



**18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“Matthew’s Score Card”-- Oct. 16, 2011**  
**Text: Matthew 22:15-22**

*Prayer: “Teach me your ways, O Lord, that I may know your truth.” Amen.*

Little did I know when Vaughn and I married how much of a sports enthusiast he is. There are a few sports he does not watch, but there are many that he does.

I’ve gotten accustomed to doing things by myself on Sunday afternoons as he watches the Steelers play – unless, the Cleveland Browns are playing the Steelers, then the game turns into a must watch.

Aside from watching football on tv, we have over the years gone to various local sporting events, including baseball with the home team.

I have never understood much about baseball, so I go with Vaughn solely to watch the games and to spend time together. Vaughn on the other hand, keeps track of balls, strikes, errors, outs, hits, runs, and whatever else score cards help keep track of. I’ll ask questions about why a play was called foul when I thought it was good, or why the batting lineup is a particular order. Patiently, he’ll explain, and as he does so, will frequently comment, “you can’t tell who the players are without a score card.”

I am reminded of this saying as I have watched some of the baseball playoffs with Vaughn. I am reminded of this saying as we look at our text from Matthew today.

From a surface level, it could appear that Matthew is telling a story about Jesus and the Pharisees clashing yet again. This time, the conflict is over a coin and a tax. To us, the coin, the tax, and the question may seem to be small and insignificant items. But to the story, and those who heard Matthew’s story, the coin, the tax, and the question asked of Jesus carried much significance.

So, using the image of a baseball score card, let us look at Matthew again:

On one side of the question asked of Jesus is a group of people called the Herodians. Having borrowed part of the story from Mark and adapting it to fit the community he was writing to, Matthew keeps the Herodians in the story. Herodians were people that supported the Roman Empire and its regime. Because they supported the empire, the Herodians would have supported paying the tax in question.

On the other side of the question asked of Jesus is the Pharisees. Now the Pharisees were the Temple intellectuals -- the religious know-it-alls, if you will, who dutifully observed Biblical law. The name, Pharisees, literally meant, “one who separates himself”, meaning that as a group, they separated themselves from impure persons and things in order to seek a higher level of holiness based on what they thought God desired.

According to Jewish law, paying taxes to the emperor was allowed. The Pharisees acknowledged this by having the coin in question present at the time of asking Jesus the question. In having the coin present, they participated in the economic system made possible by Rome.

However, what was problematic was who and what was on the coin. The coin had both the face of Augustus Caesar on it and the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” By having his picture and the inscription on the coin, Caesar had placed himself as great, or in his mind, greater than God. Even though the Pharisees supported the Roman Empire, and admitted to being extremely religious, having the coin in their possession with Caesar’s face on it broke the first two commandments: You shall have no other gods before me, and You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

The tax also in question was influenced by Rome. This particular tax was implemented after Judah became a Roman province during the Common Era. In time, the tax promoted a strong sense of nationalistic pride that would later contribute to the destruction and fall of the Temple in AD 60.

The underlying issue to the question is how Jesus answers the question. If Jesus answers positively about paying the tax to the emperor, Jesus would have alienated those who did not support the tax. If, however, Jesus answered in such a way as to say that NOT paying the tax was appropriate, then Jesus would have been arrested. Even though Matthew frequently foreshadows what is yet to come in Jerusalem, it is not time for Jesus to suffer and die.

Here is where difficulty lies in Jesus’ answer. Matthew warns us the Pharisees came with the intent to trap Jesus. And Jesus, who sees all and knows all, is well aware of this. “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?” he asks. Matthew places the comment of the Pharisees intent to trap Jesus to remind the community – and us – that Jesus is still in conflict and tension with the Pharisees. They are looking for a place to arrest him so that he can be put to death.

Jesus answers in such a way that the Pharisees again leave – in shock, amazement, and probably some anger. Where they thought they had found the perfect question in which to trap Jesus, Jesus broadly side steps it.

Almost.

For Jesus does answer the Pharisee’s question with an indirect yes. In that answer, Jesus’ expands on the reality that while there are some things belonging to Caesar, ultimately, all things belong to God.

Jesus’ answer is an answer that leaves me thinking – and wondering – about the gifts we have been given, our possessions, about sharing what we have, about our possessions, and about what we do or do not give back to God. More importantly, I wonder how often we live this idea throughout our lives. Consider that in the offertory prayer of Setting I in the Lutheran Book of Worship, we pray, “Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us, ourselves, our time, our possessions, signs of your gracious love.” In this prayer, we praise and thank God for all the good and perfect gifts first given to us as signs of God’s gracious love. As we pray, we give thanks to God and back to God for the gifts we have first been given.

The gifts we are given are given not because we deserve them, but because of God's amazing, great, incredible, and wonderful love. These gifts are given with no strings attached, given that we might have life, given that we may share with others these gifts so they too will know God's love.

I once heard the story of a pastor whose sermon on this text was to eat an apple. The congregation hungrily watched as the pastor took his time to slowly eat his way around the fresh, shiny apple. As they watched, they waited to hear God's Word proclaimed. When the pastor finished the apple, he placed the eaten and browning core into the offering plate, turned to the congregation and said, "*this* is what you give back to God."

We may recoil in horror at the thought of a pastor preaching a sermon in this way. The pastor did this in order to get the attention of members. The pastor was also trying to convey the message that everything ultimately belongs to God.

Over the next several weeks, the stewardship committee invites you to join us in answering a question. The question has two parts. The first part of the question is "what is one gift you feel you have been given by God?" The second part of the question is "how has your faith grown in the sharing of this gift?" It is a question that requires each of us to honestly look at our faith, our lives, our buying habits, and even our thoughts about the world we live in. It is a question I pray will lead us into a joyful sharing of the gifts we have first been given, that in giving to God what is God's, all full and perfect praise may be given.

May God who is gracious and merciful continue to grace us with His gifts to us. Thanks be to God! Amen.