

## THE FLIP OF A COIN

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**Text: Matthew 22:15–22**

A little boy wanted \$100 badly and prayed for two weeks but nothing happened. So he decided to write a letter to God requesting the \$100. When the postal authorities received the letter addressed to “God, USA,” they decided to send it to the President. (These days, I guess, anything is possible, right?) The President was so impressed, touched and amused that he instructed one of his assistants to send the little boy a \$5 bill, thinking that this would appear to be a lot of money to the boy. The boy was delighted with the \$5, and sat down to write a thank-you note to God. “Dear God,” he wrote, “Thank you very much for sending me the money. However, I noticed that for some reason you had to send it through Washington, D.C., and, as usual, those jerks deducted \$95.”

It’s hard to tell a joke to an empty room, so perhaps you smiled a little, chuckled even or simply groaned. That’s understandable because, honestly . . . taxes are not funny. While there are essential programs for the common good supported by our tax dollars, I am grateful for all of you who work in finances and accounting and have an understanding—or at least an explanation—for people like me who constantly bemoan how so much can be taken from so little. I approach tax time with fear and trembling, and the news is never, ever in my favor. So, as we approach our scripture passage this morning, I am standing on the sidelines rooting for Jesus to denounce paying taxes because, hey, if Christianity is the deduction I need to reduce my tax bill, I would be glad to claim it.

Foiling the government is not that easy—at least for most of us—and Jesus knows this. He also knows the ulterior motives of today’s questioners. The Pharisees, with whom Jesus has daily encounters in the gospel of Matthew, are the principal representatives of law, and their task is to uphold the law through the interpretation of the Torah. And they didn’t like taxes. The Pharisees believed that paying taxes with coins that had an imprinted head of the emperor deified the emperor, thereby breaking the First and Second Commandments. Susan Grove Eastman notes, “The Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property, and determined by registration in the census. It was administered by those in power, and it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Joining the Pharisees in today’s inquisition are the Herodians, who only appear one other time in scripture. The Herodians supported the Rome-endorsed Herod dynasty and therefore were all in favor of taxes. The Pharisee/Herodian coalition is a surprising one. Given their divided loyalties, it is unlikely that anything could have caused the Pharisees and Herodians to collaborate, except their mutual desire to see Jesus completely out of the picture.

The attempt is one of entrapment. The questioners approach Jesus and begin with flattery, complimenting Jesus’ sincerity and non-partiality. And then they ask, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the

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<sup>1</sup>David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. 4* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

emperor or not?” Since both parties represent different viewpoints, Jesus is sure to displease someone. Either way Jesus answers, he is going to get into trouble. It’s a “gotcha” question. If he advises against taxes, he will be accused of treason. If he encourages paying, he sets aside the law of God and could be viewed as a Roman sympathizer. Jesus’ response will expose him as either a seditionist or a co-conspirator.

But Jesus is not to be fooled and is an expert at speaking truth to power. He calls them all hypocrites and demands to see the very coin used to pay the referenced tax. The coin has an imprint of the emperor. I imagine Jesus holding up the coin with a short but significant retort—“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God the things that are God’s.” And in the biblical version of a mic drop, I envision Jesus flipping the coin in the air which lands at the befuddled crowd’s feet.

Give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God give the things that are God’s. In just a few words, Jesus skillfully widens the question so that it has little to do with politics and instead becomes one of faith. His answer does not solve any problem but rather defines the nature of the struggle, and he transfigures the challenge of the crowd into a theological question. Underlying Jesus’ rejoinder is to consider what, in our lives, is of ultimate importance. Do politics dictate your faith or does your faith form your political views? Do your political beliefs evolve from your understanding of God and God’s invitation to a different kind of living from current societal norms, or does your faith life have no bearing on which side of the aisle you currently reside? God and government are not coterminous nor mutually exclusive. Theologian, author and seminary president Marvin McMickle writes:

