

Your Ultimate Allegiance Is to Christ

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MATTHEW 22:15-22 NSRV

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They 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." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

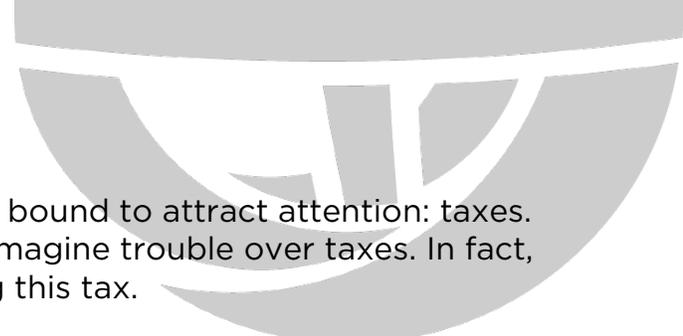
Jesus is the new kid on the block. He's been causing quite a stir. When he comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds hail him as messiah and king. As is often the case, desperate people are hungry for someone to lead them to freedom.

Jesus clears out the temple from business as usual. In so doing, he immediately attracts the attention of the religious leaders, who also happen to be the political leaders of the day. No separation of church and state in ancient Israel. They're one and the same.

Understandably, the officials have a pressing concern about this new rabbi. They demand to know: "By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus will face interrogation again and again in the events leading up to Friday. The powers-that-be will put him to the test, both to undermine his popularity with crowds, and to question his true legitimacy.

We know something of qualifying tests. Want to become an attorney? Pass the bar exam. Want to become a nurse or a doctor? Pass the medical boards. Want to operate a motor vehicle? Pass the driver's test - and that might include an eye exam too. Want to be the messiah? Prove to us that God has sent you.

The leaders have their doubts. Today's test comes from an unlikely alliance: the Herodians and the Pharisees. The Herodians are a priestly group; and often do Rome's bidding. The Pharisees are a lay group, and are committed to keeping the law of Moses. The only thing binding these two groups together is a mutual distrust and dislike of Jesus.



The Herodians and Pharisees pick a topic that's bound to attract attention: taxes. Israel is governed by Rome, so it's not hard to imagine trouble over taxes. In fact, in 6 A.D. there was an armed revolt over paying this tax.

The officials start with flattery. "Rabbi, we know you teach the ways of God. Tell us, then, is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?" Believe me, this is no casual chitchat. They've got the crowd's attention.

I mean, how many of you like paying taxes? Do you ever complain about it? Do you ever question how our leaders are spending your hard-earned money?

In Jesus' case, of course, it's a trap. They intend to publicly embarrass him. If Jesus answers, "No, it's not lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor," then Rome will come and crush him like a bug. If he says, "Yes, it is lawful," then he will lose the support of the crowds." This is one of those questions that politicians - then and now - avoid like the plague.

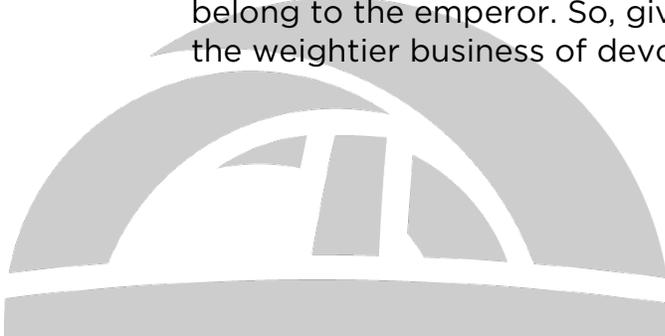
What's Jesus going to say? At first glance, it sounds like he's avoiding the question too. Instead of saying yes or no, he answers one question with another: "Why are putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"

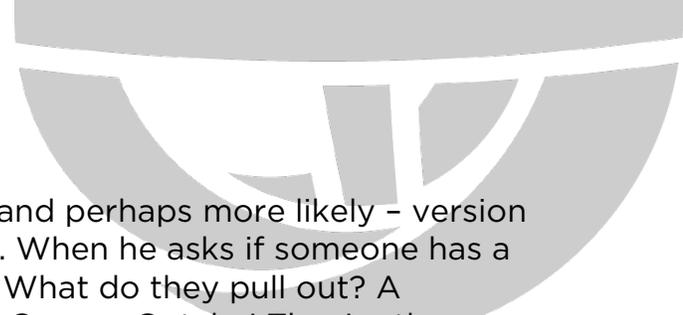
In Jesus' defense, this isn't exactly political doublespeak. It was common at the time to get to the bottom of issues by following up one question with another. The rabbis did it all the time. It was a way to explore tough topics.

Jesus might not answer their question directly, but he does give them an answer. He holds up a coin. It's a denarius, worth about a day's pay. There's an image of the Emperor on the coin. There's also an inscription: Caesar Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus." For law-abiding Jews, images themselves were bad; they go against the First Commandment. But combine that by swearing allegiance to a god other than Yahweh, and it was more than many law-abiding Jews could stomach.

Let's make a simple comparison. Our coins say: "In God we trust." Imagine if an occupying power were to change this to: "In this occupying power we trust"? Or, "In our president we trust"? Or, "In whatever god you choose, we trust"? Do you suppose that might provoke a reaction in you? Sure it would.

