

It All Belongs to God

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Matthew 22: 15-22

Well, today we're still with Jesus in the Temple. He pretty much ran into a buzz saw when he went there. Today it's the Pharisees and the Herodians, who were strange bedfellows to say the least. They were on opposite sides. The Pharisees, were concerned with the Jewish people being able to maintain their distinct identity when being overrun by Roman culture. Their efforts ranged from trying to enforce stricter observance of all the Jewish purity laws to pretty much fomenting revolution. The Herodians were, of course, supporters of and in collusion with Rome! The two groups were on opposite sides, and yet as we see all throughout the passion story all kinds of opposites came together around their hatred of Jesus.

Jesus offended and enraged them all. And he did that simply by refusing to claim as enemies the same people that these various groups claimed as enemies. So, although he was not shy about confronting anything and anyone that he felt was against the love of God, he would not demonize them. So, the Pharisees want to get rid of him because he would not demonize, as they did, the Roman colluders, and those not keeping the purity laws, i.e. tax collectors, sinners. And the Herodians want to get rid of him because he does keep confronting them, confronting the rule and the violence and injustice of Caesar, and he won't simply fall in line and behave. He won't demonize the revolutionaries, either. Indeed, he sympathizes with their concerns.

So, these two groups band together to try to trap him. Each group would like to trap him in opposite ways on this question, but the chance just to trap him and lessen his influence is enough to bring them together. So, they come and try to set him up with flattery. "We know that you're 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." All of that is true, and are things that Jesus would affirm. They are trying to flatter him, to set him up! So, then the question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" They probably saw their question as indeed, a buzz saw in waiting for Jesus. You see, if Jesus says "yes, it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," he'll be accused by the Pharisees and many others as being unpatriotic to the cause and the hopes of Jewish nationalism. If he says, "no," he can be rounded up by Rome as a traitor and revolutionary. They saw it as a buzz saw!

It's a sticky question still, isn't it. Sometimes we've been tempted to think that this episode is about Jesus insistence on keeping money and piety in separate compartments, or about keeping politics and religion in separate compartments. But, that really is to miss the whole point, here. If that were

even considered a viable option by anybody concerned here, then the question wouldn't have been considered a trap by the Pharisees and Herodians, or by Jesus, who obviously also considered it a trap, for Matthew notes that he was aware of their malice. No it's a sticky question still because we know that there are indeed conflicts in these areas, that in fact, if you take them all seriously, money, piety, politics, religion, there are, of course, clashes.

What do you do about Rome, the pagan power, which now controlled the promised land and in the eyes of many polluted it? Do you pay taxes to such a regime? Does that not sanction that corrupt power? Withholding taxes was one of the ploys advocated by devout rebels of the day. What is a person to do? What were Christians in Nazi Germany to do? What are we to do in the light of terrorist attacks in the present day? But, I think maybe what we first need to understand is that it is so sticky because cultures, and other groupings in cultures, like political parties or like religions start thinking that they can't hold together unless all the members share common enemies. Remember, that's at the heart of why both the Pharisees and the Herodians were enraged by Jesus.

Christ's way will make us the enemies of some simply because we refuse to make enemies of their enemies. We know that's true, don't we? We feel that push. If you don't demonize as enemies those the government says are enemies, you'll be seen by some as unpatriotic. If you don't demonize as enemies those one political party or the other sees as enemies you'll be seen by some as disloyal. If you don't demonize as enemies those some in the church see as enemies, you'll be seen by them as un-Christian. Friends, that's why they were mad at Jesus and so they came with this question to try to get him to declare who his enemy was. Was it Caesar, or was it Jewish nationalism?

It's a sticky question still for us, because most of the time we assume that we have to make that choice of who our enemy is. Listen to the way Jesus answers this question! He says, God is God and we are not. And everything in this world belongs to God, by definition. You see, even the question of who will you declare as enemy usurps the position of God, who instead makes his sun to shine on the evil as well as the good, and sends rain to water the crops for the just and for the unjust. In saying "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's," Jesus says it all. He says, "I will not demonize Caesar as my enemy, but my allegiance, as does everyone's here, belongs only to God."

New Testament scholar, Robert Funk also points out that there is no indication that Jesus returned the coin to the Pharisee. According to Funk, as Jesus proclaims the punchline-"and render to God the things that are God's"-he pockets the coin and has the last laugh. It all belongs to God, even as Jesus refuses to make an enemy even of one who was acting as

God's enemy. What does this all mean for us, as we try to sort out all the conflicting claims on our lives? Well, first of all it means I think that we need to remember that we're never really separate from the things we oppose. In fact, we are defined by the things we oppose far more than we realize, and certainly far more than we should be. So much so that we often start exhibiting the same qualities and the same behaviors, don't we? And secondly, realizing that, it means that there are very, very few easy answers.

Instead, what there is, is the need for unceasing prayer. What there is, is the need for more Bible study together with each other. What there is, is the constant work of discernment, because the Gospel doesn't make life simpler, it makes it more complicated. What there is, is the need for truly hearing and caring deeply about and humanizing each one, that being for God, being for Christ, would be a stronger urge in us than being *against* any thing or any one ever is. You can take that coin and flip it however you like, but the fact will remain, it's God on both sides of it!

Amen.