

## "The Tension of Two Kingdoms" Matthew 22:12-21 Trinity 23 2023

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The air had to be thick with tension! Jesus had entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey amidst the shouts of hosannas. He had gone to the temple and drove out the moneychangers and merchants, to the dismay of the chief priests and elders. No longer could his ministry be relegated to some distant phenomenon that was taking place in the small towns and countryside in the region of Galilee. Jesus had brought his teachings and ministry into the center of Israel's faith.

As a result, into the tension that already existed between Israel and their occupation by Rome, a polarization was quickly developing among the people regarding Jesus. Although many of the common people viewed Jesus as a prophet, others, especially those who held positions of power and authority, viewed Jesus' teachings and actions as subversive and inflammatory.

So, the Pharisees plotted to entrap Jesus. And the trap could not have been better staged. According to our lesson, Matthew tells us that the Pharisees took with them some Herodians. The Pharisees and the Herodians were on different sides of the issue that they planned to put before Jesus.

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The Pharisees were devout Jews who strove to live by the law of Moses, and as a result of their piety of faith, they were critical of the Roman oppression, especially to the idea of paying taxes to support Caesar, since they considered him to be evil. After all, Caesar considered himself to be divine, and what pious Jew could bring himself to support through their taxes such a blasphemer.

The Herodians, on the other hand, were supporters of Herod, and tended to support Rome from whom Herod gained his authority. They were a group of Jews who had compromised their faith and piety, to win favors from the governing forces. Thus, the Herodians were in favor of paying taxes to Rome.

So, these two groups, representing both sides in the tension that existed between Rome and Israel, come to confront Jesus. And how they tried to sweeten Jesus up for the kill. Just listen to their hypocrisy! "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." Although all of this is true, coming from the mouths of those who set out to entrap Jesus, it's enough to make you sick.

Then came the question. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The trap had been set. If Jesus answered "No," the Herodians,

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who enjoyed the benefit of Roman rule, would report him to the authorities as a traitor or seditious. If Jesus answered "Yes," the Pharisees would have ample fuel to discredit him among the people as a Roman sympathizer, a person unfaithful to Israel.

But Jesus saw through their ploy to entrap him, and their sickening sweet attempt at flattery. And Jesus had the wisdom to escape their trap. He asked to see the coin used to pay the tax. Jesus is handed a denarius, a small silver coin of Roman issue. As Dr. Victor Furnish points out in his commentary on our text, this coin "bore a portrait of the reigning emperor crowned with a laurel wreath, the sign of divinity. It also bore the inscription, 'Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of the majestic God, and High Priest.'" End quote.

Can you see why the question of paying taxes to Rome was such a contentious issue at that time? Even the coin that was used to pay the tax, not only bore the image of Caesar, it also claimed him to be divine. For the Pharisees, and for the early Christians, it was viewed as paying homage to Caesar, akin to acknowledging him as divine – a denial of their faith.

Of course, the Herodians, who may not have acknowledged Caesar to be divine, overlooked the inscription, in favor of the political benefits that they received from Rome. Even though they may have

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professed to be children of Israel, they adapted to the ways of the world, and in the process, compromised their faith.

So, Jesus asks those who tried to entrap him, "Whose image and inscription is this? They answered, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'" And Matthew tells us that "When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away."

In other words, Jesus turned the table on both sides of the issue, and challenged both the Pharisees and the Herodians – without answering the question. For the Pharisees, who found the inscription on the coin that Rome had issued to be so offensive to their faith, he simply said, give it back to Caesar. And to the Herodians, who had compromised their faith to gain political favor and power, he said, give to God the things that belong to God.

However, the fact that Jesus was able to avoid the entrapment that the Pharisees and Herodians posed to Jesus, does not resolve the tension for us. In fact, his response only serves to lift our awareness of the tension in which we must live our lives, as citizens of what Luther has termed "The Two Kingdoms."

The first part of his answer tells us that even as people of faith, who are heirs of the kingdom of God through our baptism into Christ's

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death and resurrection, we have a responsibility to return to Caesar the things that are Caesars. In other words, as long as we are citizens of this world, we have a responsibility to the governing authorities of our nation, our province, our county and our community.

And I believe that Jesus means more than simply paying our taxes, in support of the various benefits that result from living as a citizen of our country. Governments also ask for our allegiance. Governments have the right to establish laws to regulate our life as we live in community with one another, and to have the authority to enforce them. They may even, in the time of war, ask us to come to the defense of our country by serving in the armed forces.

On the other hand, as disciples of Christ, who have been redeemed by his death and resurrection, we must also acknowledge that we are children of God's kingdom, to which our ultimate allegiance belongs. After all, God is the source of our very existence, to whom we owe our very life. If we are to "give to God the things that are God's," then we can only conclude that we owe God, and God alone our worship and praise for his gift of creation, for our life and all that sustains it, and his grace that has redeemed us and claimed us as his own.

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Thus, Jesus' response to the question that was meant to entrap him, traps us all! We live as citizens of two kingdoms – an earthly kingdom, to which we owe certain allegiances, and a heavenly kingdom, to which we owe everything. Jesus' response doesn't really settle the dispute between the Herodians and the Pharisees, any more than it settles the conflict that each of us encounters, as we try to live out our faith today.

Rather, Jesus invites us into the struggle. He invites us to acknowledge that our government has a right to expect a certain allegiance from us, but that we should never allow our government to distort or compromise our faith and allegiance to God. Jesus' answer says "Give to Caesar what belongs to him, but no more than what belongs to him."

Over my life span, I have seen our government move away from the moral fabric supported by the Judeo-Christian faith. And I have seen, even within the church, this struggle, this tension between our allegiance to the nation, and our allegiance to God, being manifest.

The fact is, as Christians, we are in the midst of this struggle, this tension of living in two kingdoms. And since Jesus did not answer the question, neither will I. But I pray that God's Spirit might lead us all to first come to acknowledge that to God belongs our first allegiance, and

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upon this, the Spirit might lead us to take our faith seriously. For upon this, the future of the church rests.

Amen.