Who Are You, and Whose Are You?

Text: Matthew 22:20

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They thought they had him. They really thought they had him. It’s Monday of Holy Week; the day after Jesus threw the money changers out of the Temple. This assault on law and order put Jesus in conflict with both the religious and the civil authorities in Jerusalem, and for the last 24 hours the Jewish officials have been trying to find a way to trap him. He’d acquired such a strong following that if they simply arrested him, there would probably be a riot. But if they did nothing, they’d be in trouble with the Romans, who expected the Jewish leaders to keep their own people under control.

But now they have him right where they want him: in the Temple, facing a question so tough that no matter how he answers it, he’s going to be in trouble. The question is this: should a good Jew pay taxes to the Roman occupiers? If Jesus answers yes, he’s going to be in trouble with his Jewish followers, because they hate the Romans, and they hate the Roman tax system even more. If he answers no, he’s going to be in trouble with the Romans, because he’ll be advocating at least civil disobedience, if not insurrection. Either way, the authorities will have cleared a way to arrest this trouble maker.

How will Jesus answer the question?

Before we look further into this passage in the 22nd chapter of Matthew’s gospel, we need a little background. Among the major players in this scene (and in the passages around it) we have, first of all, the Romans: who don’t actually appear until several chapters later, when Jesus is arrested; but the Roman shadow looms large over all of these last 7 chapters of Matthew and indeed over his entire gospel. Rome is the imperial power that controls the Jewish homeland. Between its occupying army and its Jewish collaborators, the whole of Judea and the lands surrounding it are under the Roman thumb. One false move, and you’re likely to get crucified.

Secondly, we have the Roman tax system, which worked a little differently than what you or I might expect. Roman tax collectors were like independent contractors. Rome told them what they must remit to the imperial authorities, but the tax collectors could charge the people whatever they wanted to charge them. So they would extort however much money they could get away with, send the required portion to Rome, and pocket the rest. And you thought the I.R.S. was bad! Needless to say, Roman taxes and Roman tax collectors were hated by the Jews.

So we have the Romans, we have the Roman tax collectors – some of whom were Jews! – and next we have the Jewish King Herod and his allies in the Jewish community; a.k.a. the Herodians. Rome had delegated local control to Herod. As long as he kept the Jews in line – as long as they posed no threat to Roman authority – they could practice their religion as they pleased. The Herodians were a political party who supported Herod in his administration as a Jewish/Roman lackey.

Then we have the Sadducees: the political party of the Temple. They hated Rome, but supported Herod so long as his administration made it possible for the priests to do their thing in the Temple and maintain the ritual life of the Jewish community.

Finally, we have the Pharisees. These were the keepers and the teachers of Jewish law. In many ways they were a third political party. They weren’t supportive of the Temple and all of its obscure rituals, and of course they opposed Herod and Rome and its laws, because their vocation had to do with maintaining the *Jewish* law and the high standards of ethical monotheism which that law upheld.

Talk about a political mind field! And a public figure like Jesus had to navigate his way *through* this mind field. One false move and he was likely to get killed. In retrospect, the surprising thing isn’t that Jesus was crucified; the surprising thing is that he was able to preach and teach for as long as *3 years* before he finally ran afoul of the authorities.

Each of these parties hates the other parties. But they do have at least one thing in common: they all want to get Jesus. And now they’re setting the trap. After listening to him tell parables all day, the Pharisees – who were the intellectuals among this combative crowd – the Pharisees step away and come-up with the question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?” That is to say, is it lawful under *Jewish* law, because clearly the Roman law says, “Pay the tax! Lacking the guts to do the dirty work themselves, the Pharisees send some students, along with some Herodians, to confront Jesus.

Did you notice how first they try to flatter Jesus with praise? “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one” (Mt. 22:16). Talk about buttery smooth! I mean, give me a break!! You’d think they were trying to sell Jesus a used car! Then they pop the question about taxes.

But Jesus is no dummy. He sees the trap coming even while his opponents are piling on the praise. “Show me the coin used for the tax,” he says. Then, pointing to the coin, he says, “Whose head is this?” Because the coin was stamped with the profile of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, much the way that our coins are stamped with the profile of various presidents. “Whose head is this?”, Jesus asked. Or, as another translation has it, “Whose image is this?”

Stifling the temptation to say, “Well, duh!,” his interrogators say, “It’s the Emperor’s image;” or, “It’s Caesar’s image.”

“Well then,” Jesus says, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Which leaves the Herodians – who are really just stupid political camp followers – it leaves the Herodians scratching their heads, and the students stifling a laugh, because they know that Jesus the great debater has just beaten their teachers – the Pharisees – at their own game.

