



Sermon, Scripture, & Prayer

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Matthew 22:15-22

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.

Gracious and Loyal God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

When I was around 13 my parents started to allow me to go to the mall with a friend by ourselves! It was one of my first breaths of independence, a chance to go to someplace with my own money and have full autonomy over what I spent it on. Making my own purchases meant that I, of course, needed to have my own loyalty cards to get the best deals. I distinctly remember signing up for any and every loyalty card that was offered to me for the first year or so, nothing made me feel more adult than filling out the information sheet with my details and getting that plastic card to fill up the slots in my wallet. Though I soon learned that a purchase at Hallmark once a year (because let’s be honest, Hallmark is expensive!) did not really add up to any decent rewards. I also learned how annoying getting emails from every single store under the sun is. I learned that I should be less eager to declare loyalty to a store to get a piece of plastic.

Fast Forward to today. One of the things I didn’t expect having to think about when getting cats is figuring out where to get our cat supplies. We have been all over. Hardings, Farm & Home, Pet Supplies Plus, PetSmart, chewy.com. So many options! While going to all these different stores over the last couple months to get supplies, one

of the toughest questions I have had to face at some of these stores is... if I want to start a rewards card with them. I know this is a bit ridiculous, but in the moment when I am standing at the register, with my credit card poised, ready to stick it into the card machine to pay, and they ask if I want to get a rewards card, especially if I have to ask them to repeat themselves because I had a hard time hearing them through the mask, I suddenly feel like I need to decide right then and there if that store is the one that we are going to stick to, the store we will come to to buy new food and supplies, if our purchase rewards will actually add up to anything. If that store will win our loyalty for the price of spending a few extra moments giving them my name, phone number, and email. While I am thinking through that dilemma in my head, Brennen usually cuts in and says no thanks. Though, I will say, my internal dilemma has only heightened after visiting those stores more than once and being asked the question again. Alas, I am not a loyal shopper to PetSmart or Pet Supplies Plus.

This is a bit of a silly example, but it is related to our Bible story for today! You are probably used to thinking about this passage as an example of how separation of church and state is approved by Jesus. Alas, I must break it to you that it isn't so much about that, but a reminder from Jesus to be aware of and cautious of where our loyalties lie. Let's break it down a bit more.

First, we are continuing the narrative from where we left off last week. So, this is still happening in the days between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Jesus's ministry is nearing a close, Jesus knows this, the Jewish leaders are actively plotting how to make that happen. Tensions have risen to a fever pitch as Jesus has shaken up so much of what was the norm for Jewish believers in that time. That tension has only risen as Jesus entered Jerusalem, making a scene at his entrance and then at the temple when he flipped the tables of the money changers and the tax collectors and called them corrupt. Since then, Jesus returned to the temple and had a whole battle of wits with the Chief Priests and Elders who he left in his dust. They had asked who gave him authority to do what he was doing, as a trap, and Jesus deflected the trap and sprung it back on them, and then on top of it told three parables that made them look bad, and told them it to them in a way that meant they had to recognize he was critiquing them. It is following that whole interaction, perhaps the same day or a day or two later, that today's passage starts. This time it is the Pharisees and Herodians, two more Jewish sects of the time who have now plotted and come up with a question that they think will trap Jesus into saying something that would make him lose followers or give them the reason they so wanted to arrest him. From the beginning, before they even say anything, we can guess just how committed they were to delegitimizing Jesus as it tells us the Pharisees and Herodians worked on this together. I learned this week a bit more about who the Pharisees and Herodians were, especially related to each other. Apparently they were completely opposites and would have been almost enemies themselves. The Herodians fans of King Herod, as their name implies, and thus of the Roman regime, they would have been in support of paying the taxes. As far as their faith, they were all about going to the temple and participating in those rituals as the most crucial elements of faith. The Pharisees were more popular with the greater crowd because they resented and resisted the tax, but were not radical nationalists about it. Faith-wise they thought the law was the most important thing to spend time on to be the most faithful and good, not especially going to the temple. So, the fact that both of those groups were

working together on this plot to stop Jesus, means that they all must have been super against Jesus.

