

From The Pastor

“Whose image is it, and whose inscription?” “Caesar’s”, they replied. “Then give to Caesar’s what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s.

This passage from the Sunday gospel has a historical context, but it is also a universal truth for all ages. The historical setting is that of first century Palestine when the Jewish nation lived under Roman occupation and rule. This was not only a great oppression to their personal freedom and economic status; it was also a great offense against their religion and faith in God.

The Jewish nation knew themselves to be the people of God; that God is one and there is no other. They took great offense at the image of Caesar, the emperor, because he made himself to be as a god. To have to use his coin, or even to have to pay taxes was a painful and hated compromise.

Here their hatred takes a back seat to their intention to trap Jesus so as to find an accusation against him. If Jesus agrees to pay the tax he is betraying the oneness of God, and affirming the authority of Caesar as if that of the divine. If he refuses the tax, he can be accused of subversion against the state. His accusers feel they have the perfect trap.

Jesus acknowledges the role of the state and its place in society, yet is equally clear about the place of God. The state is equated its due in service of its people, but to God alone do we belong. The accusers are left with no rebuttal. Jesus affirms implicitly the authority and oneness of God as essential to faith, but allows for the needs and role of human governance.

To apply this dictum today, what might we say? In our culture where money is so highly valued for everything from buying power, personal security, social status, to even self-identity we might ask: and what is it that belongs to God? How can we best give to God what is God’s?

First, we would do well to attend to the oneness of God, as did our forbearers in the faith. The tone for today would perhaps be different, but the reality is the same. In biblical times each nation, generally, professed allegiance to their own god. In tribal cultures there was often many gods to be served, obeyed, or appeased. Such obedience was mostly done out of fear, perceived as an absolute for survival or at least for divine appeasement so as to obtain divine favor. The God of Israel calls for a relationship of fidelity as the God who creates and sustains life, saving and redeeming.

What might be some of the false gods we serve today as though they were absolute necessities for our survival or happiness? What absolutes do we live by that may hinder us from recognizing God as One, as sovereign? How might we fail to give God the proper due of honor, reverence and love? What do we allow, unwittingly or otherwise, to take the place of God in life?

Another approach is to consider the place gratitude plays in our daily awareness. To forget gratitude is to presume that life and its offerings are our right, due to us simply because we are. A loss of gratitude forgets that all is gift offered freely. The Giver is forgotten in the giving and a rightful relationship is lost. What is taken as if by right or expectation seriously offends the relationship of a freely given gift. To the extent that we take life for granted, we will lose the ability to see God in our lives.

God is the perfect giver, the absolute truth of our existence. God is our life, our hope, and our salvation. We may find happiness in many things in this life, but God alone will be our peace. God in fact, desires our happiness and our good use of all that He has made. We exist to know God, and to share God’s life here and now, and in the world to come.

Gratitude is a great place to find and know God’s presence. When, where, or how do you feel most blest? When or from whom do you most experience forgiveness, acceptance or love? Where do you find security, peace, inner calm, promise and hope? What do you most enjoy? What is your greatest joy, satisfaction, or fulfillment? God is richly present, to be found, and experienced in such times as these. To fail to notice or thank God with a grateful heart misses an opportunity to offer God his due of honor, reverence, and love.

Be glad and enjoy all God has given you, knowing that God delights in your happiness. Gratitude not only sets us in right relationship to God, it also inclines our heart to share with others. In Christ, ownership is not held as exclusive possession, but as a resource to serve our needs and those of others. An attitude of gratitude accepts both the giftedness of life, as well as its dependence on God. We are grateful because ultimately all is gift. Such an attitude can heal bitterness and resentment. We are less likely to cling to things for happiness, and we are less inclined to sit in anger and bitterness when material things are lost or taken from us. Gratitude is the heart of Christian prayer.

If we honestly give to God what is God’s, and to Caesar what is Caesar’s, happiness and right order will find its way to our hearts.

God bless you all,
Father John Esper.

