

Between God and Caesar – Matthew 22:15-22 – October 22, 2017

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On Friday night, a group of us watched a movie about Martin Luther and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther was frustrated by various practices within the Catholic Church and posted his 95 Theses, which opposed these practices, on the door of the church in Wittenberg. Posting notices on the church door was a way of sparking theological debate. And his Theses certainly caught the eye of the church authorities.

Back in the first century it was not uncommon for the religious leaders to have similar discussions. Debating scripture and posing difficult questions to one another were common practices. These contests of will among the religious leaders were useful to them, because it kept them on their theological toes. It helped them to consider ways in which the religious law could be applied to various real-life scenarios.

Our New Testament lesson this morning illustrates this type of debate. However the scene depicted in the gospel of Matthew between Jesus and some religious leaders was no benign game of wits. This was an attempt by the religious leaders to trap Jesus. In their questioning, these leaders were trying to discredit him. They sought to create a scenario in which any answer he gave would dishonor his teachings and lower his popular standing with the crowds who followed him.

Jesus was teaching in the Temple when representatives of two groups came to question him. The Pharisees sent some of their disciples. With them came some Herodians. Pharisees and Herodians did not mix very well. It was kind of like putting Packer fans and Bears fans in the same room during an important playoff game. The Pharisees and the Herodians tended to sit on opposite sides of the theological fence. The only thing that they held in common was their dislike for Jesus. That they came together to question Jesus was an ominous sign. Trouble was definitely brewing.

The Herodians, as their name implied, were Jews who supported the political power of the Herod family. Because this power had been bestowed upon the Herods by the authorities in Rome, the Herodians would have been supporters of the Roman rule of the region. They also would have supported the Roman taxation. The Herodians aligned themselves with the Roman powers. Because of this, they were likely detested by the average Jew.

The Pharisees on the other hand were respected. They were a lay group of Jews who fervently studied and obeyed the Law of Moses. They did not associate with the pagan Romans. They believed that acquiescing to Roman rule was a theological faux pas. The Pharisees opposed the occupation of their land by the Romans, but unlike some of the more radical Jewish groups, the Pharisees kept their mouths shut. Unlike the Herodians, they definitely were opposed to Roman taxation.

As these two antithetical groups came together, their singular goal was to trap Jesus. They began their questioning of him with some words of flattery. They said, "Hey, we know that your reputation

for telling the truth is legendary around here. You don't run from controversial subjects and you're not afraid of putting people in their place. So how would you deal with this hot topic?" The hot topic they hit Jesus with was paying the tribute tax to Rome. So Jesus, what do you say? Pay the tax? Yes or no.

This was a tough question. Either way he answered the question would cause trouble. If he were to argue against paying the tax, that could lead to conflict with the Roman authorities. If he said no to the tax, the Pharisees would have a legitimate reason to report him to Pilate, the local governor, and say that Jesus was teaching anti-Roman sentiment.

If instead he agreed that paying the tax was the correct thing to do, he would lose support among the common people. In general, the Jews were opposed to paying the Roman tax. They saw it as both an economic hardship and a reminder that they were an occupied nation. Only folks like the Herodians were in favor of the Roman taxes. If Jesus supported the tax his popularity with the people would definitely decrease.

Quite the dilemma. Taking it a step further, this was not simply a political hot topic. The way the Pharisees and the Herodians posed the question to Jesus was couched in religious terminology. They asked him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Or in other words, "According to the Torah, according to the Law given to us by Moses, is it permitted for us to pay taxes to this pagan ruler?" Behind this question was the understanding that God was the owner of the nation of Israel. The Roman emperor therefore was a usurper of God's authority, so wouldn't it be wrong of the Jews to pay a tax to him?

Jesus, however, immediately saw the trap. He understood the motivation behind the question and refused to get caught up in a no-win scenario. Instead he called for them to produce a coin. Though there were different currencies available in the ancient world and in Jerusalem, the Roman tax could only be paid with a Roman coin. Roman coins were not allowed in the Temple. The fact that right there in the Temple his accusers were able to produce such a coin, proved that they had already bought into the Roman system.

They handed him the denarius. Jesus took the coin and examined it, front and back. A denarius was a silver coin that represented a day's wage. Whenever a new emperor ascended the throne, new coins were minted depicting his image. Tiberius was the reigning emperor of Rome at that time. On the tail side of the coin would have probably been the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus," or in other words, high priest of the Roman religion. For a Roman Emperor to claim divine authority was considered to be blasphemy by the Jews.

