

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Taking Up Temple Space

Matthew 22:15-22

October 18, 2020

We heard in our Gospel reading today, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s; give to God what is God’s.” Simple. Straightens all the problems out. Let’s think this morning together about this deep and enigmatic saying of Jesus.

With these words, Jesus slips a trap laid for him by two competing religious groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus into saying something that can be construed as sedition against the Romans. The Herodians are trying to trap Jesus into saying something that can be construed as blasphemy against God. Strange bedfellows these two are, they team up to try to catch Jesus in an answer that will either get him arrested by the soldiers or will get him rejected by the crowds.

They ask a political-religious question masquerading as a tax-law question. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” It goes without saying that by Caesar’s law it’s legal; Caesar is the ruler of the Roman empire and the emperor is the law in the territories he controls, which back then included the Roman territory of Israel; what Caesar says is the law including “pay me my tax.” But the Jews also have the law of God to follow. That’s of course behind question; is it lawful according to Jewish law to pay a tax to a foreign, occupying empire that will then use the proceeds from the tax to build roads and aqueducts and Roman pagan temples and fund Roman imperial soldiers like those occupying Jerusalem.

It was a prickly 1st century question to even ask in whispers much less answer out loud standing in the middle of the temple square in earshot of Roman officials and Romans soldiers. Just how far can people of faith go in going along with the culture and world which they inhabit? It’s a challenge people of integrity have faced in every generation and under every form of government.

Jesus asks them to produce the coin used to pay the tax. Just holding the coin anywhere was distasteful at best for a pious Jew, a sharp reminder of the tragic pain of Roman occupation. That coin wasn’t supposed to ever be brought into the sacred temple space. Bringing the coin into the temple was blasphemy, breaking 2 of the 10 commandments. It had the image of the Caesar on it and the inscription “The son of God.” This was why they had money changers at the temple. You were supposed to trade your Roman denarius for Jewish shekels before you entered the temple to make sacrifices or to pay the temple tax or to pray. It was the monetary equivalent of ritually washing your hands. We may not be able to be rid of the Romans everywhere, but at least in God’s temple space, we can do this one small righteous thing to remember who is our true king.

So back to the story, “Is it lawful to pay the emperor’s tax or not?”

"You hypocrites. Show me one of the coins."

They do. They were standing *in* the temple. Don't miss the delicious irony embedded in the story. One of them, at least one of them, pulls from his robe pocket one of the forbidden coins. Jesus asks, "whose face is on that coin?" "Caesar's," they mutter, like children who've been caught. "Whose inscription is that?" he asked. "Caesar's," they mutter. Hmm.

And the jaw of the trap is sprung, not on Jesus, but on them. It's the biblical equivalent of . . . any of you remember those old Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner cartoons. Wile E. Coyote would set a trap. Road Runner would be standing in it, but invariably, the Acme TNT wouldn't explode or the jaws of the trap wouldn't spring or the anvil wouldn't fall. Road Runner scooted off unscathed. Wile E. Coyote stepped in to see what went wrong, and bam. The anvil falls on his head; the trap springs; the TNT explodes. That's what has happened here: the trap is sprung back on the ones who set it. They aren't concerned with the theological and spirituality of the relationship between the Jerusalem and Rome; the jingle in their pockets gives them away.

The thing about this story is that Caesar's coin wasn't rare. It's everywhere—in everyone's pockets. For rich and poor alike, the denarius was so common that it's one of those things you don't think about anymore. How often do you stop and really look at the image or the words stamped on a coin? But that was at least part of the point, they were trading in the currency of the dominion of this earth, but seemed to have forgotten that Caesar's rule is at best a dim shadow of the reign of God. That's an important thing to remember, whether we're on Team Herod or Team Pharisee or Team Overthrow-Them-All or Team Keep-My-Head-Down-and-Hope-the-Political-Storm-Blows-Over.

They show Jesus one of the coins there in the temple. It has the image of Caesar and the inscription 'the son of God.' Must have looked pretty precocious to Jesus, who was, you know, actually the son of God.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," Jesus says, pointing at the coin.

"Give to God what is God's," Jesus says, while doing what?

Oh, I wish I knew. Did he gesture to the temple? *Give to God what is God's.* Did he put his hand to his head or his heart? *Give to God what is God's.* Did he hold up a mirror? *Give to God what is God's.* Did he gesture to encircle the whole earth and cosmos? *Give to God what is God's.*

Oh, I wish we knew. Not only because it would help interpret this story, but because this story can seem pretty far away. We don't have Pharisees or Herodians or Caesar or the temple or Roman taxes anymore. What does this mean to us, then: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; give to God, what is God's.

We do have earthly governments, and we do have demands placed on us by those governments. Some of those demands we are ok with; others we don't like, but we do because we have to. And others, sometimes, people of faith must actively resist. Knowing the difference is spiritual discernment. Not every form of governmental mandate is tyranny. Not every

demand placed on our lives is unreasonable; not every instance of sacrifice expected of individuals is unjust. Not every tax is stealing. Not everything of Caesar is necessarily not a thing that also may be of God. We have to get over hyperventilating about fascism every time we have to do something we don't really want to do.

And yet, there's a reason why there are Christian martyrs. There is a limit to Caesar's dominion over our lives. Or there should be. I'm concerned that at the very least we live in a moment when Caesar is occupying a lot of space in a lot of our brains and is not paying rent. For some, it's almost a cultic obsession, for others an all-consuming, burning hatred. Either way, I wonder if we need a reset, if we're giving to Caesar things that rightly belong to God—our highest hopes, our greatest fears, the quiet of the early morning, our eyes and ears. Caesar gets some of us, but does Caesar really deserve all that you're giving him?

Anne Osdieck wrote a prayer-poem about this question, inspired by this scripture.

Did Caesar create the stars?
 Hurl them to the ends of the universe?
 Can he make blood course through our veins?
 Or craft a hummingbird or a
 Gerbera daisy?
 No?
 Then
 his coins can't buy
 what we really need.
 God,
 Creator,
 you are the one
 whose face we seek.
 The domain of love that
 you give in grace and peace.
 We are in your image.
 Please take us
 as your
 own.

As we pause in reflection before we come to the Table of our Lord, the Son of the living God, this seems like a prayer to remember and hold in our hearts today.

We are in your image. Please take us as your own.