So, what do we make of Jesus' response - what's he saying? I hear a couple of possibilities. First, a mild response. It's along the lines of: "Look, the tax isn't the real issue. You pay tax with Roman coins, and they bear the emperor's image and belong to the emperor. So, give the emperor his little coins back and get on with the weightier business of devoting your lives to God."





Again, that's the mild version. A more radical – and perhaps more likely – version is this: Jesus turns the tables on their hypocrisy. When he asks if someone has a coin, imagine them reaching into their pockets. What do they pull out? A denarius. And what's on that coin? An image of Caesar. Gotcha! They're the ones carrying around Caesar's money; not him. They're the ones who've bought into this idolatrous system. In effect, Jesus is challenging them with words he's spoken earlier: "Choose this day whom you will serve: God or Caesar? Because you cannot serve both."

Jesus has deftly avoided their trap, not out of fear, but rather to make a larger point. He's saying: "Although you may have to live under this Caesar or that, and you may have to pay this tax or that, you never belong to Caesar. You belong, body and soul, to the living God, and you are to commit to God what is God's."

So, friends, let me ask: where are you putting your allegiance these days -with Caesar or with God? On July 4 we celebrate our Independence Day. We give thanks for God and country. There are many things for which I'm grateful about our country: As we sang earlier in America the Beautiful, I'm grateful for "Amber waves of grain; purple mountain majesties; alabaster cities gleaming." The list goes on. I'm grateful for Founders who dared dream of the American

experiment; for heroes who've put their lives on the line for us; for those who set aside differences during a tragedy like the condo collapse in Florida and find ways to work together. And there's more: I'm grateful for certain inalienable rights: for the freedom to be able to speak out on issues about which we care deeply; for the freedom to worship in ways that are dear to our hearts; for the freedom to own a gun, though I've understand the fascination with assault rifles. Yes, there are many things about our nation for which I am profoundly grateful.

Even as I lift these up, however, there are things about our country that give me pause: the concept of Manifest Destiny, that we are the new Israel, the new Promised Land, and God meant for this to be. I struggle with our treatment of American Indians; shiploads of Africans sold into slavery; the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II; children at the border often treated as little more than a political football. In "America the Beautiful," every time I sing the phrase, "God, mend thine every flaw," I'm humbled and have to confess that our nation is far from perfect. Not now. Not ever.





In the last several months, especially since the events of January 6, we've been learning more about Christian Nationalism. At its core, Christian Nationalism encourages us to purposely link God and country. It contends that America has been and always should be distinctively Christian. There's no real separation of church and state. Christian nationalism holds that America was founded as a Christian nation; the Founding Fathers were Christians; our nation's laws and founding documents were based on biblical principles, and maybe even directly inspired by God. America's power and prosperity are the result of our faithfulness and obedience to God.

Friends, is that how you see things? As I reflect on Jesus' answer to the Herodians and the Pharisee about taxes, Jesus doesn't seem willing to conflate God and country. In fact, in the case of Rome and Judaism, he seemed to be pushing in the opposite direction: God or country. You cannot serve two masters. Choose this day whom you will serve: God or Caesar?

This is a stretch for many of us. As American Christians, we regularly see God on our side, which means, of course, that God is not on the side of our enemies. But is that the Jesus you know?

It's frighteningly easy to wedge Jesus into our political views, whether for Christian Nationalism or something else. We must be careful. As far as I know, Jesus never ran for office. He never stumped for a political candidate. He never pledged allegiance to a country or a flag. That's not to say these things are unimportant. But to what level do we raise them? For some, it seems, they become the object of ultimate allegiance, and in the process, they become political idolatry.

Jesus focus was not on country but on the kingdom of God. A few chapters after his run-in with the Herodians and Pharisees, he explored a hard question with his followers: "When you someday stand before God, how will you be judged?? Jesus responds: "When I was hungry, did you give me something to eat? When I was thirsty, did you give me something to drink? When

I was sick, did you care for me? When I was a stranger, did you welcome me?" Jesus puts it bluntly: "As you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." How are we to live as Christians? Plain and simple, not by grabbing power at all costs. We are to imitate Jesus and walk in his ways.





Shortly after the chaos at the Capitol on January 6, Tish Harrison Warren wrote an article in Christianity Today. She's an Anglican priest. She urged: "[As followers of Jesus] we have to take up the slow work of repair, of re-forming our faith and our churches around the deep and unchanging truths of Christ. We must reconstruct communities where we can know and speak truth, serve the needy and the poor, love our neighbors, learn to be poor in spirit, rejoice in suffering, and witness to the light of Christ amid the darkness."

Warren got even more specific: "This work will be frustratingly small and local, under the radar, and away from the headlines. It will feel paltry and unimportant in the face of raging nations and widespread ecclesial and national decay. It will be long, risky, and uncertain. But in that meek and humble place, [hopefully] we can again find [our way to Christ], the true Light of the World."

I'm challenged by these thoughts. Here's the question: Can we follow Jesus, even it means going against our favorite politician or political party? As I see it, God doesn't want Republican-followers or Democratic-followers. God wants Jesus-followers.

At some point, Christians will have to choose between God or Caesar. And when that time comes, let's pray that our ultimate allegiance will be to Christ. Amen.

