

- “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” They replied, “Caesar’s...Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”
- In our gospel today, Jesus nimbly sidesteps the trap laid for him by the Pharisees.
  - You see, they’re still angry about the way Jesus challenged them. Remember the parables about the workers in the vineyard or the guests at the wedding feast?
  - Imagine...Jesus wanted their faith and relationship with God to be more than just going to right services, professing the right doctrine, coming from the right families, offering the right sacrifices.
  - Jesus challenged them that **no one** has a lock on the kingdom, that any chance one has of getting there comes only from God’s free and gracious gift, that this gift is given to anyone and also requires our participation of heart and faith as well as exterior action in service to our sisters and brothers.
  - No wonder, they’re angry and out to get Him. So they set a trap. A trap about taxes.
  - The census tax was levied by the Romans. If Jesus answers “Yes” then He’s guilty of co-operating with the oppressor and loses credibility with His own people, the Jews. If He answers “No” then He’s guilty of rebellion and can be denounced to the Romans.
  - Either way, it seems Jesus can’t win. But Jesus takes his own advice: *Be as cunning as serpents.* (Mt. 10:16)
- Jesus deftly turns their plot to entrap him into an opportunity to speak about God and to preach the Gospel: *Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.*

- Jesus turns their snare into a reminder that God and Caesar are not competing realities and that godly men and women have responsibilities in each world, in both worlds.
  - And Jesus also makes clear we have obligations in each world.
  - Today, I'm going to follow Jesus' example, and take what could be difficult, what some would consider inappropriate, as a platform to speak about God, proclaim the Gospel.
  - I want to focus on the second part of the exhortation of Jesus: *give to God what is God's*.
- 
- As Christians, we strive to receive all God gives us gratefully, cherish it, use it in a responsible and accountable manner and share it in justice and love with others, thus returning it to the Lord with an increase.
    - In other words, it starts with God's love for us. God has given us all that He has because He loves us. "Giving to God what is God's" as Jesus exhorts us today, is returning God's love.
    - It is making a conscious and firm decision to be a follower of Jesus Christ, no matter the cost, a decision which is ratified and carried out only in action. Saint Paul reminds us in our second reading that the gospel is not about words alone, but also the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit.
    - "Giving to God what is God's" focuses on choosing and living a God-centered life, realizing all we have and all we do, indeed all we are **able** to do, comes from God. What we choose to do with those gifts is our gift back to God in gratitude.

- It's the way we fulfill our baptismal promise to love and serve the Lord. Stewardship is our way of responding to God's call with a life of gratitude.
- Stewardship is the life of a mature disciple.
  
- True Christian disciples live out their stewardship through tangible practices of sharing their resources of time, talent, and treasure:
  - Time.
    - All of our time should be God-centered, which means using our time to honor God.
    - God calls us to set aside a portion of our week to focus on strengthening our relationship with God through quiet prayer, Mass, reading and studying the scriptures.
    - God wants us to dedicate a certain amount of time each day to draw closer to Him, to be active in our building our relationship by being passive before Him.
    - This time with God then can serve as the foundation for everything else that we do outside of our prayer.
  - Talent.
    - We should assess our strengths and determine how they might be used to help build the kingdom of God.
    - These strengths could be an overt talent like sewing or painting or an internal skill such as organizing or listening.
    - Each of us has been gifted in extraordinary ways and can perform some action to help others, especially within the context of the needs of our community.

- God has given us these talents not merely for ourselves but to help others as well.
- Treasure.
  - This is what most think of immediately when they hear a priest talking about stewardship and perhaps it's what we think is the most personal.
  - Jesus spent a good deal of time talking about how we handle our finances because He knows how difficult, indeed how dangerous, our stewardship of our finances can be.
  - Stewardship of treasure is planning to return the first portion of our earnings to God as a way of showing our gratitude and commitment to Christ and to the Church.
  - Tithing, giving the first 10% of the treasure we have received, is the traditional, Biblical guideline of what God has repeatedly asked of us.
  - Stewardship calls us to give in proportion to our blessings by sharing a percentage of our gifts with others and using the remainder to live my life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.
- None of this is easy but we do not do it alone.
  - IN our first reading, the Prophet Isaiah reminded us that only God is the LORD; there is no other, no God besides Him. It is God who strengthens us even when we are not aware.
  - Last week, Paul so beautifully reminded us in his letter to the Philippians that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

- Again, Isaiah in our first reading, gives us the image of God as a loving Father who calls us by name, takes us by the hand and helps us to do good.
  
