

**GIVE TO CAESAR...GIVE TO GOD**  
**Matthew 22:15-22**

**Dranesville UMC**  
**Sunday, October 18, 2020**

Proof texting can be a problem for believers. The term, proof texting, may be a new one for some of you. What it means is to take a passage or verse of Scripture out of its original context and apply it in a situation for which it may never have been intended or envisioned. Today's Gospel Lesson is one of those passages that has fallen victim to proof texting on a number of occasions. I often referred to it as I made decisions about how to live my life. Only years later did I come to realize that I had misused it.

This is also a passage that comes into play during election seasons and other times when persons are being considered for elected or appointed offices. I will spend some time on that aspect in a little while.

First, let's walk through the passage to see what it says and doesn't say. By doing that, we may have a better idea of what it does mean for all of us.

In the past three weeks, we have looked at three consecutive parables which Jesus told while confronting and being confronted by the Jewish leaders. These leaders had demanded to know who Jesus thought he was and why he thought he had authority to do and say the things he did. He was very much on the offensive as he denounced the leaders for their hypocrisy.

In today's lesson, the leaders try to seize the upper hand. They want to question Jesus to try to trip him up with his answers to a loaded question.

Before we look at the question, let's take a look at those asking the question. Matthew tells us that a group of Pharisees and Herodians came together to interrogate Jesus. These are two groups who could not be more different, could not dislike one another more, but had decided to put aside their differences in order to try to get rid of Jesus.

The Pharisees were a group of Jewish lay men who spent their time studying the Law as laid out in what we know as the Old Testament. Based on their study, they added specific regulations of their own which were intended to help believers avoid breaking

the Law. The reasoning was that, if Jews obeyed all of the 613 lesser rules the Pharisees created, there would be no risk of inadvertently violating any of the Biblical laws. Pharisees were opposed to the Roman occupation and chafed at the thought of having to pay taxes to Rome; taxes which helped support a pagan religion and allowed the wealthy and powerful Roman elite to live lavishly while people in much of the rest of the Empire struggled to get by.

As Americans, we might be able to understand the Pharisees' objection to taxation by a foreign power. The Romans had seized their land and then demanded the conquered people pay for the "privilege" of having Roman occupation troops on their soil. That must have been galling. Our nation began as a revolt against what many colonists believed to be unjust taxation by the British. There was also resentment about the colonists being compelled to provide food and lodging to British soldiers who were regarded by many as occupation forces similar to the Roman troops in Palestine.

There had been a revolt against Roman taxation when Jesus was a small boy in 6-7 AD. Led by a man named Judas, it was quickly crushed by the Romans. Many of those who took part in the revolt, if they were not killed outright, were tried and then crucified throughout the land as a way of driving home a very powerful message - Rome expected everyone to pay their taxes.

Another comparison between the Palestinians and the American Revolution is the fact that a minority of the people of Palestine revolted against Rome. During the American Revolution, about 1/3 of the colonists favored separation from Great Britain. Another 1/3 remained loyal to Britain and the remaining 1/3 didn't really care one way or the other.

To give the Pharisees their due, their original motivation in creating all these additional rules may have been good and honorable. The problems arose when the Pharisees often failed to keep their own rules or were very heavy-handed in their efforts to get others to follow them. For rather obvious reasons, the people both respected and resented the Pharisees.

Let's look at the Herodians. This group is seldom mentioned in Scripture or other historical writings. What we know about them is that they were loyal to the Romans in the hope that Rome would permit the descendants of Herod the Great to restore the monarchy throughout the land of Israel. As it was, Israel had been divided into four regions. Three of them were each ruled by one of Herod's sons. They all answered to

the Roman prefect who also ruled the fourth region. At this time, Pontius Pilate was the prefect. The Herodians supported the Roman taxation system. When it comes to matters of faith, the Herodians were ambivalent. Most were not Jews, in the truest sense; so they weren't bothered by much that Jesus said or did.

The concern that united Pharisees and Herodians was their perception that Jesus either was or could easily become a catalyst to stir up the masses to revolt against Rome or, to a lesser degree, could stir up the people in such a way as to undermine either group's base of power. They had to do something to prevent those things from happening.

Matthew tells us members of the two groups approach Jesus and speak all manner of flattering words to him. In their minds, these statements may have been little more than empty, meaningless words intended to cause Jesus to let his guard down in order to be entrapped more easily. They had no idea how truthful they were. Jesus' integrity was unassailable. He taught the true way of God and did not hold back, no matter who his audience might be.

Those are convicting thoughts for me. Jesus didn't worry about what others thought of him personally. As his followers, why do we often excessively worry about what others think? Jesus told it like it was. Why don't we? Why do we often hold back? We may tell ourselves we don't want to hurt other peoples' feelings; but is that really the case?

Now comes the question to Jesus: "...[I]s it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" This is not a question in which the ones asking are looking for information in order to learn something useful. This is a question intended to do one thing - force Jesus to say something which can be used against him.

The question was a brilliant one that seemingly had no safe answer. If Jesus answered that it **was** right to pay this tax, which was required annually of all individuals, other than Roman citizens, throughout the Empire, his seeming support for taxation would have alienated him from many of his followers who deeply resented this unfair financial burden. The Pharisees would have Jesus in a position that would eliminate him as a threat to their power.

If Jesus states that it **isn't** right to pay the tax, he would be tried and found guilty of sedition; especially given the number of witnesses who could testify against him. The penalty for sedition was death by crucifixion. You can bet that the Herodians in the crowd would have been all over that.

Jesus is not about to be hemmed in. He calls his questioners exactly what they were - hypocrites. Rather than answer their question, he asks them to show him a coin. He's about to expose their hypocrisy.

Someone in the crowd produces a Roman denarius, the coin used to pay the tax. Jesus is now like a good trial lawyer who knows you should never ask a question under circumstances like this if you don't know the answer with absolute certainty. He asks, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

They replied, "Caesar's."

The hypocrisy is exposed. Jesus has them and they don't yet realize it. The coin is the key. This particular coin would have the image of the current emperor on it. On one side would be the words, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus." Caesar Augustus was believed to be a god. A common title then given to Tiberius was "Son of God." The other side of the coin would have the words, "High Priest:" meaning that Tiberius was the high priest of the pagan Roman religion which worshiped his late father Augustus as one of many gods.

The coin was considered to be a graven image, a symbol of idolatry. This would be a violation of the Second of the Ten Commandments. The Jews were not to make or possess any images of or pertaining to any god or gods. The Pharisees, the ones who tried to impose and enforce hundreds of petty rules on the people, were ignoring one of the most basic of the major Commandments. They were so caught up in trying to catch Jesus in wrongdoing that they paid little or no attention to their own transgressions.

Another factor comes into play here. Although Matthew doesn't tell us this, the Gospel of Luke states that this exchange between Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians took place on the grounds of the Temple. This makes the hypocrisy with the coin even more egregious. Roman coins were not permitted anywhere near the Temple. That's why there were moneychangers. They enabled the people to trade Roman money for local coins which could be used when making monetary sacrifices. The Temple should never be defiled with foreign money. Jesus' adversaries seem to have either forgotten or ignored that detail in their attempt to pin him down.

OK. So this group has proven themselves hypocrites. They have still asked Jesus a seemingly inescapable question. Jesus then proceeds to blow them out of the water with his response. His answer, most accurately stated in the New International Version,

reads, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Did Jesus say it was OK to pay the tax or not? He didn’t answer the question as asked. He said something much more meaningful and his questioners knew it.

One more detail about the coin: Because it bore the image of Caesar, any Roman coins were considered to be the property of the Emperor. Jesus is simply saying, “If this coin, which bears the Emperor’s image, belongs to the Emperor, then give it back to him.” That only sounds logical. Give Caesar back his property.

The second part of Jesus’ answer would have been convicting for his adversaries: “Give to God what is God’s.” The Roman coin bore the image of Caesar and belonged to Caesar. All people are made in and bear the image of God. In fact, in the early Church, humans were referred to as “God’s coins;” since humans bear the image of God. With that in mind, one can quickly ask and answer the question, “What should we give to God?” The obvious answer is, “Everything is his, so he should get it all.” Jesus did not place Caesar and God on equal footing. He didn’t call for the overthrow of the Emperor; he simply identified the believer’s basic and essential allegiance.

Now I can finally get around to explaining how this passage has been misused and misunderstood in our time. In this country, we hear a lot about the separation of Church and State; often from people who don’t know what they’re talking about. They cite this verse as some sort of proof that faith and government should be completely separate or somehow compartmentalized in our lives.

To some extent, I lived this out. For the past 50 consecutive years I served the nation for 24 years and then the Church for 26. I had mistakenly compartmentalized the nation and the Church in my mind. Knowing and serving Christ should have had priority in my life for all those years; but I can’t honestly say that was always the case when I was on active duty. In my mind I was giving back to Caesar and then giving to God; not fully understanding or living out this concept of bearing God’s image and owing full allegiance to God under any and all circumstances.

So how are we to understand Jesus’ teaching? Let’s keep a few things in mind:

1. Jesus did not come as a political or military threat to the established rulers of the world. That’s true today.
2. Those who respond to Jesus’ kingdom invitation will continue to have obligations to the governing authorities.
3. God as Creator has sovereign right over creation and everything in it.

Let's try to think through what all of this means; especially as we face an election in a few weeks. Devotion to God demands a higher allegiance to Him than to anything else; but it is not an excuse to avoid other responsibilities that do not conflict with it.

What's the appropriate response to living in a society whose beliefs differ from our own? We need to critically evaluate and withstand its claims; but we don't censor those claims from being heard or boycott all participation in society. This is the idea of "being in the world, but not of the world."

How do we live in a consumer-oriented society? There is nothing in Scripture or the teachings of the Church to prohibit having a decent standard of living; but we also need to think of the needs of others when we make decisions about how we spend our money. We should think of those less fortunate and support those who work for justice.

We can dress comfortably while purchasing from companies who pay fair wages and have healthy working conditions. We can drive a decent car - when we are unable to walk or maybe take public transportation to our destination. In other words, we participate in society while considering our impact on others. This is just the opposite of being obsessed with "keeping up with the Joneses."

One thing we might consider as voters. I have heard, and I'm sure you have too, political candidates who, in one breath, profess their faith and declare how important their faith is and, in the next breath, try to reassure voters that their faith will have nothing to do with how they will carry out the duties of the office they are seeking. This flies directly in the face of the lesson for today. Christ has our primary allegiance in every phase of our lives. We can't set aside our work life, our time in the classroom, our recreational time. We bear God's image all the time.

This passage does not answer many questions about subjects like our obligations regarding taxation, military service and other aspects of citizenship. It gives space to political arrangements with the reminder that we all bear God's image and belong to God.