

Cursive on the Coin

Letters. Diaries. Manuscripts of various kinds,
written in ink on yellowed paper. All were composed by hand,
during the Civil War.

A textbook included photographs of some of these manuscripts.

Professor Drew Gilpin Faust, an American historian,
asked her college class what they thought of the book.

One student said the photographs were not very helpful to him,
because he couldn't read cursive.

"What?" the professor said to herself.

"Had I heard him correctly?" Cannot read cursive?

She then asked the class, **"Who else can't read cursive?"**

About two-thirds of the class raised their hands.

"And who can't write it?" she asked. Even more.

According to ***The Atlantic***, cursive was omitted from

Common Core standards for education back in 2010.

At that point, handwriting instruction

had already been in decline for some time.

Laptops and tablets were everywhere,

so students began getting lessons in keyboarding.

They were using their hands to type on a keyboard
instead of writing on a pad of paper.

The result? Many students today cannot read a Civil War-era manuscript,
or anything else written in cursive. We live in a cursive-less world.

The Pharisees also had a hard time reading what was in front of them,
but for a different reason.

In the gospel of Matthew, they approach Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem.

They are trying to lay a trap for Jesus,
much like the person who asks you,

“Have you stopped beating your spouse?”

If you say ***“yes,”*** you are in trouble, and if you say ***“no,”***
then you have an even *worse* problem.

The Pharisees try to get Jesus to make a decision about paying taxes,
a choice they think will bring him into conflict
with either the Roman government
or the parties rebelling against the empire.

Whether he says yes or no, he is going to be in hot water.

The Pharisees say: ***“Teacher, we know that you are sincere,***

and teach the way of God in accordance with truth” (22:16).

They lay it on pretty thick, describing him glowing terms.

They hope this praise will lower his resistance before they attack.

“Tell us, then,” they ask, ***“what you think.***

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v. 17).

This sounds like a simple question, but it’s really a loaded question.

The Pharisees figure that if Jesus ***approves*** of paying taxes,

then he’ll offend the people who are trying to

rebel against the Roman Empire.

But if he ***disapproves*** of paying taxes,

then he could be reported to the empire and maybe even arrested.

They are saying, in effect, ***“Do you support rebellion or Rome?”***

They know that either choice can be used against him.

Fortunately, Jesus is aware of their malice

and flips the choice back to them.

“Show me the coin used for the tax,” he says.

They give him a denarius, a Roman coin.

“Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answer:

“The emperor’s.” Then Jesus says to them,

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,

and to God the things that are God's" (vv. 19-21).

He makes them read the writing on the coin,
and he uses their failure to comprehend it
as a way to slip out of their trap.

The Bible tells us that when they hear Jesus say this, they are amazed.

They have no response, so they leave him and go away. For a while.

The story is popular because it shows Jesus outwitting his opponents
with cleverness and clarity of thought.

But this tax question does more than reveal that Jesus
was tough to manipulate.

The story challenges us to discover for ourselves what it means
to give to God the things that belong to God.

And like those college students struggling to understand cursive —
where a few letters may be recognizable
but the connections between them are unfamiliar —
Matthew's message may not be entirely clear.

At first glance, it appears that Jesus is giving us a neat,
clean way to serve both government and God.

Give the emperor one thing and God another thing. Keep them straight; don't let them get mixed up; focus on spiritual things on Sunday, and on secular things Monday through Saturday.

“Maintain separate silos,” Jesus seems to be saying.

“Don't let politics and religion mix.

Respect the separation of church and state.”

Jesus appears to be encouraging us to keep these important parts of our lives separate, divided into neat, clean and orderly compartments.

But if we jump to that conclusion, we are not learning to read the cursive on the coin.

What is written on the coin is a title, ***“Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest.”***

This means that the coin is part of an empire that worships a godlike leader.

Such an inscription is deeply offensive to both the Pharisees and Jesus, who consider only the God of Israel to be divine.

When Jesus says,

give ***“to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,”***

he is really saying to get rid of the coin.

Give it back to the person who owns it.

You could say the same about the American dollars

that we carry in our wallets. At the top of each bill are the words,

“Federal Reserve Note.”

The note is ***“legal tender for all debts, public and private.”***

Yes, we use it, but it belongs to the State.

At the end of its life, it goes back to the Federal Reserve.

We give to the State the things that are the State’s.

After speaking of the emperor, Jesus says,

give ***“to God the things that are God’s”*** (v. 21).

This is a perplexing phrase, because there is no tax we can pay to God,

and no clear assessment of what we owe the Lord in terms of worship,

stewardship or charity. Giving to the emperor is easy;

giving to God is not.

But once again, we need to read the coin.

The head on the Roman coin is an image of Tiberius Caesar.

But is there a similar coin that contains the image of God?

No, there’s not.

Jesus would say that we should look at ourselves

and look at our neighbors.

Each of us is made in the image and likeness of God.

We are stamped with God's image,

just as a Roman coin is stamped with the emperor's image.

When we give to God the things that are God's,

we are offering to God our complete selves — body, mind, soul, heart.

We are holding nothing back, seven days a week.

We do not give to God only the things that are in the divine silo.

No, we give to God everything we have.

Just a few verses later, one of the Pharisees asks Jesus

to identify the greatest commandment. He answers,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (vv. 36-37).

That's loving God with everything you have.

But then Jesus adds a second part,

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 39).

That's a reminder that love goes not only to God,
but to your neighbor and yourself, people stamped with the image of God.

Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love of self.

Such love is at the heart of the Christian faith,

directed to God and to the precious people made in the image of God.

Back in the third century, Rome was still the dominant power and Christians were undergoing persecution.

In the year 258, the emperor Valerian commanded his Imperial treasury to confiscate all money and possessions belonging to the Christian church.

Responding to this threat, the Pope put a young man named Lawrence in charge of the church's riches, and he also gave him responsibility for the church's outreach to the poor.

The Roman emperor demanded that Lawrence turn over all the riches of the church and gave him three days to round it up.

Lawrence quickly sold all the church's valuables and gave the money to widows and to the sick.

He then distributed all the church's property to the poor.

On the third day, the emperor summoned Lawrence to his palace and asked for the wealth of the church.

With great fanfare, Lawrence entered the palace, stopped, and then gestured back to the door.

Streaming in behind him were crowds of poor, crippled, blind and suffering people.

He proclaimed, ***“These are the true treasures of the church.”***

Yes, the treasures of the church are the people
made in the image of God.

We give to God the things that are God’s
when we devote ourselves to feeding the hungry,
sheltering the homeless and caring for vulnerable children.

We do God’s work when we look for the face of Jesus
in the faces of people around us —
especially the strangers, the thirsty, the hungry and the sick.

Like the people of Jerusalem, we are challenged to understand
the cursive on the coin.

Look at a U.S. nickel made after 2005.

You will see — written in cursive — the word ***“Liberty”***
next to the image of Thomas Jefferson.

The word reminds us that we are free to be generous in our giving.

We have liberty to share our food with the hungry,
and to share money with groups that help the homeless.

One of the ways that God provides for the poor
is through the generosity of people like us —
people who are determined to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

The other phrase on the nickel is ***“In God We Trust.”***

This phrase reminds us to rely on our good and gracious God,
and to believe in God’s constant care.

We trust in God — not in Tiberius Caesar, Wall Street or the government.

We trust that God will care for us, in the future as in the past.

The Pharisees looked at a coin and got a message. So can we.

We can give to God the things that are God’s —
our whole body, soul, mind and heart.

And we can put our trust in a loving and generous God,
with complete liberty to support God’s work in the world. Amen.

Sources:

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