

Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

*Loving God open the Scriptures to us in a new and exciting way.*

*In Jesus name. Amen*

Every day in so many ways we make choices with what God has given us.

Addressing a group of high powered, overachieving business students, a time management expert said, "Okay, time for a quiz." Then he produced about a dozen fist sized rocks and carefully placed them one at a time into a jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is the jar full?" Everyone one said "Yes." Then he said, "Really?" He reached under the table and pulled out a bag of gravel. Then he dumped some gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the spaces between the rocks. Then he asked the group again, "Is the jar full?" This time the class thought they were on to him. "Probably not," one of them answered. "Good," he replied. He reached under the table and grabbed a jug of water and began pouring it into the jar until it was full. Then he looked at the class, "What is the point of my illustration?" One eager beaver raised her hand "The point is no matter how full your schedule, if you try really hard, you can always fit more things in to it!"

"No" the speaker replied, "that is not the point. The truth that this illustration teaches us is that if you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."

What are the big rocks in your life? Maybe a project you want to complete? Time with your loved ones, your faith, your education, mentoring others? Remember to put the big rocks in first.

Today, in the Gospel, Jesus is between a rock and a hard place.

Two groups united in their hatred of Jesus are attempting to trap him. It's the original *coalition of chaos*.

Is it legal to pay taxes to the emperor, they ask. One group are the Pharisees, the pious Jews serious in their commitment to keeping the laws of Scripture. The other group, called the Herodians, are supporters of the governor. The problem is money. Israel was an occupied land. There were taxes on farm produce and taxes just for being. But not only did tax go to prop up an occupying army, the very money itself was a problem. Jews were forbidden from making an image of anyone. Remember the Ten Commandments where it says, "You shall not make idols." Even today if you go into a synagogue, you will not find pictures of any sort. But the coin had the image of the emperor, and underneath the inscription read, "The divine emperor." For Jews this was idolatry.

Jesus is stuck. If he says, "Pay taxes," the Jews will hate him but if he says, "Don't pay taxes," the Romans will have him for treason.

So, he gives an answer no one is expecting. "Show me a coin," he says. "Whose picture is on it? Pay to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's."

This is the classic 'both/and' answer. Jesus had again turned the tables on his accusers. He leaves them and us with two difficult questions. What are we giving to God? (Are we truly giving our money, devotion, and obedience to God?) Second, are we being good citizens and giving the government what is due?

Sometimes Christians go to great lengths to avoid paying tax. But our taxes don't go to paying a foreign occupying army, rather they go to paying the nurses, the teachers, and police. They go to building roads and universities. Ought we not as Christians welcome and support these things?

The first question is also important. Have we so filled our jars with things that there is no room for God? Are our rocks in the jar really important things or are they just stuff that stands in the way of giving true devotion to God and those close to us.

This last week we suddenly lost a friend of forty years - Pip Baker. I tell you this not to scare you, but to encourage you to really focus on the big, important things before it's too late.

The image on the coin leads to another question. In whose image are we made? We carry the Maker's mark; we bear God's image. Our life and loyalty belong first to God, and then everything else finds its right place.

It's not that careers and education and money are unimportant. God knows our need of these things. Rather, if we put God first, these things will be added to us as well, in their proper order. Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Put simply life is better with Jesus than without. He is the first rock to put in our jar, because he gives everything else meaning and purpose.

Let us pray:

*God of life*

*You give us total freedom to live our lives.*

*Help us to make you the rock of our lives  
and build everything else on you*

*Knowing that if we place you first in our lives*

*Then everything else will be ours as well.*

*This we ask in Jesus' name.*

*Amen*