

The Preaching of God's Word
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Sermon Title: Taxes

Sermon Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Matt. 22:15 ¶ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.

Matt. 22:16 And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.

Matt. 22:17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

Matt. 22:18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?

Matt. 22:19 Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

Matt. 22:20 And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"

Matt. 22:21 They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Matt. 22:22 When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Main Point: The Pharisees demonstrate one of the ways that politics can be used to distract people from the truths of Christ.

Outline:

1. A Revolutionary Question
2. A Revolutionary Answer

Introduction

I was marveling with the elders this week about just how perfect God's timing is. Monday afternoon was April 15th – tax day. And what was our sermon text for the upcoming Sunday? Well the text we just read. God just has such impeccable timing. God picked the very week when we are feeling the most broke, and the least excited about paying taxes to have a sermon on this challenging topic!

More than any time in my own memory *everything* seems to be politicized. You can't shop at Target, eat at Chic-fil-a, or drink a Bud Light without somebody assuming something about your politics.

Everything we eat, drink, and purchase is now scrutinized by somebody for whom it's a marker of political positioning. As is so often the case, this is not a new thing.

Scripture tells us that there is nothing new under the sun. The struggles and problems of our own days really are just re-enactments of events that came before. We take the problems our forefathers had, and we seemingly rehearse them again and again.

This conversation between Jesus and the Herodians here shows us that 2024 is not the first time that a seemingly simple question about politics could be used to torpedo efforts to share the Gospel.

It's not totally unusual to see churches that outright endorse candidates from the pulpit, back ballot initiatives, push for specific legislation, and even put political candidates in the pulpit to speak on Sunday mornings.

And as conscientious Christians we have to ask the question: how closely wed should we as Christians be to political activism?

How closely should politics and religion be related to each other? How does *Jesus* handle the temptation to go from being a religious teacher to being a political revolutionary?

Well we'll see the answer today under two points. The first point is "A Revolutionary Question." And the second point is "A Revolutionary Answer."

1. A Revolutionary Question (v. 13-14)

The first thing we see today is a Revolutionary Question.

After the Herodians try to flatter Jesus (which doesn't work), the question is asked in verse 14: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" "Should we pay them, or should we not?"

Now, I say this is a Revolutionary Question. I do not think that a question as simple as whether paying taxes is legitimate is *itself* very revolutionary. But remember. These men don't care about taxes, not really. Not ultimately. All of this is a pretense to trap Jesus, not a serious inquiry into fiscal policy.

When I say that the question is revolutionary, what I mean is that it's a question that's intended to use politics to either divide people from Jesus religiously, or to at least support the political cause of the Herodians. The question is literally revolutionary. To understand that, we need to grasp the context of Jesus' time.

When Jesus was maybe 5-10 years old the Romans put a small tax in place in Israel. It wasn't a *big* tax mind you, but the symbolism was clear to Israel: you are under *us*. It was about control and subservience. And when the tax was put into place there was a political revolt. A man named Judas the Galilean led the revolt. In this revolt he said that Jews should not pay the tax, he kicked out foreigners, and they cleansed the temple. He also declared that God is the king of Israel, not Caesar.

Now of course, this was just a few groups of men with a few weapons, and it didn't go very well for them. They didn't stand a chance against the might of the Roman empire. They

were crushed. This was about 25 years before this conversation took place here in Matthew.

And by Jesus' day there had formed these two groups: the Herodians and the Zealots. The Herodians are the ones asking the questions here. They were supporters of the Roman empire from within Israel. These folks are sniffing for disloyalty to Rome or some hint of revolution in Jesus, and if they find it they'll have an excuse to turn him over.

The other group was less organized, but they were the zealots. These people wanted to carry on the work of Judas the Galilean. They wanted war, and they wanted Rome out of Israel once and for all. Eventually this group basically became like terrorists who took over Jerusalem and ended up forcing a war between Israel and Rome. And they got Jerusalem totally destroyed in 70 AD.

