

## Year A Proper 29 God or Caesar Matthew 22 vv15 to 22

As I read this Gospel story, I was very strongly reminded of a small white house and garage that I pass by quite often. This garage and yard are plastered with huge, bold signs saying things like, “Save the Children!”, “Faith over Fear!”, and “God over Government!”. God over government – that’s the one that is particularly relevant to this Gospel story. The owner of those signs likely has a strong belief in God and this belief is leading this person to make those bold statements. Jesus has the opportunity to make that exact same bold statement today – God over government! God over the emperor! But Jesus does not make this statement. He shows us a way of living according to God’s ways in God’s kingdom that is not the all-or-nothing answer that the religious leaders were hoping for.

The religious leaders – the Pharisees – have joined forces with the Herodians. The Herodians are the powerful Jews who have sided with Rome. They are called Herodians because they support the puppet king – Herod – that the Romans have put on the throne in Jerusalem. The Pharisees are at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Politics and religion were inseparable through a lot of Hebrew history. The religious leaders were the political leaders – there was no distinction since God’s rule was the ultimate rule. Eventually, the Israelites decided they wanted a king like other nations did but the king was supposed to rule along with the religious leaders according to God’s ways. The Romans were the current conquerors of the Jewish people in a long line of conquerors. King Herod was their king ruling according to Roman law rather than God’s laws. Politics and religion had become separate from each other – the Herodians supporting the Romans

and the Pharisees supporting God were competing for the power in Jerusalem. They had one thing in common though – both groups wanted to take down Jesus of Nazareth because Jesus was a threat to both power groups.

So, the Herodians and the Pharisees have teamed up to get rid of Jesus. They really believe they've got him this time. They think they have him cornered in a lose/lose situation. Pay taxes to the emperor? Yes or No. They first praise him up before they ask the question. "Teacher," they respectfully call him. "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." This is all true but it is back-handed praise coming from them, meant to be a part of their trap.

This praise of theirs is bait to snare him if he moves away from his teaching concerning God-only-loyalty, which they refer to as teaching "the way of God" (v.16). They are holding up all Jesus taught and said in his ministry, including teaching about the kingdom of God and his righteousness (6:33). Interestingly, while talking about great teachings of Jesus, the Pharisees and Herodians are not interested in the real change of people or the fruits of his ministry through which, for instance, the downtrodden are encouraged to live with hope in God. For Jesus, good teaching does not stay with knowledge, but it must bear fruit.

With their insincere praise, the religious leaders are, they think, setting Jesus up so that he must say, "No, do not pay taxes to the emperor." They believe this answer would match up with Jesus' teachings about complete loyalty to God and to the way of life in God's kingdom and they would be able to arrest him on charges of treason. There would certainly a lot of happy people in the crowd if

Jesus were to say, “No, don’t pay the tax.” That person with the “God over government” sign sure would be applauding.

This tax was very unpopular with the Jewish people. The coin used to pay the tax was carved with a picture of the emperor on one side and it called Tiberius Caesar “the son of the divine Augustus, the most high priest”. This was really offensive to the Jewish people who worshipped one God and God alone. This tax had been imposed by Rome when they had conquered Israel. It was the equivalent of a day’s pay and had to be paid in Roman coin not Jewish coin. It was a reminder to the Jewish people that they were a conquered nation – an oppressed people. But, it was the law and, like it or not, they had to pay it.

As radical as Jesus is, fighting against the corrupt and oppressive power structures of the world, he does not tell the people not to pay their tax to the emperor. Jesus doesn’t answer a straightforward “yes” either. A flat-out “yes” would have had the crowd turning against him, providing the religious leaders the opportunity to arrest him without having to worry about the crowd being violent against them. A “yes” from Jesus would have destroyed the crowd’s hope that he was, indeed, the Messiah come to rescue them from their oppressors.

Instead of taking on either a yes or no answer, Jesus asks them to show him the coin used for the tax, which is a denarius, a Roman coin. It is notable that Jesus and his disciples do not have Roman money on them. A denarius is the usual daily wage - the reward for the people’s blood, sweat, and tears. Jesus knows that everyday life is hard. Sustaining this life is a crucial struggle for ordinary people. The coin represents their hard work. The people and this Roman money are part of the local economy no matter how complex or abusive it may be. Recognizing

the Roman Empire's economy and politics, Jesus asks: "Whose head is this and whose title?" Jesus recognizes that not all things in the Roman Empire are evil. An "all-or-nothing" worldview is naive. There is light and darkness in the world and people must face both and live wisely, doing the will of God. The Pharisees rightly answer, "Caesar's," and Jesus then concludes: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

This answer allows Jesus to avoid the Pharisees' trap – they set out to challenge and destroy his authority and credibility but it was they – with their possession of Roman money, who are shown to be compromised. His answer does ring true to all of his listeners. We live in God's kingdom but, then as now, human power structures, human kingdoms, exist alongside God's kingdom. Theological, moral, and ethical choices must be made by each and every person – every day of our lives – as we navigate the world we live in, trying to live according to God's ways. Jesus challenges us to think differently as we experience the intersection of human power with God's power. He pushes us to make our own decisions, think for ourselves, as we determine the best way to engage with the world. Take a stand and, in doing so, you show to God and to others what sort of person you are.

Jesus' words – give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Give to God what belongs to God – are not meant to be taken as a separation of church and state, of religion and politics. As I mentioned earlier, that is not the way it was in the counter-cultural community God created after rescuing the Israelites from the empire of Egypt. God's rule is the ultimate rule. Politics and religion were one and the same and so they are meant to be now and in the fullness of God's kingdom to come.

Jesus does not slam the door of the kingdom shut on the Pharisees. They had the Roman money in their possession but Jesus' words, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" leave the door open for them to enter God's kingdom.

This is true for all of us. We all cut deals with our culture. We all have Roman money in our pockets. Jesus does not condemn us but gives us the tools we need to live within the human power structures that we must live within but, at the same time, do this according to God's ways. Jesus teaches us a critical interpretation of the world, fearless determination, and conscientious engagement in the world, based on his teachings. The second half of Jesus' teaching today is even more important than first half: give to God what belongs to God. Sure, this coin, this symbol of worldly power is stamped with Caesar's image so give it back to him. We are stamped with God's image. All creation, ourselves included, belongs to God and is rightly given to God. In other words, acknowledged as God's in gratefulness. All that we are and all that we have belong to God. Peter writes to a persecuted church saying, "Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king as supreme or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the approval of those who do good. For it is the will of God that by doing good you may silence the ignorance of foolish people." He continues, "Be free, yet without using freedom as a pretext for evil, but as slaves of God. Give honour to all, love the community, reverence God, honour the king" (1 Peter 2:13-17). Our allegiance is only to God. Our loyalty to God binds all, everywhere, always. Our duties to the empire happen at the same time as our duties to God but they happen in the light of Peter's caution: do all things for God.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, we see the goal of life is not merely to defeat the empire or adopt an "all-or-nothing" policy but to love people, including enemies, strive after God's kingdom and righteousness, and to live in hope between now and the future. We are encouraged to pursue the way of God progressively and radically. What does that look like? What do we do? Wonderfully, that part is our choice based on what we encounter here in our communities. The key is to make the choices that will have Paul's praise apply to us too: "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; ...for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers... in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it" (1 Thess.1:2-8). Stamped with God's image, let us give to God what belongs to God.