

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 22:15-22 (NRSV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

[16] So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.

[17] Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

[18] But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? [19] Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

[20] Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" [21] They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them,

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

[22] When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

IMPOSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Some questions just can't be answered, at least not with a simple "yes" or "no." For example, someone might ask me, "Do you *still* beat your wife?" If I say "yes," that's no good. But, if I say "no," that answer doesn't work either. It implies that at one time I did beat my wife.

I've been following the nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court. The anti-abortion forces want her to say unequivocally that she is against abortion. Those that are pro-choice want her to indicate that she might be flexible on this issue.

But, no matter how she answers the questions that the congressmen ask her, she will lose support. A straightforward "yes" or "no" would not be advisable if she wants her nomination to be confirmed. So, I expect she will answer by trying her best not to answer.

Sometimes that is the only safe tactic, at least when you're nominated for the Supreme Court.

The same is true in our lesson for today. Jesus is asked a question that can't be safely answered.

A STRANGE ALLIANCE

Jesus has angered the religious elite, the Pharisees. He has angered them by his teachings, his actions and especially with his challenges to their authority. The Pharisees are willing to do anything to get Jesus, even make an alliance with their enemies.

You know that old phrase, "politics makes strange bedfellows." Well, today's story is an ancient example of that saying. The Pharisees who, for religious reasons, opposed the rule of Rome, met with a group called the Herodians. The Herodians were a group of Jewish leaders who were given power because they were willing to cooperate with the Romans.

Usually, these two groups were bitter enemies, but in Jesus, they found a common enemy, and so the "enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The Pharisees found Jesus to be person of questionable theology. The Herodians found Jesus to be a person of questionable politics. So together

these two usually antagonistic groups concocted a trick question, a question that, they hoped, would produce problems for Jesus. Whether Jesus said “yes” or “no” the answer would be wrong.

ASKING THE QUESTION

I think it’s interesting to note that the Pharisees didn’t go to Jesus themselves. Instead, they sent their young disciples to ask the trick question along with some of the Herodians. The Herodians were there to serve as witnesses should Jesus make the mistake of answering their treacherous question.

So, instead of confronting him personally (risking further humiliation), they sent out their disciples in their stead. “Surely,” they surmised, “his guard will be lowered at the prospect of young disciples seemingly seeking the truth.”

Perhaps they thought Jesus might be swayed by the opportunity to claim some new disciples. Certainly, flattery was a part of their plan. They laid it on really thick.

They told Jesus that he was a true teacher, a person of integrity. They said that they knew he was indifferent to public opinion, unlike the other false prophets of the day. He would tell the truth, no matter what the cost.

That was true, of course, and in the end, Jesus would prove it true by his willingness to die on the cross for God’s truth.

But, Jesus was not put off by their treachery. He understood very well the hypocritical nature of their question. He understood very well that they didn’t want to learn anything from him. They wanted to find a reason to have him killed.

And so they asked their question. It seemed simple enough on the face of it, a simple yes or not question. They asked, “Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or is it not?”

ANY ANSWER IS A BAD ONE

There were some in Jesus' day who wanted to overturn Roman rule by force. They were called Zealots, and this group advocated withholding taxes as a way to protest the occupation.

If Jesus sided with the Zealots, he would immediately be marked for death. The Roman government would not tolerate any protest of their rule, especially when it involved money.

So answering "no" to this question would be a disastrous mistake. In Jesus' day, those who sought to "axe the tax" often fell victim to a real axe!

On the other hand, suppose Jesus said that it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. This would have created a backlash from the crowd and the religious community.

The coins in those days had the face of Caesar stamped on the front, and on the back, there was this inscription, "Tiberius son of the divine Augustus." The coin might also read, "Pontifex Maximus" or "chief priest."

On our coins, we have the inscription, "In God We Trust." This was the same thing except in this case God was identified as Caesar!

To a nationalistic Jew who confessed a radical monotheism, such a graven image was religiously offensive and politically humiliating. Much of the crowd would have been repulsed at the political, religious, and economic implications of honoring a pagan "god" by paying a tax to him.

