

Stamped with God's Image
Matthew 22:15-22
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If you have ever felt trapped by a misleading or trick question, then you can relate to what Jesus is facing in today's reading. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is now in Jerusalem within the temple courts, facing his strongest critics and growing opposition to his work among the people. The religious and political authorities have concluded that they need to discredit or remove Jesus somehow. Because of this we find an unusual alliance forming between the Pharisees and the Herodians. Rolf Jacobsen, Dean and Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary describes Pharisees this way.

“The Pharisees—whose name derived from a word meaning “to be separated”—were committed to the pure worship and following of God. Some believed that to follow God purely meant that one needed to risk being separated from the world. Many believed in a strict—textual? — interpretation of the biblical law. They were serious about their faith. They can be described as nationalists who despised the Roman Empire.”ⁱ

The Herodians, on the other hand, are more of a mystery. Dean Jacobsen says this about the Herodians:

“We know very little about them. Josephus does not mention them, and they are only mentioned in this story and briefly in one other (Mark 3:6). But based on their name, I think we can rather safely assume that they had a more laissez faire toward the Roman empire and its system of occupation, and taxation. Their name implies that they were the political minions or theological allies of King Herod—the non-Davidic king who ruled over the land at the pleasure of the Roman emperor.”

Seeing these two typically opposed groups working together would probably be suspicious and the text certainly points out that Jesus, seeing these two groups together caused him to be suspicious too.

That is one of the many dangers when religion and politics mingle to control power or influence over a people. These two opponents decided to eliminate Jesus it was just a matter of time. They both had a lot to lose if Jesus' movement continued – namely power, influence, and control over the people. So, they conspired to try and trip him up. They were hoping that no matter how he answered he would upset much of the crowd.

Here is the trap they have set. If Jesus says that one should pay taxes to the Rome, then the Pharisees and anyone who felt it was wrong to support the Roman occupation would turn away from Jesus. If Jesus said don't pay taxes, then the Herodians could claim that Jesus was an enemy of Rome and have grounds to arrest him and put him on trial. It seems like a no-win situation.

Now remember, Matthew's Gospel, according to historians, was written after the destruction of the temple and defeat of the Jews in 70 C.E. According to author Warren Carter, in his book, "Matthew and Empire" (p. 36, 38).

"Matthew lived in Antioch, Syria, the third largest city of the time (after Rome and Jerusalem), which was directly under the power of the Roman Empire, the Pax Romana. Matthew's contexts alert us that the Gospel writer understood Jesus' teachings as intimately connected to a socio-economic climate built on increased violence for increased social control."ⁱⁱ

For Matthew's audience, the fall of Jerusalem caused distress for Jews and Christians alike. People may have been questioning where was God in all this? Their identity of faith has been displaced and damaged threatened by a new power that claimed to be God, Ceasar and the Roman Empire. This story may

have been written to help people with this question. How do I stay faithful to God under this powerful empire?

In the story, Jesus calls out the trickery happening here giving the people a clue that this was a false premise. Still, he moves ahead to answer their question. He asks to see the coin that is used to pay the taxes to Ceasar. Jesus asks who's head or image is on this coin? The Greek word here is eikon which means icon or image. The crowd answers, "Ceasar". The Hebrew word for eikon would be very familiar to the people. It appears in the Genesis story and again in the ten commandments. Exodus 20:2-3 reads "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol." Idol here means graven or carved image, hence the coin stamped with Ceasar's image, would have been seen as idolatry by some.

According to the Smithsonian Institute this coin, also known as a tribute penny, would probably be stamped with this sentence, "'Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus" and it features the portrait of Emperor Tiberius. So, for the strict Jewish leaders this coin was a form of idolatry. The Pharisees opposed paying the tax for this reason.

The other prominent place this word appears in the Hebrew scriptures is Genesis 1:26-27 reads, "Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness . . . So, God created humans in God's image, in the image of God created them; male and female God created them."

For the readers, Jesus' words are reminding the people that these Roman coins are propaganda, false messages telling them that Ceasar is god, trying to rob them of their true identity in God. When Jesus says, "give to Ceasar what is Ceasar, and Give to God what is God's" Jesus is reminding the people that they are not created in the image of Ceasar, but in the image of God. You belong to

God, not Ceasar.” The value of humans is placed above the value of any tribute or tax to any human authority, including Ceasar.

So, what do we do when we feel trapped by the political systems we live under. It is a struggle we all face when our political system comes into direct conflict with our faith principles.

Once again, I appreciate the writing of Dr. Rolf Jacobsen,

“It seems to me that Jesus’ words: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and give to God the things that are God’s,” at once free us to live with the emperor but to live for God. The kingdoms of this earth all around us trap us in their sickening realities. But the kingdom of God—which is not of this world—is even now breaking into this world and freeing us to live lives of faith in God and love of God and neighbor.”

May we honor the sacredness of all humans for we are all made in the image of God. There is no second class or lesser class that voids our sacred identity in God. We are one people, one race – the human race.

Let us meditate on Jesus’ words from the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:43-45 this coming week.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be called children of heaven.”

ⁱ Rev. Dr. Rolf Jacobson, Dean of Faculty; Professor of Old Testament; A.N. Rogness Chair in Scripture, Theology, and Ministry. Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minn. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/trap-questions>

ⁱⁱ Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire* (Harrisburg, PN: Trinity Press International, 2001), 36, 38. Sited from: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/sermon-development/disorientation-into-matthews-world-preaching-matthew-part-i>