

Isaiah 45:1-7

45:1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him-- and the gates shall not be closed:

45:2 I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron,

45:3 I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

45:4 For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.

45:5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me

45:6 so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.

45:7 I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things.

Matthew 22:15-22

22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

22:16 So 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.

22:17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

22:18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?

22:19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

22:20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"

22:21 They 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."

22:22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Proclamation of the Word

Sometimes life's most difficult questions bring us to our knees.

Why, Lord, would a small boy suffer from a brain tumor?

Or look at ISIS. What drives people to greed, power, and radical religion that inflicts beheadings and terror?

Difficult questions indeed. Where is God in it all?

Next Sunday we will Kirk the Tartans and celebrate our Presbyterian Reformed heritage. We will also celebrate the 500th birthday of the founding leader of the Presbyterian Church (Kirk) of Scotland, John Knox.

Another founding father of our particular brand of Christian theology is John Calvin. Calvin was French lawyer. In response to persecution he fled to Geneva, Switzerland. It was during his time there that a young John Knox fleeing Bloody Mary, Mary Tudor, a staunch Catholic monarch of England, came to Geneva and learned Reformed Theology and Worship from Calvin. Calvin wrote a Systematic Theology which highlights the Tenets or Core beliefs of the Reformed tradition. And the most central tenet is the Sovereignty of God. In other words, God, who created the earth and all that is in it, is the ruler of all. Indeed all of life is in God's hands. We worship a God who is immortal, invisible, God only wise. God is bigger and more mysterious than we imagine. Sometimes I wonder if we have made God too small?

Laurel Matheson discusses Calvinism in her article in this month's *Christian Century*. She describes the time author Marilynne Robinson who wrote such novels as *Gilead* visited her Episcopal Seminary. Robinson writes about faith in her fiction. She is a Calvinist and was speaking to a group of Calvin-averse Episcopalians. Now I love Episcopalians- just spent yesterday with my aunt and uncle who are Episcopalians. Matheson writes,

I don't remember what specific question a student raised about predestination or total divine providence. Whatever it was, it was obliterated by Robinson's response; [She said] imagine you are faced with grieving parents whose young child has died in a seemingly random and tragic accident. Which is more comforting, to assert that all of this is somehow in God's hands or to indicate that their child slipped through some ontological crack?

Robinson's piercing gaze scanned the silent room, daring us to defend a theology that would leave God occasionally out of control. No one spoke. Checkmate. Calvin.

Our passages today are great examples of the biblical witness to this understanding of the Sovereignty of God. Nothing is outside of the realm of God, even the ruling power of Cyrus of Persia. Listen again to these words from Isaiah 45:6-7:

I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things.

God, through his prophet Isaiah, does not speak of "weal, or well-being, and woe" as in an existential dark night of the soul, he is writing in a world where Israel has been conquered by the Babylonians, or modern day Iraq. They have been forced into exile when a benevolent Persian (modern Iran) ruler

Cyrus comes along. Even though Cyrus does not recognize the one God of Israel, God declares that he has placed Cyrus in charge. And God does this so that Cyrus will know and so that the people will know and recognize the LORD as the Sovereign God of all. Military triumph and humiliation of neighbors are in God's realm, just as the personal suffering and loss are. Weal and woe are ever present realities. Our world is more like the ancient world than we like to think. John Calvin believed that it is the role of human rulers and magistrates to serve the will of God, first, for the well-being of God's people and good order.

For example, let's put this to the test. We see the recent acts of Putin and Russia as a sort of manifest destiny or empire building. Remember the summer's acts in the Ukraine, the Crimean peninsula, and the downed Malaysian Airlines flight. How do we interpret such actions in light of the hand of God at work? Is Putin a benevolent outside ruler or a power hungry, greedy tyrant?

These are real questions of sovereignty. If all belongs to the LORD, what about this situation? Can rulers serve the will of God, even rulers who do not worship God? Or are they claiming ownership and using might for their own gain as in the case of Hitler, who saw himself as above the will of God.

In all fairness to Russia, our own nation's founders had their own idea of manifest destiny, and our country was born out of the British Empire. We are not immune to the desire for sovereign control, land, and resources. Let's be honest. There is a great post on Facebook this week in honor of Columbus Day, I suppose. It was a picture of a Native American chief and the caption read, "Turns out you are all illegal." – ouch.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that the LORD is God. There is no other.

