

WHOSE COIN IS IT ANYWAY?

MATTHEW 22:15-22

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It's a trap! Everyone knows it's a trap! The Pharisees who are asking the question know it's a trap. The Herodians who joined this conversation know it's a trap. The people who are listening to this conversation know it's a trap. But everyone wants to hear Jesus' answer, because it's such an interesting question.

I need to give you background information so that you can appreciate how interesting this question is to all the people present in the story. The Pharisees and Herodians don't get along very well. The Pharisees form a religious party that is somewhat traditionalist, conservative and nationalist. The Pharisees are mentioned often in the New Testament, often confronting Jesus and his disciples. The Herodians, on the other hand, are mentioned only three times in the Bible. The Bible does not give much information about them other than what the name seems to suggest. It is believed that they are a political party that supports King Herod Antipas, the Roman Empire's ruler over much of the land of the Jews. In other words, they seem to be pro-Roman political party. So, if you have to put them in the religious/political spectrum at the time, they are put relatively far from each other, positioning themselves close to the each end of the spectrum. Now, you can see why this question they ask can be a trap and yet at the same time can be interesting to many people. In this spectrum, where does Jesus really fit in?

So, the Pharisees and Herodians make a set up before they ask this million-dollar-question. "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" (vs. 16). We can see these flattering words are only to ingratiate themselves with Jesus and set him up for the next question. I mean, if they truly think he is this amazing teacher, why don't they then become his disciples, right? They are basically telling him here, "Jesus, you think you are smart and you don't really care what other people think of you. Tell us, then, where do you stand on this spectrum?" Verse 17 says, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Here's why this is a trap question. At the time, Jewish people were paying heavy taxes. Some estimate that a Jewish family paid approximately 50 percent of its annual income to various taxes. If Jesus answers that it is indeed right to pay taxes to Caesar, it will put him in disfavor with the burdened people, who will think that he has capitulated. If Jesus answers that it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar, it can be used against him with the Roman authorities to support their case that he is a potential rebel. They know that either answer will jeopardize Jesus' mission and this is their intention.

Jesus knows their intention. Verse 18 says, "But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?'" Then, Jesus asks for the coin used for the tax. Jesus

asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" (vs. 20). On the obverse side of the coin was a profile of the head of Tiberius Caesar, with the Latin inscription on the perimeter of the coin, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." On the reverse of the coin was a picture of the seated Pax, the Roman goddess of peace, with the Latin inscription "High Priest." For this reason, many Pharisees would not even touch this coin; they have their own currency to be used in the Jerusalem Temple.

Jesus here gives a shocking answer. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (vs. 21). Now, first of all, let me be clear: he's not arguing that we always need to submit to our governing authorities, however oppressive they are. I believe his statement is profound, because it reveals the attitude necessary for Christians when there seems to be conflict between church and state. The state will always make at least one or two decisions that the church will not agree with, because the state is made up of not just Christians, but other religious and non-religious people. And our natural instinct is to put everyone somewhere on this religious/political spectrum.

You have the Pharisees standing relatively on the far right, not so happy with Roman oppression, and the Herodians standing relatively on the far left, being pro-Roman empire. And here they are, attempting to force Jesus to be put on this spectrum. I believe his answer to them is "Neither." I believe his answer basically means, "I will neither be on the right or on the left, but I will be on God's side." You see, Jesus' kingdom is not from this world (c.f. John 14:36). His kingdom is marching to a different drum beat. His kingdom and his rule and his justice will not be bound by any ideology, ism or propaganda in this world. His kingdom exists and operates at the level where it will eventually be completely set apart from all the kingdoms ever existed here on earth. A man of God named Daniel in the Old Testament interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, where he saw a huge statue, made of iron, clay, bronze, silver and gold, being broken in pieces by a stone that was cut out, not by human hands. And that stone became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. That huge statue, Daniel says, is a collection of all the powerful kingdoms here on earth. The stone that is cut out, not by human hands, is Jesus and his kingdom, which will rise against all nations and fill the whole earth on the day of the Lord. His kingdom is already here and exists and operates through his people here on earth. But seeing his kingdom rise and overthrow all other kingdoms here on earth will happen when he comes back again, and his kingdom and his people will continue to march to a different drum beat.

When Joshua and the Israelites were marching into the land of Canaan, they saw a man standing before them with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua asked, "Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?" He replied, "Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come" (Joshua 5:13). Yes, God was on the side of Joshua and the Israelites. Yes, God is on our side. But, if you ask where he ultimately belongs, he belongs to a different world. Ultimately, it is his kingdom against the rest of the world. And to that, Joshua fell on his face and worshiped (Joshua 5:14). Now, do you think Jesus has one or two opinions about Caesar and his coin and his kingdom? You bet he does. He is the Judge and he will judge all the kings and all the kingdoms on earth. But he says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." His kingdom is not found here, and yet we live here on earth. But, ultimately everything belongs to God.

Everything must yield to God. This answer challenges us to think about what we need to do when our conscience conflicts with the way the state and world operates. Jesus' challenge to us is that when we think about difficult and controversial issues, it shouldn't be about who's right. Rather, it's about are you willing to obey and yield to God. Don't we all have one or two opinions about assisted suicide and homosexuality? But, Jesus' challenge is: are you willing to surrender to God and obey him? God told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because he wants us to yield to him and obey him, rather than we judge ourselves and make choices for ourselves. It's eventually not about whether or not we are doing right things, but really it's about whether or not we are building our kingdom or God's kingdom. And my prayer for you today is that in every circumstance you will choose to yield to God and obey him. In the end, whose coin is it anyway? May God bless you when you obey. Amen.