So, if Jesus said, "Yes, you should pay your taxes" he would be seen as traitor to his country and a traitor to his religion.

AN UNEXPECTED ANSWER

No doubt the crowd understood the importance of this question and the dilemma that it gave Jesus. I imagine a quiet hush falling over the crowd as Jesus prepared to answer. And Jesus did answer.

First, Jesus let these young disciples of the Pharisees know that he understood their game. He said, “I know this is a trick question, and I know that all your flattery is just so much baloney. But, I’m going to answer your question anyway.”

Does anyone have a coin? Someone pulled a silver coin out, a denarius, the exact amount required to pay the tax. Jesus asked, “Whose face is imprinted on this coin?” The question seemed simple enough. They replied, “It’s the face of Caesar.” And Jesus said, “Give Caesar what is his and give God what is his.”

Jesus said in effect, “It’s only money. It has Caesar’s imprint on it. Give it to him. Who cares? Just make sure you give God what is His.”

Jesus refused to answer their simplistic “yes” or “no” question. Instead, he made them make up their own minds. What do I owe Caesar and what do I owe God? And, by implication, he was asking, “Who deserves the greater loyalty?”

JESUS IS LORD

The early church understood the importance of that question. Their first creed about Jesus was a paraphrase of what people were required to say about Caesar.

Everyone in the Roman Empire was required to say, “Caesar is Lord.” It was like a loyalty oath. It was a way of being patriotic, like pledging allegiance to the flag.

But, those early Christians refused to take the pledge. They couldn’t say “Caesar is Lord” because they didn’t believe it. Instead, they believed “Jesus is Lord” and that’s just what they said.

It cost many of them their lives, but they were even willing to give up their life for the cause of Christ. They laid down their lives rather than bow down to the power of Caesar.

Jesus asks us the same question. What do we owe Caesar and what do we owe God?

We complain about taxes but as someone once put it, “civilization is expensive and taxes pay the tab.” So, each year we just write a check. It is painless enough and only takes a few minutes. We do owe Caesar his due.

But, God wants more from us than what we give Caesar. God wants more than just ten percent of our income at the end of the year.

God wants all of us all of the time. There can be no halfway measures when it comes to following Jesus.

A man teaching on Christian stewardship once said that he always made it a point to give more to the church than he gave to the government in taxes. In this way he was reminded of his greater allegiance; he was reminded of the One who had greater authority over him.

The person who considers himself to be in debt only to God is the person who is perfectly free.

We cannot, like the Pharisees, compromise with the enemy when it suits our political ambition. Instead, we are called to live in a different way. We are called to live by principle instead of pragmatism.

In every situation, we are called to ask what is right instead of what is popular.

In some cases, it might be appropriate to give Caesar his due. In other cases, it might mean even standing against the claims of the state to support the even greater claims of God in Christ.

THE DANGER OF SEPARATING CHURCH FROM STATE

I'm all for freedom of religion. I believe that there should be no official religion established by the government.

But, I do not believe in the so-called "separation of church and state." That's not a part of our Constitution nor is it an article of faith. In a democracy, everyone gets a chance to voice his or her opinion.

But for those of us who are Christians, all of our decisions, including our political decisions should be informed and directed by the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Anything less is a denial of the Lordship of Christ and a course of action that can lead to great danger.

A preacher was taking a tour of a building in Germany where the Treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648. The tour guide said,

"After a hundred years of bitter religious strife, Europe was given peace in the Treaty of Westphalia. For the first time in European history economic, social, political questions were limited to the sole concern of the state while making spiritual, religious matters the sole duty of religion."

The preacher said,

"One thing our guide failed to mention. Just outside the room where the Treaty of Westphalia wrought such peace, putting religion in its place, three hundred years later, jackbooted Nazis kicked Jews to death. And anything God might have said to politics was silenced by shouts of 'Heil Hitler!'"

A prominent theologian writes about the "extraordinary concept of political sovereignty" and suggests that this fallacy is at the root of our problems.

Once you've relegated religion to the "spiritual" and assigned everything of any real importance to the "political" there is neither competitor nor check upon the omnivorous state. This explains the bloody Twentieth Century.

