

Farmville Baptist Church  
October 18, 2020  
“When Jesus Gets Political”  
Matthew 22:15-22

This morning’s scripture passage is only 7 verses, and on the surface it can seem very simple. The straightforward interpretation of this story, at least in this country, has most often been “keep church and state separate” – give to the government what belongs to them, and give to God what belongs to God. It’s neat, clean, and way too simple. When we dig in, we discover that there is much more to this story. In today’s text, Jesus gets political (and it’s far from the only time by the way).

Remember that we are late in the book of Matthew. All the way back in 12:14, we learned that the Pharisees go out and plot against Jesus, about how to destroy him; and they have been working toward that goal for ten chapters now. And Jesus has just been adding fuel to their fire. By this point in the story, Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and cleansed the temple – neither of which were popular moves with his enemies. In the triumphal entry, Matthew shows us that Jesus is not the kind of king that the people were expecting. He is not the warrior king who will liberate Israel from their oppressor by force. Instead, he is the humble king who will lay down his life freely. In the cleansing of the temple, Jesus denounces the religious leaders. He is not rejecting Israel or Judaism – rather he is saying that judgment begins in God’s house, that the Lord corrects those whom he loves.<sup>i</sup>

After those two surprising events, Jesus has one verbal conflict after another with those who oppose him. Last week we looked at the last of three judgment parables that Jesus preached; today’s passage is the first of three controversy stories: one about taxes, one about the resurrection, and one about the Great Commandment.

Today's story is just one more attempt by the Pharisees to finally trap Jesus. Let's begin by looking at the players in the drama: the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians. The first thing we need to understand is that these are two groups that find themselves on opposite sides of this issue- it is highly unlikely that they would ever team up together. Here's why: ( SLIDE 1) the Pharisees were popular with many of the people – they resented the tax and resisted paying it. As we'll see in a minute, they thought the Empire and the coin were idolatrous. The Herodians, on the other hand, were a Jewish political party who sympathized with the Herodian rulers in their general policy of government, and in the social customs they introduced from Rome. They agreed with the Sadducees in holding the duty of submission to Rome, and of supporting the Herods on the throne. As such, they supported the tax.

Together, these two groups approach Jesus, with hypocritical flattery. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere (or true), and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality.” Do you notice that each line of their insincere speech speaks truth about Jesus? He is true, he teaches the way of God, and he shows deference to no one – unlike those gathered who pretend to praise him.<sup>ii</sup> He shows no partiality to anyone.

Together, these two groups put Jesus in an apparent no win situation by asking him a question. “Tell us then what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” On the part of Jesus' enemies, it's a great question, because either way Jesus answers, he gets into trouble. Here's the problem (SLIDE 2)

- If Jesus agrees with the Pharisees, he is publicly committing sedition and treason by encouraging people not to obey the government by refusing to pay their taxes.
- If he agrees with the Herodians, he loses the popular support of the people who were tired of Roman oppression. Worse he sets aside the law of God.

(Did you notice that his enemies don't specify which law they are talking about – God's or Rome's?) Basically, it doesn't matter, for his enemies finally think they've got him. One way or another, he's done. GOTCHA. But Jesus, who is aware of their malice and intent, responds brilliantly, turning the whole question and dropping it back in their laps with a serious theological punch.

“Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” he asks. Then he says, “Show me the coin used for the tax.”

Let's talk about that tax for a minute: (SLIDE 3)

- This was a “head tax” instituted in 6CE when Judea became part of Rome. There was an immediate revolt to the implementation of the tax in Jesus', and then a larger, disastrous revolt by the Zealots from 66-70 CE – right before the fall of Jerusalem. This was a big deal to the Jews.
- The tax was roughly equivalent to a day's wage and it had to be paid annually
- It had to be paid with a Roman denarius

The tax was a real burden on those who were already impoverished and oppressed, but the fact that they had to pay it with a Roman coin added insult to injury.

In his answer, Jesus said, “Show me the coin used for the tax.” (SLIDE 4). On one side of the coin, we find the face of the emperor along with the inscription: Tiberius Ceasar, august and divine son of Augustus. On the flip side, the words read, “High Priest.” For good Jews, this coin breaks two of the commandments: You shall have no other gods before me, and you shall not make for yourself any graven image. By having the coin in their possession, which they had to do to pay the tax, they were breaking the law of God.