But throughout the Gospels it seems like most people expect Jesus to become the leader of these zealots. But of course he never does. He refuses to.

So the Herodians ask Jesus a question that's intended to cause a religious division. After all, if Jesus gives the politically wrong answer, half of the crowd will dislike him and probably not listen to his message anymore.

If he says, "No way, don't pay taxes," then he's *literally* a revolutionary who is calling for an armed revolt.

If he says, "Yes, pay the tax," then it's like he's bowing down to the authorities along with the Herodians, which many of his listeners aren't open to. They saw the Herodians as traitors – turncoats.

But notice this. This is key, and if you don't see this, you really miss a glaring issue that we still need to learn from today: political debate becomes a tool of the enemies of Jesus to get him off-message and to create new enemies. To put it in statistical terms, they mean to splinter Jesus' base. For the moment Jesus is a spiritual teacher with a spiritual message about real spiritual heart change.

But his enemies know that **if they can transform him into a political leader they can either weaken his influence or strengthen their own authority.**

So why is this a revolutionary question? Because one way or another they're trying to trap him into becoming a revolutionary. That's point number one. A Revolutionary Question.

2. A Revolutionary Answer (v. 15-17)

The second point today is “a revolutionary answer.”

Jesus responds to the question by questioning their motives, first: “Why put me to the test?” He doesn’t let them get away with thinking they’ve pulled the wool over his eyes. They haven’t. But he doesn’t wait for a response. He keeps going.

His response is to look at that Roman currency and to say, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”

When Jesus says this he’s saying, “What does Caesar have a claim on? He may very well have a valid claim on our money.”

And Jesus does answer the question about taxation here in a way that’s qualified. He doesn’t say “Yes, pay your taxes,” but he does force his listeners to make a value judgment and then answer the question for themselves. “What do I owe to Caesar?” This that has Caesar’s image is his, right?

Then Jesus says, “and to God the things that are God’s.” What does *God* have a claim on? Caesar’s image is on the money. He has a claim on the money. What is God’s image on? Us. God has his image on us. Genesis tells us, “God made man in his own image.” So Jesus is saying, essentially, “**give Caesar’s money to him, and give God your whole person.**” That’s what belongs to each. God calls for WAY more than Caesar does.

One thing Jesus does in his answer is, he refuses to pick either option that the have been set before him.

For the Herodians here the political choices are black and white. You either pay taxes or you don’t. Which is it, Jesus?

Jesus doesn’t accept the false dichotomy. He doesn’t call for a revolt, but he also doesn’t call for the people to just roll over and give Caesar everything. He doesn’t call for patriotism or revolution.

Why might this be? Well we know that Jesus’ priorities are in another place entirely. Jesus says, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my disciples would have fought for me.” If I can put it this way, Jesus lives in a political world, and yet his kingdom transcends the politics of the day.

The message here for us is NOT that we are commanded by God to be aloof or unconcerned or removed from politics. Individual Christians ought to be as invested in political issues as they are comfortable with, but without it becoming an idol to them. But notice how Jesus won’t be pulled into these things.

There are political implications to God's Word. Scripture has things to say about what is righteous and what is unrighteous. Right?

We know, for example, that some soldiers met Jesus in Luke 3:14 and asked, "What shall we do?" and Jesus said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." He had instruction from God's word for someone who served in a political and military capacity.

St. Augustine, way back in the 4th century, was living in a crumbling Roman empire. And he said that the people of God are at once citizens two cities: the city of man, and the city of God. And we live in both.

And so Jesus also isn't calling for us to become Amish... to escape from the world into an enclave. Notice that he didn't call for the soldiers to throw down their weapons. He didn't call us to be people who are politically uninvolved. He's not calling for all Christians to stop caring about what happens in the common realm... in that public place that believers and unbelievers all share together. We should be willing to participate there.

But here's what he *does* do: even as he permits the Christian to engage in a life of politics, he doesn't drag his *church* into such things. The mission of the church is more specific and important, and focused on the spiritual lives of people.