Of course, they can't just come out and tell Jesus to his face that they hate him. There are enough people in the crowd at the temple that like Jesus that they don't want to alienate, so they do the typical of anyone trying to get away with something, they dump a bunch of flattery all over what they are saying to soften the blow. It is clear that this flattery was only a bunch of baloney as Jesus's first response to them is to ask them, "Why are you putting me to the test?" The phrase, "put to a test" is used a few other times in Matthew, most famously in the story of Jesus being put to the test in the desert by Satan. Using these words here puts these specific Jewish leaders in the company of Satan! Jesus is seeing right through their crap. Anyway, once they get the flattery out of their system, they drop their trap: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" To us, that probably sounds like a pretty earnest question to come from those who are paying taxes to a government that invaded them and then those taxes they collect are used to enforce the invasion. In another context, it would have probably been a good question to get Jesus's full thoughts on. But, we know that the cross is looming, this is not an earnest situation. It is not a conversation among equals, it is not a learning opportunity or a good-hearted debate. As the first verse told us, they were plotting to entrap him; this question is a loaded one that they think has a yes or no answer, both options getting Jesus in trouble with an important group. If he says, "Yes, it is lawful and you should pay your taxes," then he is going to lose most of his followers in the crowd who were, rightfully so in this situation, against the taxes from the Romans. If he says, "No, it is not lawful to pay Roman taxes, and you should resist paying them," he would have been committing sedition, or encouraging rebellion, which was a betrayal warranting arrest and a death sentence (which is really what the Jewish leaders wanted to happen to him at this point, so they were definitely hoping Jesus would go with the second option, but the first would do just fine).

At this point, we have had a number of these stories, so it is probably not a big surprise that Jesus had a way out of their trap. He casually asks them, "Show me the coin used for the tax." and it says, "they brought him a denarius." Now I know all of you are ancient coin experts so I don't need to go into why that was such a scandal, right? Riiiiight. Yeah I'm not either. But thankfully some others are and share with the rest of us so I can share it with you. Remember how I mentioned that just a day or two before this scene Jesus had flipped the tables of the Money Changers and Tax collectors who were in the temple because of the corruption? He wasn't mad that they were there at all, but because of the ways those running them were gouging the customers with high fees. Think of the currency exchange booths at the airport and the huge fees they charge. The money changers in general were actually really important to the temple because one of the biggest rules of going into the temple was that no one should enter while carrying a graven image, anything that was a representation of an idol or something worshipped. Which the Denarius coin was! It was a Roman currency that had the face of the emperor on it and an inscription that said, "Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus Pontifex Maximus" which means, "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." The coin was basically Roman propaganda, and on top of that it has a graven image idolizing Caesar and an inscription that is basically a confession of faith toward Caesar as the Son of a God. So, it was against the law to have this coin

inside the temple, which was enforced by the Jewish leaders who are now questioning Jesus. To facilitate following the rules they allowed the money changers to be there to exchange the denarian into the Jewish currency, Shekels. But, those money changers were gouging everyone with fees to provide the service, so they became a barrier between the poor and the ability to enter the temple. So the coins and the money changers were not good in the temple. So, that's the deal about the coin.

So, let's remember the scene. Jesus is in the temple, talking with crowds who wanted to learn from him and follow him, and the Pharisees and Herodians come up and sling this question at Jesus wanting to nail him to the wall for his opinions about the taxes. But instead of giving them an immediate answer, Jesus asks them to hand him one of the coins that would be used for the tax. And they don't hesitate. Someone easily digs into their pocket and pulls out a Denarius. Do you know what this means?! These leaders of the faith are trying to trap Jesus and are not letting plenty of others come into the temple with the laws that they are currently breaking. Jesus asking them to pull out the coin as they do, reveals their hypocrisy and causes them to reveal their hypocrisy to the whole crowd. Jesus really rubs it in as he asks them whose head and title is on the coin. Though it means they are admitting to their guilt, the question is too easy for them to not answer, and so they admit it is "the emperor's." Through this simple request and follow-through Jesus is showcasing how the Roman ways have infiltrated its way into everything, even the temple, even into those who were the most into the law and the temple. This interaction points out to them and the crowds that the Jewish leaders have become complicit to the Roman ways and oppression of the city. So, the big question they could be asking themselves is, "what do we do about it?"

Now, Jesus gives his response to their question on if it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, but avoids the simple yes or no. His response is bit of a puzzle. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." This is the phrase that the separation of church and state interpretation comes from. On the surface it does seem to encourage us to split our lives into what we give the secular powers and what we give to God. But, in the rest of the Gospel, Matthew makes it clear that those kinds of separate dualities are not something he approves of; which means we should dig a little deeper than just "Yeah, pay your taxes and be religious." If we look just below the surface, this response is an insult to the empire, basically saying, "Pfft, give back to Caesar this piece of law breaking trash, and give to God what really matters." The law breaking part is just that the coins are in the temple, paying taxes would have been lawful, because it is not against any of the laws in the Torah. It is technically allowed for them to participate in the economic system of the Romans and pay the taxes, but the second half, "Give to God what is God's" encourages them to think about that involvement, consider if they are still giving to God what is God's or if they have let idolatrous practices creep in. Thinking of this in terms of the coin with the imprint of the emperor's face, what would God's equivalent be? What is God imprinted on? If there shouldn't be any graven images then, it couldn't be an object, it would be a person. Jesus and all of us. Jesus is the full human imprint of God in the world. God is also imprinted in each of us as we are all made in God's image. We all carry with us God's image. Caesar gets a bunch of coins, while God gets all of creation. Thinking of 'what is God's' being Jesus and all of us, Jesus's response could be interpreted as Jesus

challenging them on if they were going to go ahead with destroying him or would they give to God what is God's, and recognize Jesus's divinity and treat him as such.

