

Matthew 22:15-22

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.

GOD’S POLITICS

What did Jesus mean when he told the religious and political leaders of his day, “Give to Caesar the things that are the Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s?”

What do we owe God? And what do we owe Caesar? To put it another way, what is the relationship between church and state?

Some commentators suggest that this passage is not about the relationship between church and state. But, I would contend that not only is this passage about the relationship between church and state the whole Bible is in one way or another about the relationship between church and state.

Think about it. The story of Moses is about the word of God confronting the injustice of the Egyptian state.

The message of the prophets is about what God required of his people, the nation of Israel and their leaders.

He wanted them to be compassionate and just in their dealings with the poor and the aliens (the foreigners) among them.

And when they didn’t listen they were punished.

The defeats and setbacks of God’s people in the Old Testament are always attributed to their lack of justice and compassion toward the least in society.

THE POLITICS OF JESUS

God has never been shy about getting mixed up in politics. In fact Jesus was crucified because he condemned the political and religious leaders of his day. That conflict forms the background for this passage.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd. They hailed him as the Messiah.

And the first act of this Messiah was to challenge the political and religious powers. He said that they had turned God's House, the Temple into a den of thieves. And he overturned the tables of the moneylenders and ran those who sold sacrificial animals out.

From this point on in the gospel of Matthew the parables of Jesus take on a very sharp edge. And these sharp parables are pointed right at the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem. No wonder the religious and political leaders plotted against Jesus. Jesus was a threat to their religion and their state.

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.

A STRANGE ALLIANCE

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.

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.

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 a fool. He understood very well that they didn't want to learn anything from him. They wanted to find a reason to have him killed.

PAY TAXES?

And so they asked their question. It seemed simple enough on the face of it, a simple yes or no question. They asked, "Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or is it not?"

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!

A PAGAN IMAGE

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 idea except in this case God was identified as Caesar!

To a nationalistic Jew who believed in one true God, such a graven image was offensive and humiliating. They saw this coin as blasphemy, and they wanted no part of this tax established by those who occupied their country.

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.

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.

RENDER UNTO CAESAR

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. (It’s interesting to note that even though this coin was blasphemous they had no trouble finding one!)

Anyway, Jesus lifted that coin up for all to see and 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.”

(I wonder if some in the crowd that day were reminded of what the Psalmist wrote, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof?” (Psalm 24:1) In the final analysis none of it belonged to Caesar. It all belonged to God.)

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, we also owe God His due.

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.

LIVING BY PRINCIPLE INSTEAD OF PRAGMATISM

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. There are passages in the Bible that suggest that God allows rulers to be elected.

And for that reason we should in most cases support them and pray for them. They aren't always the right. They aren't always the best, but civilization is important in a broken world.

Good government can restrain sinful behavior and make life more bearable for society as a whole. (cf. Romans 13:1-6)

In other cases, doing what is right might mean having the courage to stand against the claims of the state to support the greater claims of God in Christ. Faith serves as the conscience of politics.

There are many examples of this in the Old and New Testaments.

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. In the church we remember the words of the prophet Amos who railed against 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).

Why do you think the goods we get from China are so cheap? Poor people who serve a government that is unjust and oppressive make them. They don't get the fruits of their labor. Their labor is exploited.

Economic exploitation is not just a problem over there. It's a problem here.

When Wall Street bankers make money by producing nothing but complex and worthless financial documents that enrich 1% of the country and send the rest of the country into a tailspin, I think the Bible calls us to say that's wrong and that we need to do something about it.

In this one world economic system we do a lot that sounds like selling the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals (or maybe we should say a pair of Nike tennis shoes)!

PERSONAL BUT NOT PRIVATE

You see the Christian faith is personal. That is, we believe that God calls us by name and forgives our sins personally. But, the Christian faith is not private. It's not just about Jesus and me.

Jesus calls you and me into the world. Jesus calls us to speak out and speak up for those whose voices have been squelched by the powers that be.

Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah when he preached a sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. He read,

"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).

Jesus said that the prophecy was being fulfilled in his ministry. The people liked that until Jesus told them that this meant reaching out to the poor and oppressed all over the world.

Then they wanted to kill him. And if we take our faith public, there might be some who will want to kill us too!

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 essential values 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. It's up to us to speak truth to power.

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. Pay your taxes with gratitude.

But, remember this. Our first allegiance will always be given to a greater kingdom, a kingdom that requires more than money and a kingdom that offers hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

Amen.