

What's In Your Wallet?

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

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Scripture

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

Sermon

My preaching professor at Princeton Seminary, Tom Long, called Matthew 22:15-46, as "Jesus' Final Exam." [1] What Jesus is up against here is intense. He's being put to the test by religious leaders trying to trip him up, and after each test, Jesus comes out unscathed, leaving the religious leaders dazed, amazed, and frustrated.

The first test has to do with taxes; at least, that's what it appears to be about it. There's something else going on. The religious leaders gather around to test Jesus' theological sophistication with several "what if" scenarios. These are not benign academic exercises. They're trying to stump Jesus, discredit him, question his wisdom and authority, and question his legitimacy and popularity. This is a fierce struggle unfolding before our eyes.

Matthew tells us that the first set of examiners consists of Pharisees and Herodians. It's easy for us to skip over this bit of information, but Matthew wants us to know that both Pharisees and Herodians put Jesus to the test together. Why is this significant? Because the Pharisees didn't like the Herodians. Only mutual distaste for Jesus could have pushed these two groups together. Who were the Herodians? The Herodians were a priestly group whose power base in Israel was founded largely on a set of alliances forged with the occupying Roman government, with Caesar and his minions. The Herodians had no problem with an alliance between Caesar and Yahweh; they saw no problem with the Roman occupation. They believed there was nothing wrong with strong ties between synagogue and state, between Temple and state. It gave them power. Others considered the Herodians collaborators. The Pharisees, a lay group within Judaism committed to obeying the Law of Moses, considered them "unclean." For the Pharisees,

compromises with the pagan Romans would have been theologically unthinkable. In Matthew's day, the Pharisees had become the dominant force within Judaism, and here they're aligned with the Herodians to trap Jesus.

Sure, the Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus with flattery, but it's not sincere. Then, they lob the first trick question. "Tell us, what do you think, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (Mt. 22:17). For nearly twenty-five years, Jews had been forced to pay a head tax to the Roman government—and they had to pay the tax with Roman currency. Some, such as the Herodians, saw no problem paying the tax. However, a majority were uncomfortable paying taxes to a pagan emperor, and they expressed their distaste through mild provocations and even insurrections. There was an small armed revolt when the tax was established in 6 A.D. Paying taxes to pagan occupiers was terrible enough, but what made it even more difficult to accept was that the tax—a denarius, a day's wage for a laborer—was paid with a denarius coin. And the coin was minted with an image of Caesar Tiberius. This much know from Matthew's text.

Jesus asked about the image and title on the coin, but Matthew didn't provide a full answer for us. His listeners, though, would have known what it read on the coin. The inscription read, "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest." What's the problem with this, you ask? Tiberius is the son of the divine Augustus, Caesar Augustus. Augustus was not his last name, but one of many titles given to him. Augustus was a religious title; it referred to his role as priest, one who could "augur" or divine the future. Upon the death of Caesar Augustus in 14 A.D., the Roman Senate deified him and declared him a god. Augustus was later worshiped as divine, particularly in Palestine and Asia Minor. This meant that Tiberius was son of a god. Tiberius was also a priest, another Augustus. All this was blatant idolatry for a faithful Jew. It was scandalous. A moral and theological outrage.

To raise the question of paying taxes to the emperor pulled the scab off of political and theological wounds, which was precisely their intent. It put Jesus in a no-win situation. If Jesus said, "No, according to the law of God is it not lawful," then the Roman authorities would consider him a dangerous political agitator. If Jesus said yes to taxes, he would lose credibility with the people who begrudgingly paid the tax, an affront to their faith.

Jesus was caught in a terrible bind. Notice that he doesn't answer the question; instead, he asks if they have one of those coins. He asks what's on it, and they answer, and Jesus says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's" (Mt. 22:21).

You have probably heard this verse countless times. We can probably hear the King James Version echoing in our heads, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." But what does it mean? And what does it mean for us?

There are essentially two ways to approach Jesus' statement. Go ahead and pay the tax. Give Caesar his little coins back to him, then get on with the more important work of God. The coin bears Caesar's image, but you were created in God's image. So give all of yourself to the God

who "owns" you. That's one way to read this text, perhaps a tame reading of the text. Maybe one we like. But that's probably not what impressed and startled the religious leaders.

