

Put to the Test

Matthew 22:15-22

The United States of America is quite familiar with disagreements around the question of paying taxes. One of the issues that pushed the thirteen fledgling British colonies to call for independence from Great Britain was a dispute over taxes. Whether one considers the Stamp Act of 1765 or the Boston Tea Party of 1773, the phrase "Taxation without representation is tyranny" could be heard from Boston to Baltimore to Charleston.

Apparently those same disputes could be heard among the Jewish people in first-century CE Palestine, and for many of the same reasons. Palestine was a colony of the Roman Empire, and the Jews were paying taxes that supported the army and government that occupied their country. The Jewish people had grievances around the question of taxation.

Not surprisingly, there were people in both colonized groups (in America and Palestine) who took opposite sides on that question. America had loyalists who supported the British government and patriots who opposed it. Palestine had Herodians who supported the Roman government and Pharisees who opposed it.

Marvin A. McMickle

Our passage in Matthew, continuing to recount the dispute between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, relates a plan of deceit to trap Jesus in a no-win situation. A coalition of surrogates were sent to Jesus, pleading a phony righteousness, yet in fact naming the truth. They came to Jesus with hypocritical flattery: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere [lit. "true"], and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality" (v. 16). Each line of this insincere speech spoke truth about

Jesus: He is true, he teaches the way of God, and he shows deference to no one, unlike these "hypocrites" who pretend to praise him. In this setting the famous question is put, whether it is right to pay tribute money to Caesar or to God (see Exod. 30:13). The Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property, and determined by registration in the census. It was administered by Jewish authorities, but it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished residents of first-century Palestine, and at least on one occasion the census provoked a revolt against Rome, when Judas the Galilean led a rebellion in 6-7 CE during Jesus' infancy. So if Jesus answered, "Yes," to the question, he risked alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine; if he answered, "No," he could be accused of fostering sedition. Brilliantly, Jesus refused to do either, and in his answer he showed what is truly "lawful"—that is, what fulfills the law of God.

Andrew Purves

The Pharisees and the Herodians were trying to entrap Jesus into disclosing something about himself that would clinch their attempts to indict him. They seemed smug about their strategy of using a coin to draw him out into the harsh light of political partisanship, where they thought they would peg him as either collaborator or seditionist. Jesus deftly transfigured the challenge as a theological question, and used it to disclose something instead about them—and us.

What does a coin tell us about who we are?

In the United States, the coins in our own pockets make a more moderate theological statement than the coin that was handed to Jesus. "In God we trust," they say—and also "Liberty," perhaps proclaiming our freedom to construe those words in any number of ways: as a statement of our highest aspirations, for instance; as an appeal to the better angels of our nature; or as an expression of the ambivalence we feel about our own civic creed regarding freedom of religion.

Perhaps the words on our coins are sober and timely reminders of the fallibility of

even the gigantic institutions that lie with "full faith and credit" behind our currency. Certainly they describe the attitude of some who consider their own wealth evidence of divine favor.

The inscription on the denarius Jesus' opponents handed him was not nearly as ambiguous and much more overtly offensive: Tiberius Caesar, august and divine son of Augustus, high priest. At that time, within Jesus' community, the words spoke both of oppression and of blasphemy. With the coin, Jesus' adversaries knew they had him spectacularly cornered; they constructed their question as a political conundrum and awaited a political response.

Jesus called their bluff, naming their game: "Why are you putting me to the test?" (v. 18), and then demanded to see the Roman coin used to pay the tax. Notably, his questioners had brought such a coin with them into the temple. Simply by holding it up and commenting on its appearance, Jesus foiled their designs. Jesus deftly widened the question so that it had little to do with politics—and nothing at all to do with the threat of arrest. Everyone had to decide, he said. He reconfigured the challenge around a question he intimated but never even had to verbalize: What is it that bears *God's* image? "No one can serve two masters," he had said (Matt. 6:24); none of us is exempt from the discernment, the choosing. What belongs to whom?

When Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21 RSV), we have wanted to hear him describing two parallel duties that can be discharged simultaneously, so as to preserve our good standing as citizens of both civic and "faith-based" communities. There is a place for everything, and everything has its place.

However, Jesus was not the one being put to test, but the one doing the testing, not tidying. He was not sketching parallel responsibilities, but a radical exact opposite. Caesar could stamp his picture and pedigree far and wide, but he could

not come near the true commerce that animates us. So Caesar would get many or most of the coins—and be flattered by how well his likeness was rendered in the medium of cold, hard cash; but the coin of the realm of our flesh and blood is the image of God. What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image. Every life is marked with that inscription, an icon of the One who is its source and destination.

Three observations are in order. First, by telling his interlocutors to give (lit. "give back") to God what belongs to God, Jesus recalled the parable of the Wicked Tenants, who refused to give to the landowner, God, the fruit that belonged to him (Matt. 21:41). His judgment on the Jewish leadership in that parable echoed in the background of his exchange with the Pharisees' representatives. Engrossed in trying to entrap Jesus, they themselves were failing to give God what belongs to God.

Secondly, Jesus distinguished between obligation to God and obligation to Caesar. To faithful Jews, such a distinction was obvious, but not to adherents of Roman power. The inscription on the coin itself indicated that loyalty to God included loyalty to Caesar, God's appointed representative. Jesus allowed room for loyalty to Caesar, but subordinated it to loyalty to God. One may give Caesar his due, but only if it does not conflict with what is due to God, because what belongs to God, the creator and Lord of all, encompasses everything else. Jesus allowed the payment of the tax, but only under the greater lordship of God, who owns everything.

Thirdly, therefore, we are driven to ask what does belong to Caesar, and what belongs to God. Some early interpreters looked to the image on the coin, and answered that coins—bearing Caesar's image—belong to Caesar; and human beings—bearing God's image—belong to God. Thus Tertullian, writing early in the

third century, said, "Render to Caesar Caesar's image, which is on the coin, and to God God's image, which is on man."

The inscription on the denarius made a theological claim about Caesar that would seem ludicrous from the perspective of Jesus' community, were it not for the bloody oppression that comes with it. The words on the coin were, in effect, a political threat: Caesar's interest in the well-being of his subjects stopped abruptly at the point where his power over their livelihood was threatened. The theological claim Jesus made about God's interest had nothing to do with power. The God to whom we render our days is the God described by the prophet Isaiah in the midst of the looming shadow of an earlier empire, for a people just as much at a loss to grasp the full magnitude of God's care:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child? ... Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands." (Isa. 49:15-16)

The tender compassion of God for God's children is the product of our commerce, the inspiration for all the rendering we do, the taproot of our politics. Baptism is the watermark of our true currency.

All of us have fine lines to walk in negotiating the various kinds of commerce that fill our days. Most of us are collaborators some of the time, subversives some of the time. There is comfort, perhaps, in Jesus' refusal to make the conundrum of daily rendering into an easy question. The answers are simple only for those who regard Caesar as God. Meanwhile, we bear God's image—as the palm of God's hand bears ours.

True, the image can sometimes be difficult to recognize. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear, what you do, the company you keep. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the kiss of light in the eyes, the memory of our

baptism, the image of all those children in the arms of their mothers, and the little ember of resolve to remember them. All those faces are a part of your face, when you begin to see the image that God sees, the image engraved in the palm of the hand of the God who, in Jesus, stands behind us with full faith and credit. **Richard E. Spalding and**

The question of what is truly "lawful" (v. 17) is one with which each Christian is challenged everyday. The fulfillment of the law, including the question of whether or not to pay taxes, is that which grows out of our complete devotion to God, expressed in love of one's neighbor. **Susan Grove Eastman**

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