

Sunday, October 16: Matthew 22:15-22

According to Isaiah, God has a tattoo!

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

I live in a part of the country where the five-letter word *taxes* is often used as a four-letter word. Folks around here are highly skeptical of government even as they say we have the best government in the world. The people of first-century Palestine had greater reasons to be on the edge of revolt; they were taxed not by a government they'd elected but by an empire that occupied their land. The parties of the Pharisees and Herodians pushed Jesus on a sensitive issue with their "gotcha" question: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? They wanted to corner Jesus as the programmed loser, but his famous words of wisdom were a game changer: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

I prefer the word *image* for the word that is sometimes translated as *head* or *likeness* of Caesar on that tax money. *Image* is better because it makes the connections in Jesus' response much clearer. Caesar had an imprinted image on Roman coins, and God has an imprinted image too—on us. All creation bears God's image because God is the Creator of all things including the human man Caesar. When we give to God things that are God's, there isn't anything left to give to anyone else. It's all God's!

As God's people we bear the image of God. We have God tattooed on our foreheads and on our hearts. But amazingly, this isn't a one-way street. Isaiah once described God's deep connection and love for us by asking, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:15-16).

God has a tattoo! Isaiah imagines our likeness tattooed on the palm of God's hand. Both Creator and creatures are tattooed with the other's image; we carry each other's pictures around in our wallets. We know that whether it's body art or pictures

in our wallets, these symbols are reserved for those we dearly love. These are the ones to whom we are bound by covenants and kinship. There's a deep foreverness about our relationships.

Note how small and insignificant Caesar becomes up against the Creator. Note how puny his empire and his image are up against God's greatness. Note how glaring his lack of compassion for his subjects when he's up against a God described as a nursing mother whose baby's face is already tattooed on the palm of her hand. Render to God the things that are God's.

Matthew 22 is about taxes; it's about what belongs to God and what obedience to God (rather than to tax law) looks like. Because Creator and creators are imprinted with each other's image, likenesses are held in common. In humble obedience we are called to look like God in what we do and what we say. The fact that the trick question of the day has to do with governments and taxes leads us to reflect on how we Christians exercise our ultimate allegiance to God in the arenas of politics and government. Any expectation that life can be neatly divided into pigeonholes of sacred and secular, public and private, doesn't hold true in God's economy. This does not work in a world where everything belongs to God.

What does it mean for our obedience to God to be greater than our obedience to anything else? What does it mean for the cross to take central place amid all other pledges of allegiance? In the opening decades of the 21st century, there is a lot of discussion about the role of government and much discernment about the mission of the church.

As beings created in the image of God we bear a resemblance to God in our compassion for others. We are to attempt to be a striking likeness to Jesus and what he would do. As the baptized, we view the world and judge the actions of others through this lens of compassion. Governments, even so-called Christian governments, act not out of compassion but out of constitutions. We have seen both foreign and domestic governments formulate laws or policies that are perfectly legal and yet are unjust because they create victims. What is legal is not always compassionate. What is law-abiding is not always justice-making. Many of us dream of a community where governments view the world through the lens of compassion, but Caesar will always be Caesar, even in a great democracy.

That's why the people of faith who give their ultimate allegiance to God, and who have God's compassionate DNA imprinted on their spirits, bear witness to this mercy

and advocate for it everywhere. In this way we continue to give to God the things that are God's.