

Title: A Loaded Question with a Loaded Answer

Subtitle: A classic struggle between realism and idealism.

As the middle child of six boys, I often found myself caught in the middle of family conflicts. When brothers disagreed, I was usually close enough to feel the tension from both sides. Looking back, I realize those experiences unexpectedly prepared me for ministry, because life in the family of God is not always free from disagreement. Churches, communities, and nations often divide over competing loyalties, convictions, and visions for what is right. This is precisely the world Jesus steps into in today's Gospel.

Matthew tells us that the Pharisees set out *“to entrap Jesus in his words.”*¹ Their question about paying taxes to Caesar is not a sincere search for truth. It is a carefully crafted trap designed to force Jesus into a no-win situation. Luke's account makes their intentions even clearer: for they *“... pretended to be sincere, hoping to catch him in His words, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.”*²

What makes the encounter remarkable is who joins the conspiracy. The Pharisees and the Herodians were not natural allies. In many respects, they represented opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum.

The Herodians were political realists. They accepted Roman rule and believed that Israel's security and prosperity depended upon cooperating with Rome and maintaining law and order under Herod's rule. Stability, compromise, and political accommodation were their guiding principles.

The Pharisees, however, understood themselves as idealistic in their commitment to God's law, with zealous, steadfast allegiance to Israel's covenant heritage. Many viewed Roman taxation as a humiliating reminder that God's people lived under foreign domination. They sought faithfulness through resistance, preserving Israel's distinctiveness against outside influence.

¹ Matthew 22:15

² Luke 20:20

Yet here they stand together. And why? Because both believed that Jesus was dangerous and untrustworthy. What neither side could accomplish alone, they attempt together.

And that may be the first surprise of this passage. Opponents who could not agree with one another suddenly find unity in opposing Him.

But Jesus refuses to be captured by either side's agenda. He will not grant Caesar an authority that belongs only to God. Nor will He become a political revolutionary by outright rejecting the tax. While both sides demand that He choose between their competing visions, Jesus reveals a kingdom that transcends them both.

It has been commonly supposed that those who speak boldly of hope and faith in morally and politically turbulent times must either be a simpleton or unacquainted with the facts. So, to avoid being either naïve or uninformed, let's look again at what is going on.

The trap set for Jesus was a classic double bind. For the Pharisees, the tax represented a test of covenant faithfulness. Was one willing to acknowledge the claims of Caesar, or would one remain loyal to the God of Israel alone?

For the Herodians, however, the tax reflected a practical reality. Rome ruled the world, and paying the tax was simply the cost of maintaining peace and order within that system.

But Jesus refuses to accept the terms of the debate. Instead, He asks for the coin used to pay the tax. Holding up a denarius, He asks, "Whose image is this, and whose inscription?"

The question seems simple, but it exposes the heart of the issue. The coin's symbols and title reinforced the emperor's authority, while the inscription beneath his image, "divine Augustus," expressed a claim that faithful Jews viewed as blasphemous.

But if a coin bearing Caesar's image belongs to Caesar, what about human beings who bear God's image?

From the opening pages of Genesis, Scripture declares that men and women are created in the image and likeness of God. The denarius may carry the imprint of an earthly ruler, but every human life carries the imprint of the Creator Himself. Caesar may lay claim to coins, taxes, and political authority. God lays claim to hearts, minds, souls, and lives.

Suddenly the question is no longer, “Should we pay the tax?” The real question is, “To whom do we belong?” And to whom do we owe our highest allegiance?

Jesus turns the conversation on its head. His concern reaches far beyond the payment of a tax. The real issue is not what belongs to Caesar, but what belongs to God. A coin stamped with Caesar’s image can be given back to Caesar, but men and women, stamped with God’s image, are called to give themselves fully to Him.

This is why the passage remains so challenging. We often focus on questions about Caesar, carefully calculating what we owe to governments, parties, and causes, while withholding from God what is rightfully His. But Jesus calls us to remember that no earthly power deserves our ultimate devotion. Our highest allegiance belongs to the God whose image is stamped upon every part of our being.

But what does it actually look like to surrender ourselves to God? And what does it mean to live as men and women who bear His image?

Our Old Testament lesson from Exodus sheds light on these questions. It comes during a turbulent period in Israel’s history, when the people had abandoned all self-restraint and turned from God’s ways. As God’s anger is kindled against their sin, Moses is left wrestling with how to lead the nation through the crisis.