The second reading is far more radical. Again, did you notice that Jesus never answered their questions? Instead, Jesus becomes the examiner and exposes their hypocrisy. What was behind their question? Tom Long beautifully captures their intent. They were basically asking Jesus, "Are you a foolish, uncompromising revolutionary whose allegiance to the kingdom of heaven is actually a political revolution in disguise, or are you a smooth-talking street preacher who stirs up people with glib talk of God's majesty but who underneath advocates a get-along-go-along policy with the Roman, Gentile pigs?" [2]

But then Jesus has a trick up his sleeve. "When he asks them for the tax coin, they unsuspectingly reach into their purses and withdraw the evidence that exposes them—not him—as deceptive and hypocritical compromisers. They are the ones carrying around Caesar's money, not Jesus; they are the ones who have the emperor's image in their ["wallets."] They are the ones who have already bought into the pagan system." [3] They are idolaters. For the very possession of the coin makes them idolaters. Recall what Jesus says earlier in Matthew's Gospel, "Everybody has to decide between Caesar and God. No one can serve two masters" (Mt. 6:24). The choice was theirs. The choice is ours. The choice is always ours. "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15).

If you're thinking, "This is difficult. This isn't easy." That's the point. Jesus doesn't let us off easy. There are no easy formulas for resolving the tension between God and secular commitments; that was true then and it's equally true today. And Jesus wants us to resist neat schemes that divide the two too easily. Whether we call it taxation or tithing or stewardship, whether religion and politics, church and state, there is a temptation to compartmentalize life. By virtue of where we live, this isn't easy; compartmentalization is inevitable. But we need to be cautious about this as people of faith. Sure, we think and say, "I set aside this part for God, and the rest belongs to Caesar." Or we can say, "I set aside this time for God and the rest of the time belongs to me." But we know that's an illusion because nothing really belongs to Caesar, and we, ultimately, as God's children, do not belong to Caesar. Our ultimate allegiance is to God and God's vision for our lives. And time isn't ours, it belongs to God. We must be careful if we're going to subscribe too easily to the notion that there are things that belong to Caesar and there are things that belong to God. The problem with this view, theologically, is, are we saying that there are areas of our lives that do not belong to God, where God and God's Law are limited? Are we prepared to say that? And, yet, we must be cautious about thinking God and Caesar are equal or that we can have shared loyalties, see them as equal, for then we are on the edge of Christian nationalism. [4]

Theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas insists that Jesus is warning us in this text about dividing loyalties. He says, "All idolatrous coins should be sent back to Caesar, where they belong." But that's easier said than done. Hauerwas reminds us, just as Jesus knows no distinction between politics and religion, neither does he know any distinction between politics, economics, and the worship of God. [5] These are modern or contemporary divisions or constructs that we impose upon our reading of scripture.

Perhaps we think because we don't have kings and emperors, this text doesn't speak to us therefore we should just set it aside. But, Hauerwas reminds us, "That God and the emperor cannot both be served is...not solved when the emperor is said to the 'people.' The people often turn out to be more omnivorous in their desire for our loyalty than emperors. Nor is the problem of loyalty to God and Caesar solved by our separation of church and state. That separation too often results in legitimating the state to do what it wants while sequestering the church into the mythical realm of the private. Moreover, Christian accommodation to play the game dictated by Caesar's coin insures that the separation between church and state makes Christians faithful servants of states that allegedly give the church freedom." [6]

For centuries, Jesus' claim that we are to give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's has created and still creates an insoluble problem. It's very complicated. For how can followers of Jesus really live in this world as we know it with its divided loyalties? Maybe that's how it should be. Because to recognize that we have an insoluble problem is to begin to follow Jesus. Hauerwas is helpful here: "Jesus's response to the Pharisees and the Herodians does create an insoluble problem—because that is what it is meant to do. You know you have a problem, at least if you are a disciple of Jesus, when you do not have a problem." [7]

And we have a problem. We struggle with divided loyalties. We will always have this problem. We need to see and feel it as a problem and resist easy answers that compartmentalize and divide up reality. We need to wrestle and wrestle through these tensions, and, by God's grace, choose, again and again and again—and choose whom we are willing to serve.

Sources

- [1] Throughout the sermon, I rely heavily on Long's summary and interpretation of the text. See Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 250-252.
- [2] Long, 251.
- [3] Ibid
- [4] See, for example, Andrew L. Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church* (Brazos Press, 2023).
- [5] Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Brazos Press, 2006), 190.
- [6] Hauerwas, 190.
- [7] Hauerwas, 191.