Jesus was suggesting that his followers have a dual allegiance, both to the teachings and commands of God and to the government under whose flag and laws they live. Christians have duties and obligations that are due to both of these realms, and their challenge is to constantly question what do they owe and to whom? The question, “is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” is not simply a question of economics or politics or citizenship, it is a question of conscience. . . . It is a question of what Christians should do when the God they serve and the government to which they have sworn allegiance are pulling them into a situation of divided loyalties.<sup>2</sup>

In this season of political vitriol, during which it seems everyone is holding their breath, wondering and worrying about what will happen in the weeks to come, and candidates from all parties employ tactics to tear down their opponents, acting like the questioners from our text today, working to entrap the other while evading the questions they are being asked . . . Jesus invites us to not forget about God. To not let go of God as our bellies simmer and burn over injustice and foul play. To give to God the things that are God’s. What are God’s things? The coins, bearing the image of the emperor, belong to the emperor. But human beings are made in the image of God, and, bearing God’s image, we belong to God. Caesar can stamp his picture and pedigree on coins and other paraphernalia, but he cannot compete with the true commerce that animates us and gifts us life. So, yes, the emperor will receive many of the coins while also evading the taxes he employs and most likely be flattered by how well his likeness is rendered in the medium of solid discs of silver; but the coinage of the realm of our flesh and blood and worth is the image of God. What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image. Every life is marked with that inscription, fully known by the One whose creative force gives us breath.

True, this divine image can sometimes be difficult to recognize. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see not the worth that God endows but rather the engravings our life story has left upon us—and we fall into the trap of judgement based on what others look like, have, live, do and the company kept. Nevertheless, underneath all those story lines is a much deeper mark: the light in the eyes, the tenderness of heart, God’s naming and claiming of us through the waters of baptism. All through the Gospel of Matthew Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God—or “kin-dom,” as I like to call it: a kin-dom in which we truly acknowledge the worth of all people, a world that can only be ushered in when we each surrender to the understanding that because all humanity bears the divine image, there are no barriers in

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 193.

between, no levels of status making one better than another. There is no “greater than” or “last and least” . . . there is just us, creating communities of love and justice where everyone has exactly what they need. Raj Nadella, professor of Columbia Theological Seminary, offers this perspective:

The “coinage” of God’s kin-dom is of a radically different nature than that of Caesar. God does not trade in Caesar’s currency. The whole nature and trajectory of God’s kin-dom that Jesus has inaugurated, and is inviting people to participate in, is fundamentally at odds with Caesar’s. Which is why while people must pay to both Caesar and God, they must pay them not only for different reasons but in entirely different currencies. Paying to God and participating in the divine kin-dom entails repenting of the ways we have been complicit in the empire and its agenda. Paradoxically, then, people should pay taxes empire has imposed upon them while actively resisting it and working to promote the alternative kin-dom. . . . Within the context of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus suggests that whatever brings wholeness, transformation and healing to communities is a form of resistance to imperial worldview and ethos, and thus perhaps the form of coinage required of disciples especially in divisive times.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the time, we have little choice over what we must render to Caesar. Taxes are deducted from our wages and added to our purchases. Occasionally, like right now, we are offered the opportunity to select those we want to represent our nation through the power of the vote. I trust you will all exercise that right. Jesus never suggests we not participate in the kingdom in which we reside. I hear his words as a call to action and to be a participant—particularly in relentless work of tearing down systems meant to oppress and divide. Jesus models speaking truth to power, calling hypocrisy when we see it, and doing so without fear. And also, Jesus says, consider to what or whom you give the most devotion. We can live with the emperor while living for God. We can pledge allegiance and radically, inclusively love our neighbors. As God’s people we can love our country and act as a revolutionary force for justice.

Sometimes all it takes is an intentional flip of the coin.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Raj Nadella, “Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22,” *Working Preacher*, October 18, 2020, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4624](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4624) (accessed October 23, 2020).