To put it another way, faith serves as the conscience of politics.

In a world where the weak are ignored and exploited, we serve a Lord who teaches us that the weakest among us are to be honored and helped in his Name. In a world filled with violence and injustice, we serve a God who tells us that our primary duty is to “do justice, love mercy” and walk humbly with Him.

The primary mission of the church is to preach God's Word. God's Word is not only broad principles such as Jesus cautioning that "No one lives by bread alone." (Matt 4:4); it includes Amos castigating those who "sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way" (Amos 2:6-7).

Above all, the church must proclaim and live, within its walls and outside, the mission of its founder, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because [the Lord] has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, has sent me to proclaim release for captives and sight for the blind, to send the downtrodden away relieved" (Luke 4:18).

IN GOD WE TRUST

In many cultures the cost of placing one's trust in God is incredibly high; it can even cost people their lives. This is why mottoes and slogans like “In God we trust” and “One nation under God” should deeply remind us of the cost of our faith.

Are the words “In God I trust” written on my life? Could someone read my actions and see God's face? It is time for us to say with Jesus: “These coins belong to Caesar; my life belongs to God.”

Our nation has not always adhered to the values of these pledges. Understanding that is the difference between a patriot and a nationalist. A nationalist blindly believes anything his nation chooses to do; a patriot believes in the essence of his nation and stands by those values regardless of the circumstances.

Do we trust in God if we don't live by his principles? If compassion and peace are not forefront on our agenda, are we placing our trust in God? If raising the poor from poverty

and protecting the widow and orphan are not priorities; can we say that we are “under God” or that “In God we trust?”

THY KINGDOM COME

Every Sunday we repeat the Lord’s Prayer and we say, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

That’s a political prayer! When we pray that prayer, religion goes public. Faith is no longer just a private opinion. Our allegiance to Christ demands our all, including our politics.

Some of us might not be so comfortable with that prayer. Some say we shouldn’t even talk about politics and religion much less mix them!

But, I would remind you of this. It’s not our prayer. It’s Jesus’ prayer. It’s the prayer that He taught us to say “by heart.” There’s a reason for that. He knew that Caesar would always want more than his due. Caesar would always want to make idolatrous claims of ultimate power.

And it is up to the church, the disciples of Jesus, to challenge those claims.

Sometimes when everyone else is getting in step behind the flag we must hesitate and wonder in what direction we would be walking if we walked behind the cross instead.

When everyone else is saying “my country right or wrong,” we must hesitate and wonder what it means to pray this day, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Jesus didn’t answer the question posed to him long ago. But, he did implicitly ask some questions that are still relevant even today. What do we owe our country? And what do we owe God?

We do live in a great country. We owe our country much. But, our first allegiance will always be given to a greater kingdom.

THE CELEBRATION AND THE SERMON

A preacher told of a Fourth of July celebration that was held in the church of his youth. The Fourth of July fell on a Sunday that year and the church went all out in their celebration.

Some men rented Revolutionary War costumes and paraded in with the choir. Members of the high school band brought their trumpets and drums to add ceremony to the event. He said that they sang most every patriotic hymn in the book.

The names of those who had died in the war had their names printed in the bulletin. A lady got up and did her best Kate Smith imitation, singing “God Bless America.”

And then their preacher got up and preached a sermon entitled, “America, Come Home.”

He noted many good things about our country, but he also talked about things that were not so good ... things like the massacre of the Native Americans, the carnage of the Civil War, slavery ... and so on, finally ending his sermon with a critique of the current administration.

The people were not very happy with the sermon. One person said, “Those preachers just can’t stand for anyone to have a good time.”

Perhaps the problem is that our allegiance is divided. We are forever struggling with the implied questions in our lesson for today. What do we owe Caesar and what do we owe God?

In our own sanctuary we have the United States flag on one side and a “Christian flag” on the other. Does that represent what we owe Caesar and what we owe God, half and half?

I think not. The cross hovers over both flags.

In the end neither the church nor our country should have primary claim on our lives. We were claimed long ago by the one who died for our sins on the cross. He gave everything for us and our salvation.

And in return we owe him everything.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN