

“A Simple Answer”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him 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. (Matthew 22:15-22)

The scripture makes it plain. This was a trap. Two opposing political and religious groups, both of which thought Jesus was a political troublemaker who needed to go, saw a rare opportunity to join forces in a plot to put him in his place.

As a matter of faith and politics, the Pharisees resented Roman paganism and governmental control. They wanted to be free of those corrupting influences. At the same time, also as a matter of faith and politics, the Herodians were Jewish adherents who supported Herod. Yes, they knew their king was a puppet, that Rome pulled the strings and he mostly danced, but the dance was good for them. They were making money. They had influence. The Herodians liked the cozy political relationship with Rome, because they were profiting from it. Jesus was a thorn in the side for both groups, because he was preaching a gospel that was above both religion and politics – an allegiance to God and God alone.

So the two parties formed a rare and temporary alliance. Together, they sent operatives to find Jesus and press him publicly to answer a simple question: Is it right to pay taxes to Rome? If Jesus said “yes,” the Pharisees could brand him as a traitor to the Jewish people, a pawn in the pocket of the Roman occupation. But if he said “no,” the Herodians could run to the Roman governor and report him as a rebel instigator. Either way, Jesus would be in big trouble. Either way, problem solved.

But Jesus saw the hypocritical trap from a mile away. Instead of giving them that simple answer, Jesus asked them to look at a coin... one much older than this one, but very much the same. On that old coin was a portrait of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. On this one is a portrait of our first president, George Washington. This one also has four words stamped next to Washington’s neck: “In God We Trust.”

Interestingly, that phrase is a relatively new addition. President Dwight Eisenhower signed the bill into law in 1955, and the first currency to bear the four-word motto were circulated in 1957. From the beginning, it was unclear how much of the effort was driven by faith and how much was rooted in politics, but it was clearly a mixture of both. “While the sentiment of trust in God is universal and timeless,” the bill’s primary sponsor said,



“these particular four words ‘In God We Trust’ are indigenous to our country... In these days when imperialistic and materialistic communism seeks to attack and destroy freedom, we should continually look for ways to strengthen the foundations of our freedom.”¹ In the beginning, were these words more about spiritual faith or more about Cold War politics? There is no simple answer.

So, you see that old coin and this much newer one both press the same question: Who does this belong to? And below that, an even deeper question: Who do we belong to?

As a preacher, I learned early on that people have widely disparate expectations for a sermon. I remember one Sunday in the first church I served when a man shook my hand after the service and said, “My favorite sermons are the ones that tell us what to do.” He had grown up with ministers who tended to draw an unambiguous, black-and-white ethical principle from a passage of scripture. No surprise, many of those ethical principles spoke to issues that we would call political: reproductive rights... acts of war... sexual orientation. That man was looking for a simple answer. Tell me what I should believe. Tell me what I should do.

The problem is, when it comes to ethics, there is no simple answer. For most issues, there is no clear “yes” or “no” answer, no one-size-fits-all ethical strategy. Human situations are more complex than that, messier than that.

Other people are looking for a different kind of simplicity in preaching. They say a minister should never preach about politics from the pulpit. They prefer that preaching stay over in a corner reserved for purely personal, internal questions. Comfort me in my grief, but do not venture into matters that are being debated in the political world. Help me with my relationships, but do not challenge public morality. Sound preaching, according to this view, should be an escape from the world, not a confrontation of it.

But it is never that simple. God’s Word is notoriously dismissive of the nice little lines we want to erect between God and the way we want to live. The parables Jesus taught were always challenging worldly views on economics, politics, ethics, and power. God is not standing in a corner waiting for someone to ask him to dance. From the Garden of Eden, through the Hebrew prophets, the preaching of Jesus, to the ethics of Paul and all the way to the vision of the end of the world in Revelation, God is always pushing and pulling the world away from an old way of life to a new way of life.

So let’s get back to the coin. The Pharisees wanted to squeeze the preaching and teaching of Jesus into a box – reduce it all to a simple coin flip. “Heads or tails, Jesus. Which will it be? Because either way, you lose.”

Jesus, however, flipped the coin on them. “Whose head is on the coin?” he asked.

“The emperor’s,” they answered.

“So give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor,” Christ said, “and give to God the things that belong to God.”

It was a simple answer that was not simple at all. On the face of it (pun intended), the answer Jesus gave might seem to suggest that all of it is owed to Caesar. If his face is on it, it must be his. But no Herodian, no Pharisee, no person of faith would say that is the ultimate answer. Surely, something is owed to God. The hard part is in deciding how much. How

¹ “The Legislation Placing ‘In God We Trust’ on National Currency,” <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/The-legislation-placing-In-God-We-Trust-on-national-currency/>

much of ourselves are we investing in the power and wisdom of the world? How much of the leftovers are we rendering to God? And if we are giving God our leftovers, what does that say about how we are living? It was a simple answer, that was not at all simple.

I have many hopes for preaching, and most of it is aspirational. But I will say that one of my biggest hopes is that, each sermon we hear gets us all a little closer to a recognition that, in this world, God is above any other power... and that ultimately, everything is owed to God... and everything will be rendered to God.

The life of faith is a constant challenge ... a constant challenge to discern and sort out where our loyalties actually lie. Are we setting our minds on human things or divine things? And this coin, following the teaching of Jesus, poses the ultimate question: who does this belong to? Who do we belong to? Are we putting our trust in a fallible human government, or is our trust really and truly in God?

I hate to disappoint you, but I cannot tell you how to figure that out. Each of us have to decide for ourselves what we will render unto Caesar, and what we will render unto God. We have to do that every day, even with every breath.

However, while I cannot tell you how to make these decisions for yourself, I can say that God's Word does call us to a new way of life, a way of life that follows a different set of rules than the ones the world of Caesar follows. Faith is not just a massage chair. It is more than a shoulder to cry on. It is not something we can relegate to a quiet corner while we embrace the ways of the world. On the contrary, faith is a calling to engage the world... to confront with love and with boldness what is wrong... to speak the truth about what is clearly broken and try our best to make it better. It is a call to always seek the light, no matter how deep the darkness is. In short, the Christian life demands much, much more from us than a coin flip. It demands everything we have to give.

And I know that is not at all simple.

But that is the sermon. ***Amen.***