Putting it all together, Jesus is pointing out that they have let their loyalties slide closer and closer to the Romans instead of toward God and in his response to their question, reminds them that God should be the higher loyalty in their lives, not Caesar. Unfortunately Jesus does not elaborate here on where the healthy boundaries should be in participating in the systems of the world that we must to keep on living and what belongs to God. Jesus is basically highlighting that there is a big, important difference, and those Pharisees and Herodians need to re-evaluate, and is speaking to us today through the text to do the same.

There are plenty of things vying for our loyalties these days. At this point, I don't just mean between Pet Supplies Plus and Petsmart for our commitment to a rewards card. There are some bigger things going on that I am sure you are aware of that are competing for us to give our loyalty. We have a super-polarized political landscape, a polarized response to the ongoing pandemic, a dramatic election cycle, growing movements for equal rights for black and brown folks, ongoing discussion around LGBTQ marriage. Just about everywhere we look our loyalty is being competed for and demanded from us. This passage reminds us of how important it is for us to pay attention to where our loyalty is going. Is it going to things of this world and the corrupt systems in it like Money and power and oppression like the Jewish leaders had slipped into? Or is your loyalty going to the things that God wants, which at the most basic is the well-being and flourishing of God's people and creation?

Now, this doesn't mean we should all be cutting ties with all things of this world and join monasteries and live in nothing but worship and silence or create Christian communes that only live off the land and each other. Jesus does not answer their question saying they should separate themselves from the world and all worldly things, but the opposite! He basically tells them, "Pay the dang tax. Give Caesar his coins that are made to be given back to him." This part being included, plus looking ahead a few chapters to the Great Commission, to go and make disciples of all nations, tells us that he understands the importance of God's people continuing to live in the world. Jesus does not want us removing ourselves from the world completely but to stay in the world so we can continue to make disciples. That means, we will have to do some things to be a part of the world, part of society, that aren't the greatest, but are necessary to continue as part of society. This story is a reminder to beware of the creeping obligations and idolatrous relationships we can be sucked into when we get involved in systems that are not of God. We must find a balance between continuing to live in this world and continuing to be rooted in our higher loyalty to God.

If that feels a bit big and nebulous to you still, that's totally fair! This passage is not one where Jesus lays out the full picture, the full map to how we are supposed to live it out. Instead of giving us all the answers, this is one that gives us a starting point, a rule or pattern we should follow and expects that we will look past this one interaction to fill in the picture on what the exact distinction or boundary is between what we should consider as belonging to God and what belongs to Caesar or the secular world. Good news, there is a lot more from Jesus and a lot more in the Bible that can help us figure it out. Jesus teaches us what being loyal to God means. Both in the text of the scriptures from way back then, but he also continues to be present with us, guiding us toward the

next thing we need to shift back to God instead of the world. Let us trust that Jesus is continuing to speak to us through the scriptures and the Holy Spirit to help us follow his advice to the Pharisees and Herodians to re-evaluate where we have let our loyalties lie and do what we can to do better in giving to God what is God's.

Let us pray,

All-powerful and all-loving God,

You sent your Son to shake up and reform the way your people were understanding their faith and you. Unfortunately so many of those that claimed to be faithful believers of you stuck to their values and their ideas of what faith should look like instead of being open to the new paths that Jesus shared with them. We believe in Jesus and have faith in his good news, but sometimes we still falter in the ways we live into and live out our faith. Sometimes we can become too wrapped up in the things of this world and end up shifting our loyalty away from you. Help each of us hear this declaration from Jesus to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to You what is Yours. Bring to us the wake-up calls we need to recognize where we have let our loyalties slip and where we can give them to you anew. We live in this complex world filled with systems that are not of you, but those systems are populated by people who are all created in your image. Help us to remember and recognize your image within all those we meet and do all we can to make this world into what you want it to be so that we can bring your people, your creation what you want for us, what will bring us flourishing and love. We thank Jesus for his continued instruction, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us and guide us in this work, and we bear witness to your image in those around us. In the name of the Son, Spirit, and Father, Amen.