

Dear Friends,

Welcome to week four of our on-line Bible Study. Many thanks to Jim for his thoughtful contribution last week and terrific sermon on Sunday morning. If you didn't have a chance to view the storm-cloud/rainbow photographs he mentioned they are displayed in the narthex.

I'll try my best to be brief with this week's passage.

The text is one of the most famous in the Bible. It picks up right where last week's gospel lesson concluded. It is Matthew 22:15-22.

Here it is from the NRSV.

The Question About Paying Taxes

“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 emperor 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, ‘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.’

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

Before we begin unpacking the potential meanings of this lesson here are some definitions and background.

The passage (and the entirety of the Gospels) takes place against the backdrop of Roman occupation. The tax being discussed is paid by the Jewish people to the foreign (Roman) government that is occupying their country. The tax paid for the occupation and helped fund the empire. The money that stayed in Palestine paid for the Roman politicians and soldiers who oversaw the Jewish people. The rest went back to Rome.

The Pharisees were a prominent Jewish religious faction. They were very pious, but not politically active in terms of resistance to Roman rule. Other Jewish groups saw it as a religious obligation to resist Roman occupation. The scholar Douglas Hare writes that,

“the Pharisees tended to be quietists* who resented the Roman occupation but accepted it as a necessary evil; they counseled submission as long as Rome did not interfere with the practice of religion.”

The Herodians were a secular political party that endorsed Roman rule, particularly the right of Herod the Great and his descendants to rule on Rome's behalf.

Certainly those who advocated for Israel's independence out of some fused sense of religious/nationalist obligation would regard both the Pharisees and the Herodians as traitors in collusion with Rome. This third group, often referred to as “the crowd” in the Gospels, is the party looming behind all of this. The everyday “Joe Six Pack” of first century Palestine was the sort of person beginning to be attracted to Jesus' teaching and ministry. He/She would be financially devastated by the Roman tax and religiously/politically wounded by the fact of Roman occupation.

A denarius was a Roman coin engraved with the Emperor's head. It contained an engraving proclaiming the emperor's divinity and title as the high priest of the Roman pagan religion.

Finally, but not obviously, there is the Jewish law. Unlike the contemporary American concept of separation of church and state, ancient Israel functioned as a theocracy prior to the Roman occupation. This means that the religious law and the civil law overlapped. The “Jewish Law” as summarized in the 10 Commandments spelled out Israel's obligation to God. If God was to be for “His people” the people themselves had to live a certain way. The “law” spelled out these obligations. An appeal to the Jewish is implied in the way the question about taxation is phrased (“is it lawful”). It is important to note that the 10 Commandments explicitly prohibit homage to “other gods” and engraved images of idols.

From these definitions we can gather that the Pharisees didn't care about the question they themselves asked. Their intent was to trip Jesus up.

If he answered “no it isn't lawful” and advocated resisting the tax, the Herodians in his audience could seize him as an insurrectionist, a rebel, an opponent of Roman rule.

If he answered “yes, go ahead and pay the tax” the people who were beginning to follow him will lump him in with the Herodians and the Pharisees, a man willing to sell out his religious principals in order to avoid offending the powers that be.

So Jesus choice is to lose all credibility or be branded an insurrectionist. Part of the brilliance of his answer lies in the way he sidestepped this trap. But what did he mean?

For a long time Christians interpreted Jesus' answer as an endorsement of divided loyalties. In this reading Jesus is saying, essentially, "there is a secular realm and there is a religious realm and equal respect must be paid to each."

However, in recent times Biblical scholars and others have come to agree that this interpretation misses the story's point. A more radical interpretation has come into prominence. I'll try to summarize it briefly.

First, it is important that Jesus had to ask for a Roman coin. He wasn't carrying one because it contained a graven image, therefore he wouldn't carry one. To do so would break God's law as stated clearly in the second commandment. Stanley Hauerwas makes this point in a commentary on this passage. He says that Jesus request for the coin is made to "remind those who produced the coin that the very possession of the coin marked them as idolaters." This is why Jesus calls them hypocrites. They're asking a religious question about giving Caesar his due, even as they are happy to do secular business with Caesar's coins.

Second, a pious first-century Jew would assume that EVERYTHING belongs to God, most particularly the land of Israel. Douglas Hare underscores this point. "Although there is strict parallelism in Jesus statement between the two halves [Caesar and God], they are by no means of equal significance, because Caesar's role is so vastly inferior to God's."

So, imagine Jesus answering like this:

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's . . . [big pause] . . . and to God the things that are God's." Hare concludes: "The second half of Jesus' answer practically annuls the first by preempting it."

It appears then that Jesus' response is in accord with his earlier injunction against trying to serve both God and wealth. In chapter six of Matthew's gospel he says, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Nor, he seems to be saying here, can you serve both God and the emperor.

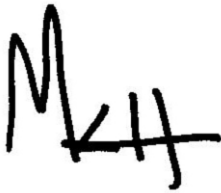
In this reading while Jesus' questioners might have been initially confused/impressed by the quick-thinking quality of his evasion, when the implications of his answer really began to sink in, they would have been enraged. He is saying, essentially, that the Emperor has no claim on the people of God. This might explain why the Pharisees, whose religious power depended upon their collusion with Rome soon began conspiring with Roman politicians to have him killed.

This analysis helps explain the lesson in its historical context. Which, for us, begs some pressing questions.

What are the contemporary applications of this interpretation? What does this reading have to say about how we, as contemporary followers of Jesus, respond to the demands of the State today? Do the old rules still apply? Are we beholden to the 10 Commandments as Jesus and his people were? Should we be equally sensitive when they challenge or condemn the practices of the State? For instance, should God's prohibition against murder cause us to question our war-time practices? Can we be people of a double loyalty to both God and the State? Or, does the fact that we are living in a democracy rather than a theocracy skew all this so profoundly that the lesson is interesting historically, but not really helpful when it comes to sorting out today's dilemmas?

These are the sort of questions this text makes us ask. We'll explore some of them on Sunday morning. It should make for an interesting time together! As always, if you have thoughts you would like to share as I start to work through these things I would love to hear from you in a reply to this e-mail.

God Bless You,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'M' followed by a horizontal line and a vertical line that crosses it, resembling the initials 'MKH'.