pretty difficult to catch Jesus out. No matter how much they thought they had trapped him, he had an answer for them. Jesus pointed to the Roman coin, which of course had the emperor's head on it, and his name. And he told them to give to the emperor those things which belong to the emperor — and give to God those things which are God's.

This answer stumped the Pharisees — and it should make us think, too. We know what things belong to the emperor: money, taxes. But what are the things of God which we are to give to God? How do we follow what Jesus says, and give God's things to God, unless we know what they are?

When we're young, one of the first lessons we have to learn, once we're walking and talking and using the toilet, is the concept of ownership. This varies from culture to culture, but here in the West, pretty much everything belongs to someone. As a child, I had my toys and my books, and I knew they were mine. They were in my room, except when I left them all over the house, of course. I remember when I was seven or eight, there was a corner of my bedroom (I was lucky enough to have my own room, even though I'm the youngest of three kids) which was defined by two walls and the end of my bed. Into that corner I threw all my things. It was a mess. All my toys, books, games, all in a big pile. I'm surprised my mother let me get away with it, and ultimately she didn't; she eventually made me clean up my room, and put things in the toy box or on the bookshelves.

When my friends came over to play, we would get out a game, or get out pencils and paper and make our own games. One friend Ron and I used to devise the most complicated games which took hours to play. At my house, we played with my toys. When I went to Ron's house, we played with his toys. Simple example, but it was always clear: this is mine, that is yours.

What about with God and me? What is mine, and what is God's?

Psalm 24 begins: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it." Everything. Everything is God's. It is his because he made it. All that has been created, was ultimately created by God. Humans can be creative too, but their creation is secondary, possible only because first God

created, then we created. Can I make a tree? Can I make a cat? (My cat assures me that cats are a higher order entirely.) No. But I can paint a picture, or I can write a song, using the creativity God gave me and guides me in how to use it. God shares his creation with us. When we make an offering at the altar, as we do every Sunday, we are giving to God what is already God's. We make the offering to acknowledge God's goodness to us. So giving of our gifts back to God is one way of giving God what is his.

Another way is through our faith. We choose to believe in God; we choose to have faith. Yet faith itself is also a gift of God. Many of us pray from time to time: Lord strengthen my faith. Help my unbelief. This is a classic prayer and points to the fact that we can only give our hearts to God with God's own help. It seems paradoxical, but it is consistent with the fact that all in the world is God's.

Aligned with faith is our obedience. Talking about obedience is difficult for some; we want to be independent, not answering to anybody. But God demands our obedience. All people are equal in God's eyes, but we are not equal with God. God doesn't want false respect. The obedience God wants is born out of our love for God, and our recognition of his sovereignty. God commands our respect and our love because he made us. The love and respect we give our parents, and which the commandment requires, is that same kind of love in miniature.

So we will pay our dollars to the IRS when they ask for them. But our hearts, our love, our souls and our faith we will pay to the one from whom all these things come: our loving Father in heaven. Amen.