

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, October 22, 2023 // Proper 24, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus 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 the emperor, 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, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Background and general observations

This is one of several encounters between Jesus and Jewish leaders who are trying to entrap him. Each encounter ends with Jesus silencing his adversaries.

In this case, the leaders seem to be trying to flatter Jesus, perhaps seeking to put him at ease or to catch him off guard with a tough question that would be sure to get him into hot water with somebody, no matter how he answered. The question of whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor was a loaded one. The tax in question was an annual tax, administered by Jewish authorities, but levied by Rome. This tax put such a burden on impoverished Jews in Palestine that, at least on one occasion, it provoked rebellion against Rome that ended the way Rome tended to end things—decisively and with much bloodshed.

So, if Jesus answers his opponents simply by saying yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then he risks alienating the poor and the oppressed who bore the greatest burden. And if he says, no, it is not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he risks facing charges of sedition. Jesus' answer, therefore, is brilliant, as he allows for the possibility of paying these taxes but makes it clear to any person of faith that he or she must consider what belongs to God.

It is interesting that Jesus asks to see one of their coins. Here they are in the temple, and Jesus gets them to hold out a coin that has the emperor's likeness and an inscription ascribing divinity to the emperor. (Are they carrying around such profane coins because Jesus drove out the money changers—the people who changed unclean money for acceptable coinage in order to make one's offering acceptable?)

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Ironically, those who seek to entrap Jesus are speaking the truth about him, while they are trying to entrap him: Jesus really *is* sincere and teaches the way of God in accordance with truth, and shows deference to no one...."

However, these people are merely *pretending* to praise him. They do not believe what they are saying and are only seeking to get him in trouble. And Jesus was "aware of their malice."

How often do we ask an insincere question, one intended to elicit a certain answer, or to embarrass, or to pursue some other, more selfish, agenda?

When have you been aware of such a question— either because you were asking it, or because it was being asked of you? What was really going on in such a situation and if you could relive the encounter, what would you change?

What do you know from your own experience of people—or even you yourself— using flattery to promote a selfish agenda? Do you ever have a tendency to ask Jesus insincere questions? How often are you content simply to rest with Jesus, to be in quiet or trusting relationship?

What changes might you make in your life that would allow you to live with greater “awareness” of your own motivations in your relationships and in your question-asking?

2. In answering those who sought to entrap him about whether or not they should pay taxes to the emperor, Jesus asked them to show him a coin. Then he asked them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They responded, “The emperor’s.”

One way of approaching this is to change the wording slightly, by asking, “Whose image is on your coin?” This could be a way of inviting us to consider, “Whose image is stamped on the emperor?”

We believe that all human beings are bearers of the image of God. The emperor’s image is stamped on the coin, but God’s image is stamped on the emperor. So, Jesus’ answer that they should “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” might sound straightforward but is actually an invitation to consider our allegiances and loyalties on the deepest level.

What reflections does Jesus’ answer raise for you about your allegiances, your loyalties, and your treatment of other people? If we are each made in the image of God, how can you reconcile your discontent with people you find difficult?

3. It seems that many people are feeling “taxed,” stretched, or burdened these days, financially, emotionally, and otherwise.

What do you know of being so taxed and stretched? What “emperors” are there in your life that seem to demand more and more of you? What keeps you from giving to God the things that are God’s?

How can you keep your composure and stay centered on God, when you find yourself “taxed” or in uncomfortable, difficult, even hostile situations? What sort of response is best when you sense malicious or insincere motivations from other people in your life? What causes you to lose your sense of being centered in God’s presence and how have you managed to regain it?

4. Allegiance and devotion to both God and country are two paramount loyalties and, for many Americans, they offer the greatest sense of belonging.

Are these loyalties ever in conflict for you? Which are you first, a Christian or an American? Does a question like that feel answerable to you?

5. Consider how this story takes on new meaning if the real question is not so much about what you should do with your money but what you should do with your life. What does it feel like for Jesus to say to you not, “show me a coin,” but “show me your life”?

What does the Lord see, when you show him your life?

Ask yourself about the Divine image imprinted on your soul. What does a person look like, or how does a person act, when he or she is living fully into his or her identity as one who is created in the image of God?

Does your public persona suggest an identity that is contrary to your truest self? How do you wrestle with conflicting allegiances and expectations? Does it feel like God’s expectations of you and your community’s expectations of you are sometimes at odds?



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