

Christ in Crisis: The Caesar Question
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Matthew 22:15-22

The Question about Paying Taxes

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 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. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 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." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Asking good, meaningful questions of one another is not a trait or habit practiced often in our current political and social climate.

Turn on any new station or talk radio, and you'll know what I'm talking about.

But we don't even have to look there; we do this all the time in our conversations or when we meet someone new. We want to figure out where people stand, what they think on this issue or that.

Yet, what we are really doing is figuring out if this person is with me or against me.

Did they vote red or blue?

Do they support the current president or are they in opposition?

We try to entrap others by asking a pointed question, place them in a box we have labeled, and then treat them accordingly.

And I am as guilty in this as anyone. Just a couple of weeks ago I caught up with an old high school friend I hadn't seen in more than five years. Now I am a lot different than I was in high school; for one I no longer ride around on a motorcycle and place football as my top priority in life.

More importantly, my worldview has expanded much more than I ever thought possible, which radically shifted my theology and therefore my political and social thinking.

But I was nervous... nervous that I had changed so much, worried that we wouldn't think the same, or worse be in total opposition to each other. So after we gossiped about high school friends, discussed how our families are, and showed pictures of our dogs, I sensed the conversation shifting.

I noticed myself trying to word my questions with precision and analyzing his answers for any hints. Despite my guardedness and ill intent, we had fruitful and meaningful dialogue, full of good questions.

In reflecting on our text today, I realized that in my conversation with my high school friend, I acted with little difference than the pharisees and herodians in our text today.

When reading and preaching from the gospels, Pharisees can be treated a little unfairly, always making them out to be the ultimate villains,

but in the exchange placed before us today,
the motivation is clear:

“the pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus”.

After scheming their snare against Jesus, it is not the pharisees who go and see if their scheme works,

but in a cowardly move they send their disciples, along with some Herodians, to face Jesus.

I don't blame the pharisees, however,

I too would not want to be publicly humiliated again by the wise and witty Jesus that Matthew presents throughout the gospel.

Now before setting the trap, the young pharisees and herodians lay some groundwork with flattery: They might as well have said

Jesus you are the smartest of us all, and since you don't seem to care what important people think about you and your teachings,

[which is really what they meant by the deference and partiality bit], we really need to hear your thoughts on this.

I can hear the sarcasm still dripping from their words as they lay their trap:
is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?

It is a well laid trap. Many commentators believe the two groups asking the question each represent one side of the quandary.

If Jesus says yes, then he sides with the Herodians, who not much is known about, but by their name are believed to be loyalist to Rome.

This would undoubtedly upset the Pharisees and the surrounding Israelite crowd who, oppressed by the occupying Roman Empire, despise the census tax forced upon them.

If Jesus says no, then that is reason for sedition, especially for someone called King of the Jews. It wouldn't take long for the Herodians to report Jesus and thus have clear reason to kill him.

Jesus could have taken the Arron Burr approach, you know talking less, smiling more, not letting them know who he's against or who he's for.

But Jesus' response is profound and clearly indicates who he is for. Now instead of Jesus answering the question first, he has the pharisees and herodians answer their own question.

You see when Jesus asked for the coin used for the tax, his opposition quickly produces one.

So “by possessing the coin they show that they themselves pay taxes and that they have already answered for themselves the question they put before Jesus.”¹

Clearly they pay the tax and use the coin that bears Caesar’s image and name.

So Jesus answer of “give to the emperor the things that are the emperors”

only enforces what they already do. The baffling part comes in what

Jesus says next.

Give to God the things that are God’s. Neither the pharisees nor the herodians asked anything about God, so this was not a welcomed challenge to the ears of his opponents. And upon hearing this, the pharisees and Herodians leave Jesus, showing a clear defeat in their failed entrapment.

But through the challenge of “Give to God the things that are God’s”, Jesus reorients the exchange, placing the emphasis not on one’s loyalty to Caesar, but to one’s loyalty to God. The two are not equal.

The shift in focus from Caesar to God brings a myriad of questions.

What belongs to God?

What belongs to Caesar?

How does one give those things to God?

Of course, Jesus doesn’t elaborate on his statement or the questions it begs, which prompts us to do our own work at understanding this rich statement and questions that follow.

What belongs to God? In Psalm 24, the psalmist tell us that “the earth and all that is in it, the world and all who live in it” belong to God.

Herein lies both the good news and the challenge of Jesus statement – Give to God the things of God: you belong to God. Every bit of who you are and what you have belongs to God. In fact, there is no part of your life untouched by our Creator.

Our money, our resources, our beliefs, our actions, indeed our entire selves are

God’s and not ours. St. Paul states this best in Romans saying as disciples of Jesus,

“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we

live or whether we die, we are the

Lords.”

Not living for one’s self is the antithesis of our culture. Look no further than the public discourse on wearing a mask.

We are so accustomed to voting, spending, and working in ways that benefit ourselves most.

Not putting ourselves first in any of these ways seems utterly asinine,

to the point where we don’t even raise the question. And it is our neighbors, particularly neighbors who are vulnerable whom we hurt most in the process.

But Jesus reminds us that we do not live for ourselves, but for God, to whom we belong.

Yet, what about Caesar? Is there anything then that belongs to Caesar? Much of modern interpretation on this passage tries to glean an answer on how the church, including Christians, should relate to the state.

But I am unconvinced that Jesus is trying to give a civics lesson here, especially to a person in the 21st century living in a democratic society.

¹ Luz 65

Rather, what I hear Jesus saying to the pharisees and Herodians, and to us, is, "you're asking the wrong question and you ask it with ill intent."

The prophet Isaiah tells us that it is God who casts down nations and overthrows kings; therefore it's God who rules and reigns throughout history regardless of who Caesar is.

Yet, we are quick to give things to Caesar, whoever your Caesar is, that only belong to God. We give our time, our thoughts, our allegiance, our undying loyalty over to parties and people and ultimately, to power.

But, as Jim Wallis strongly states, "Our loyalty to Christ above all earthly rulers means that our support for candidates and parties should never be unconditional and always based on which candidate's character and policies will do more to advance God's kin-dom 'on earth as it is in Heaven'."

In other words, we must ask good questions of ourselves about our loyalties and ask them of other Christians.

St. Peter encourages us to "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

The hope that is within you compels you to act a certain way, think a certain, and vote a certain way. Yet at the same time, be ready to account for that hope and the subsequent actions. Mere opinion is not enough, at least not for a disciple of Jesus.

Our allegiances, our beliefs, and our selves have their beginning and end in God. Therefore, one's defense must be a hope rooted in God and revealed in Christ Jesus. And did you catch the last part about how to give this defense? with gentleness and reverence.

And lastly, what does it mean to give God the things of God? Or more importantly, how do we do that?

That is a good question, but it seems like a bit of a trap.

If all things already belong to God, what left is there to give?

Perhaps that is the question we ask ourselves anew each day, what of God's do I have left to give?