Jesus asked them, "Tell me, whose head is this? And whose inscription?" They answered him, "The emperor's." "Well then," Jesus began, "Give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor. And give to God the things that belong to God." Jesus shrugged off the question, dismissed it. As if

to say, "If this little coin has the picture and the title of the emperor, then it must belong to him. So, give it back to him, if he wants it back." Jesus dismissed the question of Roman taxation and turned this discussion into something much greater. Some people like to say that this passage of scripture is about the issue of the separation of Church and state. But that's really not the focus here.

The important part of this lesson is found in the second half of Jesus' answer. Give to God the things that are God's. The question then for us is, how do we determine what belongs to God?

I once heard a little story that goes something like this. Every Sunday morning a church van arrived at a small house in an impoverished part of town. A little boy shot from the door and hopped into the back of the vehicle with the other kids from the neighborhood. He looked forward to Sunday mornings. He enjoyed going to the church and sitting with all the adults. He listened to the sermons. He didn't always understand the message, but he liked hearing the stories about Jesus, how Jesus loved him and how he was supposed to love others.

When it came time for the offering, the little boy always cringed. He didn't have any money to give. Everyone around him always looked so serious, so solemn as they dropped their bills and checks and envelopes into the plate. The boy learned to keep his eyes down as he took the offering plate and passed it to those sitting next to him. He wanted to give something, but had nothing. No money in his pocket. Not even a coin.

This continued for many Sundays. The little boy wracked his brain, trying to figure out what he could give to Jesus. And one Sunday after the offering plates had already made the rounds through the pews he had an idea. The ushers walked forward to the front of the church. The boy bolted from his seat and ran forward and cried, "Wait a second!" The organ stopped playing, the ushers froze in the aisle, and everyone stared at the boy. The pastor looked at the child with curiosity, wondering what he was going to do next.

The boy grabbed one of the offering plates from the hands of a startled usher. He put the plate on the floor. It was piled high with checks and bills and envelopes. The boy then stood in the center of the plate, on top of all that money, and exclaimed, "Jesus, I have nothing to give to you except for myself. I hope it's good enough!"

When Jesus took the coin from his antagonists he asked them to say whose image it bore. They rightly answered, "Why, it's the image of the emperor." Thus Jesus could tell them, "If it bears his image, then it belongs to him. Give it to him." But he didn't stop there. Jesus continued his remarks, getting to the heart of his teaching, "Give to God the things that are God's."

If bearing one's image reflects ownership, like the Roman coin bore the image of Tiberius and thus belonged to Tiberius, then the things that bear God's image belong to God. Each one of us, every

human being, has been created in the image of God. We each bear God's image. We each, then, belong to God. According to this teaching of Jesus, we are to give to God ourselves.

We should be careful to not interpret this teaching of Jesus as meaning that life is divided into two realities, that which is secular and that which is sacred. Sometimes I think we do try to divide ourselves. We give our attention to the material world, to the emperor, and focus much of our energy on those things that carry little meaning. We also tend to compartmentalize our lives – we put our energy and our resources into the various categories of the worldly realm - work, family, friends, politics, economics, and entertainment. And then as dutiful Christians we put energy into the divine realm – the God stuff – church, prayer, Bible study, mission work. Sometimes in our lives those realms do overlap and God does impact those mundane parts of daily life. But for the most part we try to keep them separate.

If however we do as Jesus instructs and give to God the things that belong to God, namely ourselves, then it would follow that God should touch every aspect of our lives. There would be no separation between that which is worldly and that which is divine. If we truly have given to God the things that belong to God, then every part of our lives, everything that we do or say, think or feel comes under God's ownership.

To do this then is to put our relationship with God first in our lives. All other things, all other relationships, all other obligations are secondary. This is accomplished through an adjustment of our attitudes. It's a change in our typical ways of thinking. We must intentionally make the mental decision to put God first, to give to God that which belongs to God.

When the religious leaders heard what Jesus had to say, they were shocked. Rendered speechless they left him and went on their way. They did not learn anything from this encounter, because they had already made up their minds about him. They were too caught up in their own opinions and beliefs, so they missed the truth that Jesus presented to them. Their minds were closed to him.

We on the other hand, have chosen to follow Jesus and learn from his teachings. Jesus challenges each one of us to give ourselves wholly and completely to God. It's risky business, but ultimately, nothing else really matters. The next time the offering plate comes down your aisle, will you be willing to jump in feet first?