Jesus springs the trap without getting caught. He avoids the question by making a theological point. When he asks, “Whose image is stamped on the coin?”, he’s implicitly asking, “And whose image is stamped on *you*?” The answer, which the students know, is, “God’s image, of course!” Which means that when Jesus utters those now familiar words, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” he’s saying, “*You* are God’s. It is to *God* that you owe your first and your ultimate loyalty. Everything else, including whatever provisional loyalty you might owe the Emperor, takes a back seat to your loyalty to God.”

“Whose image is stamped on the coin?” This is the key sentence in the passage; not the more familiar, “Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Because, of course, the real point is who you are, and *whose* you are. You are God’s. Just as the coin belongs to the Emperor, you belong to God. Just as the coin bears the Emperor’s image, you bear *God’s* image. You belong to God. You carry God’s image with you everywhere you go, every moment of your life. That’s what this passage is about.

It is most certainly *not* about an American-style separation of church and state; although that’s the way that it’s been read more often than not in this country. When we focus on the notion of giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God, we sometimes imagine that Jesus is saying, “The state has its sphere of influence, and religion has its sphere of influence, and as long as we keep the two separate and give to each that which we owe to each, life will be fine.” In other words, the state shouldn’t be messing with religion, and religion shouldn’t be messing with politics. As long as we obey the law of the land each day and go to the religious service of our choice each weekend, life is good.

The trouble with this interpretation is that it reads 18th century political philosophy back into a 1st century biblical text. To do so doesn’t do justice to the scriptures. The Bible needs to speak for itself. The Word of God should come to us unencumbered by the presuppositions that we try to impose upon it. Jesus knew nothing of the philosophy of John Locke and Adam Smith and the other Enlightenment philosophers who shaped the thought of our Founders. Jesus didn’t consult with Thomas Jefferson before teaching in the Temple (although I suspect that Jefferson, in his hubris, thought that he should have).

Thomas Jefferson was so arrogant that he created his own Bible. He ripped out all the parts that he didn’t like, figuring that what was left was better than the original. As if Jefferson knew better than God what should be scripture and what shouldn’t be. In fact, some of the Founders had some rather peculiar theological ideas. Which is one reason why we need to be careful about making too close a connection between the words of the Founders and the Word of God.

So, this passage has nothing to do with the separation of church and state, nor does it even have much to do with paying taxes! Maybe Jesus is shrewdly advocating the payment of taxes, or maybe not. Keeping his meaning vague was part of his strategy. Whether or not he thinks that a good Jew owes anything to Caesar, he certainly thinks that a good Jew owes *everything* to God! Because, you see, not only do *you* belong to God; *everything* belongs to God. “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything that is in it,” the psalmist says (Psalm 24:1). *Everything* belongs to God, including you and me and all people everywhere who bear God’s image. “If we live, we live to the Lord,” Paul says, “and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:7).

Give to God everything that belongs to God, including – and especially – *yourself*. So what does this mean, in terms of our daily walk with the Lord?

It means, first of all, that we are created to honor and serve and glorify God, according to the particular gifts that God has given us. We are created to honor and serve and glorify God above all others who might have a claim upon our devotion. And when in the course of honoring and serving and glorifying God we find ourselves in conflict with serving the state or serving any other source of authority or center of loyalty, guess who takes priority? Well, of course, God does; because we belong to God, we belong ultimately to God, and Jesus calls us to give to God that which is God’s.

It means, secondly, that, we owe to God a particular way of conducting ourselves in relationship to all that God owns; a particular way of behaving in relationship to all people and all Creation. That is to say, we owe to God, we owe to all others, and we owe to the earth: gratitude, generosity, compassion, gentleness and patience. These are among the fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists in Galatians 5:22. Those who belong to God – or, to use the precise language that Paul uses in Galatians – “those who belong to Christ Jesus,” and who therefore live by the Holy Spirit, should be guided by the Spirit (Gal 5:24-25). Those who belong to God are to offer to *all* who belong to God the same kind of gentleness and compassion and generosity that we would offer to our family and close friends. And that’s true regardless of church affiliation, or place of birth, or race, or economic class, or citizenship (or lack thereof): because you are God’s, and they are God’s, and all things belong to God. In the final analysis, it is God whom we serve: not the church, not the state, not some rigid ideology, and certainly not our particular fears and prejudices and pre-conceived notions.

The one good thing that can be said about the Pharisees and the Herodians and the Sadducees and even the Romans (so long as they were being pragmatic and allowing the Jews to govern themselves) – the one good thing that can be said about these often conflicted political factions is that they were occasionally able to transcend their divisions and come together around a common cause. Which is to say that implicitly, they recognized that there is a Source of Authority beyond the self and beyond the particular group to which one belongs; a Source of Authority which seeks to break down the walls that divide us; a Source of Authority which by grace empowers us to serve together for the good of all. When we recognize this One in the wit and the wisdom and the face of Jesus, we too will be amazed. But unlike his interrogators, we will not leave him. No, we will join hands and follow him. Amen.