

March 16, 2014 “Understanding The Tax Issue” Matthew  
22:15-22

One of the first details that becomes clear as a result of reading this portion in Matthew is that Jesus was not the only one to have disciples. Every Rabbi who had distinguished himself in the Jewish community had students who studied the Scriptures and the traditions of the community under the oversight of that Rabbi. In fact the Rabbis tended to have high standards. You had to pass an exam to be accepted by the Rabbi as teacher. The Rabbi set the test. The Rabbi decided who passed. His word was final. What that means is that the disciples of the various Rabbis were motivated and they were committed. If we think that was true of the disciples of Jesus...the disciples of the other Rabbis were equally committed, and just as motivated.

Verse 15 tells us this whole matter of asking questions of Jesus was a setup. The Pharisees moved the pieces round the board. The idea was to urge Jesus into a situation in which He would say something that could be used against Him. Because the Rabbis were recognizable...in fact had done their bit in this matter of questioning Jesus, they sent their much less recognizable, much less prominent students. They would appear to be members of the crowd. The Pharisees are trying deliberately to set Jesus at ease, in hopes He will say

something that will incriminate Him. The KJV is even more blunt about this strategy....”The Pharisees took counsel how they might entangle Him in His talk.”

As we have already been told in Matthew 21:46, this is war. The Pharisees are no longer working from the premise of trying to control Jesus, they are out to destroy Him. So they sent their young and eager students to question Jesus and take note of what He said in detail. They are not trying to “play fair”. They want something in context, out of context that they can use with the Romans. And that is precisely why the Herodians are involved. The followers of Herod, his servants, his soldiers, his civil servants, if you will have a stake in this. They live well as servants of Rome. They are Jews who are playing the political game with the Roman conquerors. Their concern is not to obtain a measure of power, but to keep the measure they have been given. If the students deal with doctrine in a game of wits with Jesus, the Herodians will help apply the necessary political spin. Entangling Jesus in His words.

Because this business is so serious. The issue is literally life and death, there is one more insight we need to remember at this point. I am not trying to make a case for anti-Semitism. Everyone in the Temple Court Yards that day was Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. We need to remember as we read

the Gospel accounts that the authors of these writings appeal to us to understand something far more important than what the people on the ground are doing. Through their efforts, through their scheming, something far greater than human effort is being accomplished. God's will is unfolding with a stark inevitability. God's will is that sinners like you and I and those in the Temple Court Yards be saved from their sin. It is not that some people are worse than others. It is that God will save people from their sin. Step by step His gracious plan to redeem unfolds.

Who would have thought the question would be about taxes! If there is one thing we tend to understand it is that tax time is inescapable. There are rules when it comes to taxes. Everyone has to play by the rules. It may be true that the table is not level...that some can take advantage of the rules in a manner the ordinary citizen cannot...but all have to play by the rules. There is a looming deadline. If you do not submit by the deadline, the cost to citizens increases. Penalty for breaking the rules. In some ways it seems to me it has always been thus.

The loaded question is about taxes. The preamble to the question is also loaded. "we know you are a man of integrity. Ego stroking. "You teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." Another stroke to the ego. An

admission that the Scriptures, the law and the prophets are wonderfully important to Jesus. An admission that Jesus believes there is such a thing as truth. That Jesus submits Himself to the truth of God's Word consistently and in a disciplined fashion. "You are not swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are." Ego stroke number three. You are a straight shooter. You don't treat people differently because they are important or because they are not. These are marvelous compliments. We do well to remember that the opponents of Jesus at the time voiced these words. It would be inaccurate to say Jesus enemies failed to take Him seriously. That is one of the things that has changed. The opponents of Christianity today try very hard to make sure they leave God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit out of the equation....as though we are the only ones in the church.

"Tell us then Jesus, your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" That is what they want. That is what the Pharisees want. That is what their students and the Herodians are seeking. They want Jesus to offer His opinion, ungarnished and unfettered on this question that is at best a veiled attempt to speak treason. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? How could the question fail to evoke a treasonous response? You see...the Pharisees believed it was wrong to support the Gentile Emperor in Rome. They believed it was wrong to submit to the army of occupation in Judea.

How could a man who loved the Scriptures and the truth, who was a man of integrity, who spoke plainly to people of high and low station alike, fail to think as they did? The question was a live grenade. They had pulled the pin and then handed it to Jesus. He was holding it in His very hands.

It never occurred to them to consider for a moment, He really could be the Messiah. It never occurred to them for a moment that He really might be the Son of God, understanding exactly what they were asking and with even greater clarity what they were trying to make happen. He is a man (how does the KJV say integrity?) Jesus is a man who is true, who teaches God's truth. Jesus is not impressed by people's class, erudition, or knowledge of how the world works. Jesus is who He has always claimed to be. So He knows who they are. And He knows what it is they are endeavouring to orchestrate. And so His first word is directly to them, and those who have sent them. "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

A hypocrite is a person who says one thing with his mouth, and does, lives according to a different set of rules. They have not come seeking an answer to this question they have put. They voice the question. Their intention is to see Jesus impaled on a Roman cross with the full force of the law of Rome bringing about His death. They have said one

thing....with the full intention of achieving something else. There has never been a moment when they considered the morality of their intention....killing Him. "Thou shalt not".... says the law of God. They have said, it is a good idea that one man should die for all these people.

But Jesus having declared the truth, concerning Pharisees and their disciples, having exposed the truth that He knows what the question is really about, immediately turns to it as a legitimate question. "Show me the coin you would use to pay the tax." They handed him the Roman coin...denarius. Again not much has changed in the passing centuries from then to now. The coin has been made with the image of the head of state, the Emperor stamped into it. And Jesus asks the telling question. "Whose image is this?"

I mean this is like kindergarten. Any child could answer that one. It is the imprint, the image of the head of state. "Caesar's they reply." This probably looked good to them. He was going to go for the bait. He is going to say something about Caesar!! And then like water the circumstances run through their fingers. Jesus says, "Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's." And Jesus looks them and us straight in the eyes, windows on the soul. "And give God, what is God's." Jesus gives no one an out on the matter of paying

taxes. Regardless of the governmental system, Jesus says, pay the state what the state requires of you.

There is one remaining question. And I will frame it in the language of the KJVerson. “What is it that we are to render unto God?” The word says He made us. Out of the dust He created us. And He breathed the breath of His Spirit into us and we became living souls. One thing to render unto God. Jesus said it with His words. He did it with His life. We owe God our lives. All that we are, all that we have, we are His sheep, His forever.

Let us pray....

So easy to say, so hard to actually do. It is so easy to say yes, we will live as your own possession. Your own creation. Your own children. And yet the very next moment we begin to celebrate our freedom by taking charge, trying to make others over in our own version of what your child should be and do. Forgive us our willfulness. Forgive us our waywardness. Forgive us for behaving as though our lives were our own. Help us to remember that Jesus is the mold. That we too are to yield our lives to You. Amen