Standing before the Lord, he prays, “**Show me your ways, that I may know you.**”³ This is more than a request for guidance in a moment of crisis. Nor is Moses merely seeking information about God. He is seeking God Himself. Amid uncertainty, Moses recognizes that his greatest need is not a plan but the Lord’s presence.

Notice the connection Moses makes between God’s ways and God’s character. After asking to know God’s ways, he pleads, “**Please, show me your glory.**”⁴ God answers by revealing His glory through the proclamation of His name and character. Moses understands that walking in God’s ways means knowing God’s heart. The more deeply he learns God’s ways, the more clearly he sees who God is. Obedience, therefore, is not merely conformity to a set of rules; it is the pathway to deeper fellowship with the One who gave them.

³ Exodus 33:13

⁴ Exodus 33:18

This prayer is remarkable because Moses is not a spiritual novice. He has already encountered God in the burning bush. He has witnessed the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and God's faithful provision in the wilderness. Scripture even says that the Lord spoke with Moses *"face to face, as one speaks to a friend."*⁵ Yet even after these extraordinary experiences, Moses longs for more. He has not become satisfied with what he already knows of God. Instead, the closer he draws to the Lord, the more he desires to know Him. His example reminds us that spiritual maturity is not measured by how much we know about God, but by how deeply we long to know Him.

That same longing should mark the lives of those who bear God's image today. In a world filled with competing voices demanding our loyalty, our first prayer should not be, "Lord, tell me whose side to take." Rather, it should be, "Lord, show me Your ways, that I may know You." Before we seek God's answers, we must seek God's heart.

For when we truly know God's ways, we begin to reflect God's character. And when we reflect God's character, we render to God what already belongs to Him: our hearts, our minds, our decisions, and our lives. The coin may bear Caesar's image and therefore belong to Caesar. But we bear the image of God, and therefore we belong to Him.

As your pastor, I have tried to stay clear of party politics. But this does not mean that I am apolitical. I try to avoid anything that would persuade church members to choose one political party over another. I have taken this stand because I believe both sides have legitimate concerns that must be balanced. With this view, I personally believe that a healthy two-party system is essential to a functional democracy. I have seen the destructive effects when the Church takes sides with one political party and opposes the other. And when it has done so, we have lost members. I also take this stand because the power of God's kingdom, through the Holy Spirit's ruling influence in every believer's heart, can help each member grow up into Christ with wisdom and discernment.

Admittedly, understanding how God rules in the affairs of nations and how we should engage in the political process is perplexing. But God promises that if we ask for wisdom, He will grant it generously.

⁵ Exodus 33:11

One of the most important lessons from the German Church of the 1930s is that the Church is in greatest danger when it confuses allegiance to God with allegiance to a political movement or nation.

When Hitler came to power, many German Christians welcomed him because he promised national renewal, order, and moral stability. Over time, large portions of the Protestant Church allowed nationalist ideology to influence everything, including their theology. The pro-Nazi “German Christians” movement sought to make the Church an instrument of state policy rather than a witness to the Kingdom of God. By contrast, leaders such as Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the Church, not the state or its ruler.

The temptation is always present to make an ideology, party, nation, or leader the object of ultimate trust. The German Church discovered that when political loyalty becomes ultimate loyalty, discipleship is not only compromised, it is corrupted.

In the end, the tragedy of much of the German Church in the 1930s was not that Christians engaged the political questions of their day. (Faithfulness requires that we care deeply about the world God has placed us in.) The tragedy was that many let political loyalties shape their understanding of God rather than letting their knowledge of God shape their political commitments. The same temptation confronts every generation. We are often drawn to the false security of certainty, control, and ideological triumph when God calls us to something greater: a deeper knowledge of God, as Moses sought and found in Exodus 33.

Seeking God’s ways does not lead us to withdraw from the world. Jesus calls His followers to be salt and light. As salt, we are called to persevere in resisting evil. As light, we are meant to expose the darkness. Our ultimate allegiance is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So let’s *“strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”*⁶ Amen.

⁶ Book of Common Prayer, The Baptismal Covenant, p. 305

Reflection Questions

- As you reflect on this incident in Christ's life, identify some of the conflicts between this world and God's kingdom, which are of particular concern to you. And as you reflect on how the sacred and secular are so sharply defined and divided in our contemporary society, how can we as Christians genuinely live in obedience to God?