Did you notice that Jesus doesn't have one of the coins on him? He had to ask for one. Did you notice that his enemies are able to produce one upon request? (PAUSE) Once they hand Jesus the coin, Jesus does what he so often did, he answers their question with a question of his own. "Whose head is this and whose title?" His enemies have no choice but to reply, "the emperor's." In possessing a coin Jesus' enemies reveal their own complicity in the Roman system, in naming the emperor's face on the coin, they make it clear that they are aware that a coin naming Tiberius divine and high priest is blasphemous. Before Jesus says another word, the self-righteous hypocrites are now the ones caught in a trap.

Then Jesus provides them with a two-part answer. The first part is "Give therefore to the emperor (or the government) the things that are the emperor's. If he had quit here, the answer really would have been quite simple. It was the emperor's to start with, so give it back to him. Case closed.

However, it is the second half of the statement that packs the theological punch. "and give to God the things that are God's." As we said in the beginning, it would be easy to think that Jesus is advocating for a dualistic world where the church and the state exist in clear and separate realms. But that's not what is happening at all. You see, his audience that day, good Jews who knew their Hebrew scriptures, would have known that. They would have been familiar with Psalm 24:1 (SLIDE 5) which reads, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it."

What does this mean? That *everything* belongs to God,— the emperor's image may be on the coin — but God's image is in all of us — not just humans created in the divine image, but also coins and emperors and Pharisees and Herodians — *everything* belongs to God. If everything

belongs to God, it follows that we give everything to God. Therefore, everything we give the emperor can and must be an expression of our deeper allegiance to God.<sup>iii</sup> (PAUSE)

When the Pharisees and Herodians heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. Jesus dodged a bullet for another day. (PAUSE) But he sure didn't provide us with any easy answers. In fact, he stirred up more questions than he answered, didn't he?

(SLIDE 6) We don't call the people we honor on our coins divine, in fact we have "In God we Trust" on our currency. But that doesn't exempt us from the struggles and questions this passage raises. You see, Jesus understood that some loyalty to the government comes with using the government's coins. We pay our taxes faithfully and we expect certain services in return – good schools and infrastructure, protection and justice for all. We give and we get. Others of us spend our lives working to acquire as much of those coins as we can.

Jesus' simple statement reminds us that there is a real danger here. Way back in the sermon on the mount, Jesus made it clear that we cannot serve two masters. We cannot be fully loyal to God and money (and the government that issues it). The Pharisees were hypocrites because they failed to see the problem with being rich in the emperor's money while claiming fidelity to the one who himself became poor.<sup>iv</sup>

If that question weren't hard enough, this passage raises yet another. It is one thing to say that whatever we give to the emperor can and must be an expression of our deeper allegiance to God, but what happens when those things are in conflict with one another? What happens when our taxes are used disproportionately to manufacture and stock pile weapons of war or to discriminate against women or minorities? Scripture encourages us to obey the authorities ***and*** it provides examples of civil disobedience, and Jesus doesn't give us anything in the way of concrete help. There are no answers in the back of the book.

I think that may be true because the answer often depends on our circumstances and our contexts. Jesus was very much a person of his time. He worked actively against the political and economic systems that kept the poor and marginalized oppressed. He spent time with the marginalized – women and foreigners, tax collectors and Samaritans. In the Ancient Near East, dinner parties were designed to build and cash in social and political capital – but Jesus ate with sinners and those who had no way to reciprocate.

Now, more than ever, we need to be prayerful and discerning as we navigate our daily lives. And I suspect that as we seek to answer the question “What would Jesus do,” that we will continue to struggle and frequently fail. For the reality is that we all have to make hard choices out there, a series of what David Lose calls “faithful compromises” as we try to discern what is Caesar’s when it all belongs to God.<sup>v</sup>

Benjamin Franklin once wrote a friend that nothing can be certain except what... death and taxes. Although he was wise indeed, I beg to differ with him this morning. For those of us who are believers, there is good news this morning. The empty tomb stands as witness that there is something certain beyond death and taxes – that through the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit that we have the promise of mercy and grace and help along the journey. As we question and struggle and discern, we do not do so alone. For this, let us all say, thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> Feasting on the Gospels, Theological Perspective, p. 188.

<sup>ii</sup> Feasting on the Word, Exegetical Perspective, p. 189

<sup>iii</sup> Feasting on the Gospels, Pastoral Perspective, p. 190

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., 192.,