- Aware that we are called by Christ to make a return to God, to give to God what is God's, that stewardship is exacting and difficult but that we do not do it alone, the question remains, "Practically how does it happen?"
  - I ask you to reflect prayerfully on what is God's? On what God has given you? On God's love for you?
  - And then, I ask you also to reflect prayerfully, think carefully about your giving back to God. What return does your giving represent for all of the gifts God has poured out on you?
  - How well do you follow the command of Jesus in today's Gospel to give to God what is God's?
  
- Think about your time and your talent and your treasure.
  - Do you share with God some of the moments God has given to you? Do you make time for God everyday? Do you offer God the sacrifice of a few minutes in quiet prayer or the reading of scripture? Sure everyone is busy and some things are more urgent, but nothing is more necessary.
  - Do you share with God through our community the talents and strengths God has given you?
  - Does your financial giving to our community and to other causes reflect a percentage of all that God has given you?

- I know that some of you are giving at capacity of your time, talent, and treasure, even beyond capacity. For that I thank you. We could not succeed without such generosity.
- But others are giving only a little, only from excess, only when it's available.
- And, sadly, many are not giving at all.
- It is never about the amount of time, talent or treasure one gives but about the way one gives it.
- Perhaps you've not reviewed your giving in a while. Perhaps you've never thought about it before as life decision , rather than only a financial one.
- So I ask each of you to reflect on where you fall in this scale, to reflect on your gift of time, talent and treasure and on what kind of return it demonstrates for all the Lord has given you.
- Some will rest easy in the reflection; others may be a little uncomfortable.
  
- Especially for those who are uncomfortable, I ask you to remember the Lord's generosity in your lives and to take steps to trust in the Lord with your return.
  - Right now, if you're not giving at all in any of these areas, think about giving something, anything. No gift is too small and everyone can give something in each of those areas.
  - Currently the financial burden is borne by only about 1/3 of our parishioners and the burden of service is borne by an even smaller amount. If everyone gave something, we could share that burden.
  - If you're already giving but only from your excess each week, giving financially only from pocket change or throwing God a

minute here or there, plan your gift instead. Think about what you can give every week and then commit yourself to giving that amount of time, talent and treasure.

- Then, once you are planning and giving your gift every week every, take the next step further. Make God a priority, putting God before anything and everything every else. Everyone can do that, regardless of the size of his or her offering.
- Then, even as you give of your time and your talent, take the next step financially and give a percentage of your income rather than a set dollar amount. This is a drastic change in thinking. Initially, it's not about what the percentage is so much as the fact that it is a percent.
- Percentage giving is a major cultural shift and can come as a shock to the system as I found out 7 years ago when I first started doing it myself. I realized that I could not preach to you if I was not practicing it myself so I sat down with our business manager as I prepared to do this homily. I thought I was close to the 10% mark, maybe even surpassing it. But I wasn't. I was closer to 3% which included all of my giving.
- It will be difficult but the final step is to increase that percentage until your total giving is a tithe, the biblical reference of 10%.
  
- Such a demanding call for such a strong return is not a very easy or comfortable position. But it is about putting on Christ, about wearing our Christianity, about giving back to God what is God's
  - Harsh but true, making clear what our Gospel infers: Stewardship is serious business with other-worldly consequences.

- If we do not recognize that all comes from God and should be returned to Him we cannot hope to rejoice fully in the love God has for us right now and, dare I say it, share in the intimacy of God's love in heaven.
- As so many of you know already, yes, stewardship represents a sacrifice but giving even as it hurts can bring joy, both to you who give and to those who receive the Gospel because of it.
- Your giving helps us to make known to others the generosity of God who calls us to share in His banquet as He did last week's Gospel.
  
- Next week, we are going to ask you to demonstrate how you “give to God what is God's” indicating how you will return God's love for you in your time, talent, and treasure, in what you give to the Lord and to this community, both financially and in service.
  
- Whose image do we bear? Give to God what belongs to God.