Let's turn to the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was confronted with a question about sovereignty. He is being pursued by the religious leaders who are testing him and trying to entrap him. "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" They are speaking of a particular tax. The Jews paid a Temple tax, a levy on goods and income, but this is the Census tax paid to Rome. Palestine was in the Roman Empire, and the Jews live in an occupied land. In other words, by paying the Emperor's tribute tax, the Jews were funding their own occupation by the Roman government.

Now you have to understand that they were so ready to get rid of Jesus that even the Pharisees and Herodians were working together on this one. That would be like Republicans and Democrats working together on something. The Herodians were Jews who supported Rome and Herod, the Governor. The Pharisees were more orthodox and would take offense at paying tribute to any earthly ruler, since God is the ruler of their once theocracy. Perhaps one way to think of it is Herodians were "cultural Jews" and the Pharisees were more "religious Jews." The one thing they had in common politically was that they hated Jesus.

So how does Jesus respond without offending either and without giving them the satisfaction of trapping him? If he says, "Yes, it is wrong, because there is no other God than God. We should not pay taxes to the emperor who claims he is God." That will please the Pharisees, but the Herodians would get him for treason. If he says, "No, we should support the Roman Empire and our occupation" that will please the Herodians, but not the Pharisees. So Jesus asks to look at the denarius, the coin paid as tribute to the Emperor.

Jesus asks them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They 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."

Pretty crafty, Jesus.

The Herodians would think he agreed with them. The Pharisees might interpret that to mean God owns all that is, so don't pay it. Jesus is shrewd and safe for the time being. Over the centuries this passage has been used to support keeping church and state separate, doing our civil duty on one hand, and religious duty, on the other hand. But scholar Lance Pape,ⁱ writes,

Matthew's Jesus has already spoken on the subject of money and divided loyalties: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (6:24). Whatever Jesus is getting at here, he must not be describing a compromise that divides human loyalties neatly between YHWH and the emperor.

Sometimes allegiance to God can place us at odds with other authorities and powers, like money.

Also, by asking whose image is on the coin, remember the Commandment in Exodus 20:4 forbidding "graven images or engraved images." The Emperor considers himself divine and places his image on money, just as our money has presidents on it. The coin is engraved with this inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest".ⁱⁱ Ask Ben Sill to show you a denarius sometime from his coin collection. But the claim to divinity by the Emperor is blasphemous. Jesus makes us examine our loyalty to money, worldly powers, or God. Idolatry is also forbidden in the 10 commandments. Jesus is upping the ante. Recall Isaiah where God speaks, saying, I alone am God.

Finally, if we were listening to Jesus that day, we would recall that in Genesis human beings, like you and I, were made in the image of God. We bear the image of the Sovereign God of the universe. All that we have and all that we are belongs to God.

I heard that a nearby pastor led a recent sermon series entitled, "All the church wants is your money."

In our house, we ask each member to contribute to the running and well-being of the household, whether it be doing chores or contributing income. So, it is true, the elders (ruling and teaching) expect members to give money to God's church, to run our household and to give to mission beyond

ourselves through benevolences. Every member receives a 2015 pledge card. We each make a promise to support the ministry and mission of Fort Hill church in obedience to the head of our church, Jesus Christ.

But even more importantly than our money, God wants all of you, your heart, mind, strength in service to God's purposes. We, who are made in the image of God, show and reflect the ways of God revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ. God is a big, big God, who is in all and through all, who is the alpha and the omega, the Sovereign Lord of all. God is also as near as your breath and has numbered the hairs on your head. As Pape so wonderfully writes, ⁱⁱⁱ

Whatever we render unto Caesar, or to the college or retirement fund, or to the offering basket at church, we can never afford to forget this: we belong entirely to God.

We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our allegiance.

The coin of our realm bears the image of dead presidents, but each of us bears another.

Our Sovereign Emperor, our Creator, said: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."

We must never forget to render unto God the things that are God's...

....namely our whole lives.

ⁱ Lance Pape, *Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22*, at workingpreacher.com. His article clarified this section on what references Jesus may be making in line with understanding Torah.

ⁱⁱ The inscription on the coin required for the tax reads: *Augusti Filius August Pontifex Maximus* ("Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest"). Boring, Eugene, *Matthew – Mark, The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, volume 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 420.

ⁱⁱⁱ IBID, Pape.