Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer:

“Give therefore to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” This has always been one of my favorite passages in scripture, even before I began to walk down the path that would lead me here; before I got “big time” religion.

In the past I liked this passage for different reasons than I like it now. Before, I was drawn to it not so much as a clergy person or in a spiritual way. Before, I liked it as a lawyer.

There are two reasons for this, two ways in which this passage appealed to me as an attorney. The first has to do with what it seems to say about the issue of ‘the separation of church and state”; a fine subject for a lawyer to sink his or her teeth into. And it seems clear.

There are two separate realms in our lives, two great powers. There are the civil authorities and there’s our religion, our church. What Jesus is saying, I believed, is keep them separate. The civil realm is what is necessary to maintain an ordered society, to keep the peace and to deliver necessary services. The spiritual realm is something we need to develop and nourish so that we can continue and grow in our relationship with God.

And the two operate separate from each other, all neat and tidy. Render unto Caesar, pay your taxes, stay out of trouble so you won’t have to hire somebody like me, and the civil authorities will leave you alone to worship as you please. The separation of church and state protects both, especially the church. We need to remember that. And I still am fine with this interpretation; I don’t disagree with it. I just don’t think it’s nearly as important than I used to.

The other reason the lawyer side of me really likes this passage is the way that Jesus handles himself with the Pharisees. I admire the ability of Jesus to give as good as he gets. I admire someone who can linguistically turn the tables on their opponent. And Jesus does this here. And he does in a context where the stakes are very high indeed. Make no mistake; this is a life or death situation. Jesus is doing semantic battle with the Pharisees, the religious leaders in Jerusalem that are opposed to Jesus.

Once again our Gospel reading comes from the last week of Jesus’ life. The Pharisees and all of the religious leaders of that place and time have had enough of Jesus. They’re afraid he’s going to cause trouble and mess up the uneasy peace they have been maintaining with the Romans. They’re looking for an excuse to kill him, and they want to do it soon.

And so, the stakes are high, which makes Jesus’ ability to hold his own verbally even more admirable, especially for a lawyer type who lives for this kind of thing. The Pharisees ask Jesus a brilliant question that is perfectly designed to get him in trouble. They ask, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” I love that “or not”; they’re really trying to pin him down.

Either way Jesus answers, he’s in trouble. If he answers that it is right to give tribute to Caesar, he is in trouble with the people. He loses his credibility as a prophet; he will be seen as one who will cave in. Remember, the reason that the Pharisees don’t just get rid of Jesus now is that they fear the reaction of people. Without the support of the people, Jesus is in trouble.

But if Jesus answers that it is wrong to pay taxes, then he’s done for. The Roman authorities are not going to put up with an itinerant preacher running around telling people not to pay their taxes. Jesus is stuck, until he comes up with his own brilliant response: “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s…” The lawyer in me admires this… a lot.

But, while I don’t think the reasons I have always liked this passage in the past are wrong, I do think I have been missing something. My focus has been on the first part of Jesus’ response; render unto Caesar. I am still drawn to this story, but now I think I’m more drawn to the second part of the answer; render unto God the things which are God’s.

What does it mean to give to God the things that are God’s? Just what \*is\* God’s. In order for Jesus to see what belonged to Caesar, Jesus looked at a coin, and found Caesar’s image. Where do we look for an image of God? How do we figure out what to give to God?

This is not a trick question, and you know the answer. Genesis 1:26: Then God said, ‘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.’ We give ourselves to God, because we are the things on earth that bear God’s image. You and me, and our neighbors, and all that comes from us.

Allow me to quote Pastor David Lose, who said this about the quote from Genesis: “Pause for a moment to let that sink in. We were made in the image and likeness of God, and because we bear God’s likeness we are to act like God. Not mind you, like *gods*, those who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like *God* – the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and saves…no matter what the cost. We are called, that is, to serve as God’s agents, God’s partners, and God’s co-workers, exercising dominion over creation not as an act of power but rather as an act of stewardship and extending to all the abundant life God wishes for all.”

It is so important for us as Christians to remember who we belong to. Just as surely as the image of the emperor was stamped on that coin they handed Jesus, the image of God is stamped upon the very essence of our being. “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created him.”

This is driven home for us in our own church even more clearly in the words said at our baptism when the sign of the cross is made on our foreheads; “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.” We are that, Christ’s own forever.

So let us give of ourselves to God, because this is what God wants, to be in relationship with us, a relationship in which we choose to give of ourselves freely. To give of ourselves to God, because this is what Jesus means when he says give to God that which belongs to God. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, or a lawyer, to figure that one out.

Amen