

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him 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 Caesar, 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, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are the Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

"Hidden Agendas"

Adolf Hitler's primary hidden and long-term agendas involved secret rearmament, geographical expansion of the German Reich, and the systematic extermination of populations he deemed undesirable, all masked behind public diplomatic claims of peace.

By the time these agendas became clear and obvious to the world, a lot of damage had been done and so many lives were lost either fighting for or against the ideologies and hidden agendas.

To explain Jesus' enigmatic words in our scripture today- "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"- I want to show you what lead up to this challenge that the Pharisees and Herodians put to Jesus.

It starts at the beginning of Matt. 21, where we see Jesus making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey with the crowds hailing him as the son of David, coming in the name of the Lord.

Jesus arrives at the Temple and cleanses it for a second time, driving out all who were selling and buying in the Temple, saying, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers." Hidden agenda right there- ostensibly, those sellers were providing a place for people to buy what they needed to make sacrifice in the Temple, but a money scam was ripping the people off and greatly benefitting the sellers.

The blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple, to be healed and to listen to him, but the chief priests and scribes were angry, with this crowd seeking healing and with the voices of children crying out "Hosanna's" to him. Jesus then left for the night.

When he went back to the Temple the next day, the chief priests and elders challenged him about his authority- "What right do you have to do the things you did yesterday, and today you are back teaching here?". He counters with a question of his own and a promise: *"if you tell me the answer to my question, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things.* Jesus' question was, *"The baptism of John, where did it come from? From heaven or from men?"*

So, the chief priests and elders step aside to confer as to the what the safe answer might be: *"If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we are afraid of the multitude; for all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know."*

And so, Jesus refused to tell them by what authority he was doing what he was doing.

The Chief Priest and elders had recognized that they were trapped- if they answered either way, they would lose honor and potentially rile the people who had gathered to listen to and receive healing from Jesus.

Then, Jesus tells the Parable of the two sons and the Parable of the Vineyard with the wicked tenants. The chief priests and Pharisees hear these parables and recognize that Jesus is casting them in the role of the bad guys, and they got angry but did nothing because the crowds saw Jesus as a prophet.

So, the Pharisees want to put a stop this. The Chief Priests, the scribes and the elders would all love to see an end to Jesus' popularity; they were all smarting from their decline in honor and from being bested by some nobody from Galilee who threatened to undermine their power over the people.

After another parable, the parable of the Wedding Banquet, the Pharisees make their move. They have hatched a plan along with the Herodians. Our scripture says that the Pharisees sent their disciples instead of going themselves, but for the sake of simplicity, I will just use the term 'Pharisees' since these disciples were representing them. It's possible the Pharisees wanted to have some distance should the confrontation not go well, or maybe they thought that Jesus would let down his guard if dealing the disciples and not the head honchos.

So, we come to today's scripture.

The tax in question was the census tax, and the coin used to pay that tax was the denarius, so Jesus asked them to show him this coin. The denarius bore the image of the emperor Tiberius who ruled Rome at that time. One side of the coin would have deified Tiberius as a "son of the divine Augustus." The other side would have honored him as the "Pontifex Maximus" or "chief priest" of Roman polytheism—which is to say that the two sides of the coin celebrated the absolute religious and civil authority of Tiberius.

So, the Pharisees saw the tribute tax as a heretical- this mere man sets himself up as a god against the one true God, Yahweh- as well as being antinationalist, a capitulation to a pagan emperor. The Herodians, on the other hand, viewed refusing to pay the tax as sedition- rebelling or resisting Roman rule. They were a political faction and an influential group of Judeans who supported the Herod's dynasty and its alignment with Roman authority.

The two groups could hardly be more opposed in their views. But, as the saying goes- "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". They are quite willing to join forces to rid themselves of this troublemaker.

The question is put to Jesus- should we pay taxes to Caesar or not.

