



Matthew 22:15–22

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the

imperial tax to Caesar or not?” 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” 21 “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” 22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Reflection

It's Tuesday of the week of Jesus' death. Friday morning at 9am he will be nailed

to a Roman cross, the charge against him written above his head, partly as a warning and partly in mockery of him. The words will read, 'This is the King of the Jews.' Two days ago Jesus certainly entered Jerusalem like a conquering king, setting the Roman authorities, and the Jewish religious establishment who had cosied up to them, on edge. Things only worsened on Monday when Jesus entered the temple markets and violently drove out the merchants and money changers as if he owned the place. He'd accused the temple authorities of turning God's house into a den of robbers. Imagine walking into the temple and accusing the chief priests of theft! Worse still, the crowds are right behind him. He's incredibly popular, dangerously so.

Today has been far worse than even all that. Jesus has been teaching in the temple courts since early morning. He's drawn a huge crowd. And when challenged by the temple authorities and some of the leading Jewish ruling families about where he thinks he gets his authority from, Jesus completely turned the tables on them for abusing theirs. He systematically spent much of the morning publicly humiliating them. All their combined wisdom has come to nothing against this prophet from Galilee. Not only has Jesus made them look foolish but with three withering parables he has painted prostitutes and tax collectors in a better light than them, condemned them with words from their own mouths as 'wretches who will be brought to a wretched end' and in yesterday's parable portrayed them as murderers who

would be destroyed for their crimes.

When you think about it, it is extraordinary that they've managed to sit through Jesus' devastating indictment of them for this long. They lasted until the first verse of today's passage, which begins,

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.

You can almost hear their plotting. 'This man is turning the whole city on its head. The crowds are right behind him. His wisdom is unassailable. He's claimed the temple for his own. He must die otherwise the people will never recognise our authority again and all that we've so carefully nurtured will be lost.' And so they lay careful plans to trap Jesus. Four in fact. One after

the other throughout the rest of the day. We read about their first attempt in verse 16 which begins,

16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.

The Pharisees send their young trainees to Jesus, perhaps to try and catch him off guard. They come with the Herodians, unlikely bedfellows, sort of like city officials, able to arrange Jesus' swift execution with the Romans if he publicly puts a foot wrong. Sent to trap him, listen to their hypocritical fawnings,

“Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't

swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.

If they truly believed this they wouldn't be laying this trap. Here it is:

17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

In many ways their question is evil genius. It would have put any normal man very quickly between a rock and a hard place. Here's Jerusalem, swelling to past capacity with Jewish religious fervour on the eve of the Passover. The air is thick with religious zeal and hatred of Roman oppression. This imperial tax has been a sore point for many years. And what's more, the tax was one denarius. An idola-

trous coin that on one side had a picture of Tiberius Caesar's head and the inscription 'Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus', basically saying that Tiberius was the son of god, and on the other side saying, 'Pontifex Maximus' which means high priest. So this wicked coin, needed to pay this wicked tax, effectively was also an idolatrous graven image saying not only that Caesar was the son of god but that he also was the high priest of god. So, as you can imagine, this tax and this coin were utterly detestable to zealous Jews. But then if Jesus said anything against the imperial tax these Herodians would arrange for the Romans to arrest him in a heartbeat.

Game, set and match? Not even for a moment. Listen to Jesus,

“You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?”

Using your flattery while you try and arrange my execution.

19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.”

Doubly hypocrites, they pull out one of these coins that were so detestable to the Jews. Jesus doesn't have one, but they do; and carrying one around in the temple of all places!

Taking hold of their coin Jesus stuns them, leaving them speechless with his wisdom,

“Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” 21 “Caesar's,” they re-

plied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” 22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

‘Pay your taxes. Give back that abominable currency that you for some reason are carrying around with you to Caesar. But more importantly, give to God what is God’s.’ Jesus isn’t side-stepping here. This is deep ethical teaching and has seen Christians ever since be model citizens under governments instituted over us by God. We can do this recognizing God’s authority in the establishment of government as one small part of God’s far greater authority over all. We give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, as one small part of our far greater obligation to give to God what is God’s.

Think & Pray

Are you giving to Caesar what is Caesar's? Paying your taxes? Doing your civic duty? Being a good citizen under the authorities that God has placed over you? Do you think much about being a good Australian citizen? Do you pray for your country, our leaders and the future of our children? Do you volunteer some of your time for the betterment of our society? Take some time this morning to think about how you might do good for our country because this is an essential part of being a Christian in our world and a light to the world.

But also consider if perhaps you are in the world more than you should be. Jesus ends today with the words: Give to God

what is God's. Are you giving to God what is his? You were bought at a price. Are you honouring God with all he has given you? Give to God what is God's. Give him your time, your money, your devotion, your joy, and your friendship. Make your whole life an act of worship to our God who has given you life, breath and everything. And do so more and more. What does this look like for you? Make this your prayer this morning also.