

Loyalty and Worth

Deuteronomy 4: 5-8, 15-20

Mark 12: 13-17

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Deuteronomy 4: 5-8, 15-20

See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now.

Mark 12:13-17

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?’ But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, ‘Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.’ And they brought one. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they were utterly amazed at him.

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Atop Mt. Sinai God engraved the Ten Commandments on stone tablets as moral laws, as moral mandates, as the basis of Israel’s covenant relationship with God. Each command was a direction of obedience to God above all else. The first commandment, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me,” set God above any and all other ideals to be worshipped. The second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them,” set God as imageless to the Israelites. There is nothing in creation, nor which can be created by humanity, that can imagine or image God. At best it would

be only a false and limited idea of the true God, and it could become a golden calf that is instead given the worth and loyalty that belongs to God alone.

As the 40-year exodus wandering was nearly finished, Moses reminded the Israelites of God's command to not corrupt themselves, or their covenant with God, through forms, figures or idols. "Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven.

Do not bow down to anything, to anyone, that God has created as though they are worthy of your worship. Do not be led astray so that your commitments and loyalties are in conflict or distracted.

For 1600 years, for 57 generations, through incredible hardships and exiles, the imageless God has been the faith tradition, goal and wisdom of the Jewish people and now many live under Roman rule and occupation, where among the many indignities with which they live is to have to pay taxes to their conquerors with coins that bear the image of the emperor who owns them. The silver Roman coin they must use is worth about a day's wage and on it was the picture of the emperor and the inscription: Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest. Through the breaking of the first two commandments ... do not have any other gods before me, and do not worship graven images or idols, the oppressed God-fearing Jews pay with God-mocking coins.

Now, just days after Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowd waved palm branches and shouted Hosanna, and he has overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple, the political and religious leaders are out for him, looking for a reason and a way to kill him. Jesus was approached by some shrewd and calculating Pharisees and Herodians—two political archenemies typically opposed to one another as the religiously conservative Pharisees were obsessed with law keeping as a means of righteousness, while the Herodians were a political party of religiously pragmatic Jews who chose to work with Herod and the Roman government. This event could very well be the root of the phrase, 'politics makes strange bedfellows.'

With false respect they came to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?'

The Pharisees were ready to pounce on any comment that would seem to compromise the authority of God. The Herodians were ready to pounce on any comment that seems to threaten the political authorities. Either way, they know they have Jesus trapped. They presented themselves as respectful of Jesus yet were setting him for a fall and a fail as they stirred the expectations of the crowd. They wanted Jesus to feel the pressure of the crowd when they asked their question, knowing that he would be judged immediately by the first statement he made. He couldn't say, "That's a complicated issue to deal with," he couldn't give a long-winded answer. In the eyes of the Pharisees and Herodians he was trapped into a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer.

Instead, the trappers are the ones to fall and fail by Jesus' brilliant answer. 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Jesus took their small-minded perspective and shattered it to reveal the workings of God in our lives. While as citizens we do have an accountability to our emperor, to our government, we have a higher accountability to give to God the things that are God's. And what are the things that are God's? Everything, as there is nothing outside the realm of God. It is God who is most worthy of our loyalty.

Atop Mt. Sinai God had carved in stone the moral mandates for the covenant with God's people, yet long before then God had created us in God's own image. Since the sixth day of creation we have been marked, been inscribed, with the image of God. The coins that were to trick and trap Jesus belonged to the emperor because they bore Caesar's image. We bear God's image, so we belong to God, and we are to give to God the things that are God's. It is our spiritual nature that enables us to connect with God, to be like God mentally, morally, and socially on a limited, finite scale.

In this Lenten season of reflection, what does it mean for us to give to God the things that are God's? How can we offer to God every part of our lives, all day, every day? How can we offer to God our true worth and loyalty, all day, every day? Amen.