If Jesus agreed that the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, that sounded like capitulation to the oppressive Romans and a failure to stand in opposition to a false god. He would have lost his audience. But to answer in the negative and encourage tax evasion was political sedition that would have jeopardized his ministry and endangered not only his own life but also anyone who followed him.

In fact, telling people not to pay their taxes to Rome was one of the false charges that led to Jesus's execution: Luke 23, "This man opposes paying taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king". That was an inflammatory rumor, perhaps the ancient equivalent of our "fake news".

Now, remember what the passage I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, when Jesus was challenged about his authority to do what he was doing in the Temple (casting sellers out, healing and teaching people). He set before them a counterchallenge, and what did they say? “We don’t know”.

They knew they were trapped with one answer or the other, so they said, “We don’t know”. Chief Priests and elders may have saved themselves from an immediate backlash from the people there, but I strongly suspect that their answer took them down a peg in the eyes of the people

So, I’m thinking that the Pharisees and Herodians thought they could not lose this challenge. If Jesus had followed that example and said, “I don’t know”, that would not have sat well with his followers. And it would have opened the door for speculation that Jesus **did** have an answer but that he chose **not to** so he could save face. The Pharisees and Herodians could then have stoked rumors about what Jesus really believed about paying taxes to Rome and there would be nothing to stop them spreading uncertainty, discontent and creating a backlash.

But Jesus’ answer cuts through the well-laid trap.

His answer about whether or not to pay the tribute tax took the focus away from an issue that was **created** by the Pharisees and others of what it supposedly MEANT to pay the tax- that paying this was a compromise of Jewish sovereignty and an act of idolatry. Jesus’ answer said, in effect, it’s a piece of round metal and since it has this guy’s face on it, give it back to him.

So, the part about rendering unto Caesar seems fairly straightforward. But Jesus adds more to his answer: “render unto God what is God’s.” Is there anything that isn’t?

To really understand Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees and Herodians we need to first realize it is just that- it was an answer to the Pharisees and Herodians. It wasn’t an instruction to his disciples or the crowd that was following him, and it isn’t an instruction to us today. It’s a specific answer to a specific question in a specific time and place.

The point of this statement isn’t primarily to make each of us search our souls to see if we have given all we could and all we should to God- it’s designed to challenge the hidden agendas of those that wanted rid of Jesus- people that imagined themselves as representing God and doing what they did for the glory of God and to promote faith.

What was Jesus telling the religious leaders of that day?

I think he was referring to power and control. The Pharisees, the Herodians, the Chief Priests, the elders, the scribes- they were all threatened by Jesus because they saw him as eroding their power and control with or over the Judeans. And they saw him as destabilizing the status quo.

They needed to yield their power and control to God, to see God as the one in charge, to trust God with the fate and future of the people of God.

The Pharisees were willing, ultimately, to get a man killed by manipulating the very power structure they despised. They were willing, ultimately, to go against the commandments and scriptures they supposedly upheld, scriptures that prohibited killing.

Their allegiance had become an allegiance to themselves and to the agenda they had for God’s people. They started out with good intentions and a focus on teaching the word of God, but they got off track and now they needed to render unto God what was God’s- the power and authority to direct and choose for God’s people.

The Herodian's motivation was different but, ultimately, they wanted the same thing- the power to control to decide the fate of all Judeans.

Just the fact that these 2 groups held a very low opinion of each could get together for a common agenda showed that they could easily suspend principles and beliefs for that common agenda of maintaining power and control. Get rid of Jesus and we can go back to working against each other.

Clearly, this issue of hidden agendas has always existed. Besides being in government, politics, the halls of power, it's also in churches and denominations.

Some churches are blind to their hidden agendas because they see their agenda and God's agenda as being one and the same.

Render unto Caesar- it's just a piece of metal.

Render unto God- now that's a whole lot harder. It requires you to give up something much more precious, something you may have already sanctified and made holy in your mind- your agenda.