

## Matthew 22:15-22 The Right Question

*The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus 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.*

The Pharisees had been following Jesus around, listening to him preach and teach, watching him heal the sick and command a great following of people. They had also had their authority challenged by Jesus and they were determined to get even. They knew by now that they would not trap him by questioning him about God, because it was clear that he knew more than the rabbis, so they changed tactics. This time they sent some of their own disciples and also brought along the Herodians. This is interesting because the Herodians were Jews who supported the Roman government, while the Pharisees did not. This was an unlikely alliance, these Pharisees and Herodians, but politics can make strange bedfellows.

The one thing that unites them is that they are intent on entrapping Jesus, but he will not be entrapped. They begin with flattery, telling Jesus he is sincere, that he teaches the way of God, that he speaks the Truth, and is not easily influenced. The ironic thing about this is that they were describing Jesus, and doing it very well. Most of the time flattery will get you lots of places, but with Jesus they got nowhere.

In asking Jesus a question about paying taxes, the Pharisees knew they would get a reaction. After all, don't we all have something to say about taxes? They were sure they had the right question, one that would incriminate Jesus no matter which way he answered. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus answered yes, he would lose his base, his followers who believed his good news about the coming kingdom. If he answered no, then he would be accused of committing an act of sedition against the Roman government. This work of incrimination is all too familiar to us right now in our own politics. The questions asked are the right ones for proving an agenda, but they are the wrong questions for finding the truth.

But Jesus recognized their attempt to trap him and he questioned them right back. "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." When one of the Jews pulled the Roman coin out of his pocket he was caught red handed. He was breaking a commandment because Jews were forbidden to have these coins with the emperor's image on them. But Jesus let that slide because he had another question for them. "Whose head is this, and whose title?" The literal Greek translation is, "Whose image is on the coin?"

When the Pharisees answered that it was the emperor's image on the coin, Jesus said, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And when they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

They went away amazed, because they knew Jesus had answered truthfully. They went away because they knew that Genesis, the first book of the Torah, says that humanity was created in God's own image. Judaism affirms the truth of the essential dignity of every human, that humans are imprinted with the image of God in their moral, spiritual, and intellectual nature and are created to mirror God's divinity. And they know the truth that whatever is stamped with God's image belongs to God.

The Pharisees knew that Jesus had seen right through the false image they hid behind. He had looked through their façade and right into their hearts. The emperor's image was on the coin, so the coin belonged to the emperor. They had not asked Jesus the right question, but in his reply, Jesus has asked the right question. And it's the right question for us to ask ourselves.

The coin belongs to the emperor, but what then belongs to God? What is it that bears God's image? We do! God's image is stamped on our very souls.

When we look at a coin, we can clearly see the image on the coin. When we look at ourselves, can we as easily see the image of God? Can we see who we are and whose we are? Sometimes that image can be blurred or worn down by sin in our lives. Sometimes we forget what we are supposed to look like as God's children, we chase after false gods and avoid the truth.

How would it look to live our lives in such a way that we reveal the image of God? I don't think Jesus is suggesting that we separate ourselves from the economic and political systems of the world. Might Jesus be inviting us to think more carefully about each decision we make? Do we consider how all of our decisions – what we buy, who we vote for, how we spend our time – all of our decisions should be shaped, not by the false questions and untruths of others, but by the truth that has been imprinted on our heart, by the confession that the whole creation belongs to God, including us?

Jesus asked a clever question, "Who's image is on the coin?" In asking, he helps us to then ask ourselves the right question, "Who's image is on us?" It's a good question to ponder before we make our daily decisions, whether they are financial, political, or personal. Because the way we answer the question reveals everything about where our true allegiance lies. Do the answers we give show us to be sincere, do they teach the way of God, do they speak Truth? Whose image is on us? The right question will result in the right answer and will always remind us that we belong to God. Amen.