

Have you ever seen a coin displayed in a museum? It's odd. This piece of money is taken out of its context and put inside a glass case, and it invites your attention rather than your use. Separated from the sweat of labor and the dusty exchange of the market, this coin inspires reflection on its beauty, even as we forget its value at the time of its use.

In some ways that's how our Gospel lesson this morning operates, too. This text displays a saying of Jesus, a proverb that leads us to reflect upon matters of church and state: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." And as we think about such matters which are beautifully captured in this saying, we may remain distant from what was *really* happening at the time of this dialog. Seeing the beauty of our Lord's saying, we miss our *Lord* who was saying it and the value of His work here in the temple of God.

At this point in time in the gospel of Matthew, it's Holy Week. Jesus has come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with His disciples. God has come to visit His people. Jesus cleanses the temple of those who change money, only to reveal the person of God in the temple changing lives as the blind and the lame come to Jesus for healing (21:14). Israel, though, refuses God's visitation, and this is only one among many dialogs between Jesus and the religious leaders that reveal their spiritual bankruptcy before God.

Pretending to care about matters of the law, they break the law. Their goal is to trap Jesus in His words. Later on, in response, Jesus rightly declares that they have neglected the weightier matters of God's law. In the temple, where God desires to show forth *mercy*, they have instead practiced *malice*. Where God looked for faith, they have fostered rejection. Where God has given them the blood of sacrifice, they have sought the blood of the righteous, and so the air is thick with irony. The religious leaders stand in the temple, arguing about money, while the temple itself is *spiritually bankrupt*.

This is most clearly seen the day that they condemn Jesus to death. Time and time again they fail to render to God the things that are God's and are left standing in the temple turning blood money over in their hands. They have taken Jesus, the king of Israel, and turned Him over to Caesar. Judas then comes to them and confesses his sin. Rather than attend to matters of justice and mercy, these false shepherds of Israel turn Judas away, saying, "What is that to us?" and immediately begin to debate, in all seriousness this time, what they should do with the thirty pieces of silver, as if their faithful service to God rests

upon how they treat this money, when they have condemned their Messiah and disregarded their calling to tend to God's people and care for their souls.

(But) While the temple and its leaders are spiritually bankrupt, the world is now **rich** with the mercy of God. Outside the temple, outside Jerusalem, the true king of Israel reigns from a cross. Here, the treasury of God's mercy is now thrown open and the priceless blood of the Passover sacrifice is now shed; God comes to redeem His people. Here, we see a true king, the king of Israel, doing the work of a servant-king. Jesus had said that His rule was unlike that of the Gentiles, as He "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). Through this merciful rule of Jesus, the world is forgiven and true disciples are formed.

Today, we as Christ's disciples continue to follow, rendering to God the things that are God's: praise for the riches of salvation freely given for all people and a faithful willingness to show forth mercy towards others in the daily life of the world.

Because the reign of God is eternal, the church always faces the temptation to take this gift of salvation out of the currency of daily life and place it under glass for people to come and see. Like a coin displayed in a museum, the work of God is there for people to ponder, but far away from their daily lives. There's even a website called *reserveaspotinheaven.com* that sells tickets to heaven. While we might laugh at this website, some live as if that were the case with the church. For them, religion is a private belief about their soul's future with little connection to the dust and sweat of this world. Yet the reign of God is **here, now, among** us, and it has **present** as well as eternal value.

God, in Christ, rules among His people in His Kingdom of Grace here and now by His undeserved mercy. This rule is different from that of Caesar or any other earthly ruler, past or present. This kingdom promised in the Old Testament, fulfilled in Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection comes to us now by His Spirit and His Word, that is His Means of Grace.

God's reign is **now**, in your life and mine, through Christ Jesus. God's eternal mercy **matters** in the daily life of this world. We show forth God's reign in our lives through the fruit of the Spirit. We treat others, as Christ would have us do, with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness. and self-control. We also share the good news of forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation which is found in Christ alone.

Yes, our Lord rules over **all** things. He has established governments to keep order in this world and He has created the **church** in His mission to give **life** to all people. Here, God gathers us in His temple, a place of **mercy** not

malice. Here, He forms us to be His people, known by their love for one another, their love for God, and their service in His merciful mission to a fallen world.