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Sermon

Image and Ownership

Matthew 22:15-22 with Isaiah 45:1-7

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What is your citizenship? To what country do you owe allegiance? Most of us, I imagine, are New Zealanders. Sometimes people hold dual nationality. What would they do if those two nations were to go to war against each other? Divided loyalties are very difficult.

Today's passage continues on directly from last week. It is Passover week, just days before the crucifixion. Jesus came to Jerusalem and was hailed by the crowds. He cleansed the temple and the religious leaders confronted him. He warned them of their danger as rebellious subjects whom God would eventually put aside. Then, we heard the parable of the wedding feast with its predictions of the collapse of their system and the destruction of Jerusalem while the sinner and gentiles would go into the Kingdom ahead of them.

The religious leaders wanted to be rid of him. That was clearly stated at the end of the last chapter:

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. [Mt 21:45-46]

So the Pharisees and the Herodians hatched a cunning plan. We should be startled at that. Why? Because they were archenemies. The Herodians were supporters of Herod the puppet king under the Romans. They had sold out to the oppressor for power and privilege. The Pharisees on the other hand were meticulous about observing the law and strict in their religious observance. These were not happy colleagues. But so determined were they to get rid of Jesus, that they actually plotted together with the Herodians to trap him.

They chose the issue of Roman taxes. The Herodians unsurprisingly supported it because their position, power and wealth came from the Romans. But everyone else bitterly resented it. The Romans were invaders. They were under a corrupt and demanding tax system which could often take up to 50% of their income. The Zealots hated it because to pay tax to Caesar was to acknowledge his rule. The Pharisees objected to the idolatry on the coin which had the Emperor's head on it and his claim to divinity.

So if Jesus supported paying the tax he would lose support from the common people, the Zealots and the Pharisees. If he opposed it, he could be denounced to the Romans and arrested for sedition.

The question is asked with flattery "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are." It is

subtle because if he does not answer the question, he can be accused of lacking that integrity, since he would have paid attention to who the questioners were.

Do you see how Jesus handles the situation? First, he exposes their hypocritical, weasel words of flattery covering their attempt to destroy him. He says, "Why are you trying to trap (or literally tempt) me?" The word "hypocrite" came from the Greek word for an actor who wore a mask in their dramas. He means they are pretending one thing but really believing something else.

Recognising this duplicity, he avoids a direct answer in what would be a lose-lose outcome. Rather he asked a question in response. They are not really wanting advice on what to do – it is purely a trap. Do you see how he asked questions to lead them through the logic and have them say the conclusions? That involves the person with the argument more than standing back in critical observation.

So he asks them to show him a coin. Whose image is on it? Caesar's. Whose inscription is on it?

He was using a wise technique: Ask questions to lead them through the logic but have them say the conclusions. That involves the person with the argument more than standing back in critical opposition. It also meant when the answer was given, he had not said it – they had.

The inscription read, "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, Chief Priest." Here is the problem: Caesar claimed his father has been made a god and was to be worshipped. In time, he would claim the same for himself. This contravened the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me."

Then there is the image on the coin – the likeness of a man. The second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

Jesus responded with a brilliantly wise statement. He clarified the divine and the secular rules and established a way to hold them in tension. Yes roads, the Pax Romana, the benefits of government need to be paid for. So **give to Caesar what is Caesar's**. It has his name and snapshot on it he issued it, so it is his.

But what about you? We humans carry the image of God. If we are God's people we bear the name of God. **So give to God what is God's**, that which bears his image and his name. Give yourself to God! Your loyalty belongs to him. Your money may go to the state in taxes. However, some things don't belong to Caesar. Worship is one of them. Only the one, true God may be worshipped.

This answer amazed the Pharisees and the Herodians. It says that they left him and went away. Actually, the wording could mean they let him be or they allowed him. I think these disciples of the Pharisees conceded the point to him and gave up.

But importantly, he didn't just get himself off the hook - he established a principle to guide his people through history. It developed into the principle of separation of Church and State. Some loyalties are due to the government under God, some are due to God.

It is not impossible for Christians to be under non-Christian leaders. The Old Testament reading from Isaiah was addressed to Cyrus the (then future) Persian emperor. God said he would appoint him for his own purposes. It was Cyrus who gave the decree for the exiled Jews to return to their land. It was Cyrus who commanded the temple should be rebuilt and restored the plundered temple effects. Isaiah's prophecy says he would be appointed and used by God. So too, Paul and Peter both teach that we are to submit to our rulers.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." How does that apply to us? It acts as a standard we can use to gauge our actions and loyalties as we go through life. To whom does my loyalty lie in this situation? Is the government trying to take over God's domain in that issue?

Communism and any other totalitarian system want to be absolute. They will not allow any other allegiance. God either does not exist or he is secondary to the state. That is why, they prohibit Bibles. The Bible declares absolutes about mankind and morals.

When the government tries to dictate our consciences; when it tries override God's instructions then it is out of order. We are to give to God what is God's - our trust, our worship, our dependence for security.

Remember the coin? Whose image is on it? Caesar's. That is because it belongs to Caesar.

What about us? Whose image is on us? We carry the image of God. If we are Christians we bear the name of God. So give to God what is God's, that which bears his image and his name. Give yourself to God!

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