

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## WHAT IS GOD'S? Matthew 22:15-22

Before I get started, I want you to take the Hymnal from the pew rack and open it to the title page. What do you see there?

*Hymnal 1982*  
*According to the use of The Episcopal Church*

*The Church Hymnal Corporation*  
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Now turn to the back of the title page and look down near the bottom. There you will find these words:

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Why does the Hymnal and almost every other book that has been published have such information printed on the first few pages? The answer, simply put, is that it is there as a protection against others claiming the author's work as their own. It says that you may only use this material elsewhere if you acknowledge in print the true owner of the content. The copyright is the secular world's way of articulating the Eighth Commandment – "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). We call it plagiarism, but that is merely a term for a specific form of stealing because it is taking what belongs to another and claiming it as your own. The propensity of human beings to do so is so prevalent that a whole body of law pertaining to intellectual property issues has been developed. However, the underlying principle is the same whether one is dealing with copyright, trademark, patent, vehicle registration or a burned brand on the hide of a cow. It is all about the identification of ownership.

The lure of taking what belongs to others, even that which has been loaned to us, was illustrated by Jesus in the Parable of the Vineyard we studied two weeks ago. In that story we saw that the line between stewardship and ownership is easily transgressed by greed. Instead of having use of something we take it as our own. Now I am sure that none of you have ever borrowed something from a neighbor and neglected to return it, but most certainly you have a victim of such ingratitude. In the parable Jesus taught us that what we have has been given us by God, who created all things, and therefore belongs to God and not us.

The Gospel lesson today takes us beyond ownership to teach us a lesson about recognizing the owner. Like copyright, trademark and patent, whatever bears the image of someone is thereby identified as being owned by that person. Therefore, Jesus meets the challenge of the Pharisees with the words:

*“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21).*

It is easy to understand what Jesus is saying about the imperial coin, after all, it bears the image of the emperor. But what does he mean about giving “*to God the things that are God’s*”? If the coin belongs to the emperor because it bears his image, what bears the image of God in this world, and therefore, belongs to him?

To answer that question, let’s go back to the creation narrative and see. If an author or creator is going to put his signature or imprimatur on his work he will do so almost as part of the work itself. In Genesis chapter 1, there is no mention of God’s image associated with the creation of light, nor the sky, nor the land, nor the seas. Likewise, the vegetation, the celestial bodies (sun, moon and stars), the sea creatures and the animals are not spoken of as bearing God’s image. But in verse 26 we find the first mention of the image of God when God says:

*“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26).*

When God is finished with bringing creation into being and giving everything to humankind, then, at the end of Genesis 1 we read:

<sup>31</sup>*God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day (Genesis 1:31).*

God made man in his image, gave him dominion over the created order and placed him in his work as the signature of the artist, the proof of ownership. We are the image of God embossed on creation just as the image of the emperor was embossed on the Roman coins. Therefore, we symbolize that everything in creation belongs to God, and that means everything we have, including ourselves, belongs to God. The word we use for that condition is *stewardship*.

Going back to the Parable of the Vineyard, God’s people being placed in God’s vineyard are put there for two reasons. First, they are there as the ones delegated by God to maintain God’s vineyard for God. And second, they dwell in the vineyard to demonstrate that the vineyard has an owner and to reveal who the owner is. By the parable, Jesus illustrated that the Jewish leaders failed on both counts. God’s answer was to remove those usurping tenants and replace them with the Church – the body of those who through the cross and death of Jesus Christ were restored to the proper image of God and called to announce and demonstrate the purpose and direction of God in the world. As the Church we are to be those who acknowledge to the world that all there is belongs to God and that the kingdom of God is represented in this world by the community of believers.

Humankind was created and applied to the creation as God’s image, the imprint at the bottom of the title page that says, *Copyright © by God – All rights reserved*. Through sin the print became almost illegible, but with the Incarnation and death of God’s Son, the signature of God was

indelibly restored. As members of the Body of Christ our duty is to conform to his image (Ephesians 4:13) and to witness to the world that all there is and all we have belongs to God. The way in which we make that known to ourselves and to the world is to “give from that which we have been given.”

Let us keep silent before the Lord and examine our hearts as to God’s purpose for us and our proper response to his call. Pray that the generosity of God might be met by a willingness in your heart to respond to him with a joyfully generous spirit.

*Amen.*

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on October 16, 2011, the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Stewardship Sunday), Proper 24, Year A.*