Again: if the church is faithful it will say things from God's word that absolutely will affect how we politically engage, but that political engagement does not become the church's work, it becomes the Christian's work.

Do you see that distinction between the church and the Christian? There's overlap on the venn diagram between the two, but they don't lay over each other perfectly. One has a mission that doesn't necessarily belong to the other.

Another thing that Jesus does here is, **He makes a distinction between God's claims and the claims of government.** We owe one thing to Caesar. And we owe another thing to God. God is not Caesar. Caesar is not God. They aren't the same, and they aren't to be confused. When they are concerned with different things, we give each what is owed to them.

But God and Caesar sometimes overlap each other in their claims, and when that happens and they come into conflict, Scripture says that God gets what he is owed rather than Caesar.

For example, when the government tells the Apostles to stop preaching Jesus, they keep preaching Jesus, right? Their response in the book of Acts was, "We must obey God rather than men."

And so what does that mean? It means always obey God when the choice is between God and Caesar. This is why some of the earliest persecution of Christians called on Christians to worship Caesar and punished them when they would not give incense in sacrifice to him.

Ultimately, the call to give Caesar what is Caesar's does have its limits. But that is a different sermon, I suppose.

Caesar and God normally operate in different spheres, right? God's realm is spiritual.

Caesar (when he does his job) is concerned with making sure that the common places that we share don't descend into anarchy. That's one of the things Paul tells us in Romans 13. It's why he bears the sword.

And so we submit to the government, not because the government is perfect, but because it is what God has put in place for our temporal well-being.

But the second point today is that Jesus also gives a revolutionary answer.

Conclusion

There's something here to offend all of us, I think.

Because Jesus steps on *everybody's* toes. He's in this two-party situation. It's assume he'll have to side with one party over the other. If you asked the Herodians they'd say one is angelic, and one is demonic.

Christians very much feel that pressure in our own day. Man, do I feel it. "Which party are you with? Are you with the angels, or the demons?" There's rarely an opportunity to be somewhere in between.

You're either all in, or you're a squish. You're either a RINO or a DINO. You're either one of us or one of them.

Well look at Jesus. He offends everyone. Jesus stepped all over the Herodians' toes with his answer, doesn't he? Because in worldly terms their view of things was either you're a friend of Caesar or an enemy of Caesar. There's no such thing as the sidelines.

And Jesus stepped all over the toes of the zealots too, because he *didn't* call for revolution, and in fact called them in some sense to recognize this secular authority.

Jesus' words had something to offend everyone here.

And so I want to make **two applications** here today.

The first is this: in a world where everyone tells us that we *must* choose between two political choices, it is not always wrong to decide to side-step political division.

Think of what happens: the herodians and the zealots both have their problems, and I suspect the people around Jesus had good points for why Jesus should really side with one

of them over the other. But what Jesus shows us here is that we don't always have to buy into that false dichotomy. There is room for genuine political disagreement among people who truly love Christ and who hold to his word. Based on Jesus' answer here in the text, you could perhaps be a Herodian, or a zealot, and also a follower of Jesus.

After all, he has a former zealot (Simon), and a former tax collector (Matthew) among his followers! There's room for these people.

Look at the balance that makes him stand out. Jesus doesn't make Caesar or Israel ultimate. These earthly kingdoms make demands of us, but God is over them, and is greater than both and more important than both.

But that doesn't just relativize everything. It doesn't mean that all bets are off, and it doesn't mean that there aren't right and wrong answers to some political question. It doesn't mean that we're supposed to pretend to be aloof from the problems of the world around us. It also doesn't mean that there is no such thing as righteousness or virtue in the public square. But it does suggest that if Jesus won't be dragged into political mud fights, then as his followers we shouldn't feel bullied or pressured into entering into them ourselves.

The second point of application I would make is this: politics can be an incredible distraction from the Gospel work that God has given us to do. Jesus comes preaching the kingdom of God. A kingdom that he told Pilate, was not worldly.

Notice the trap. The idea is that if the Herodians can get Jesus to talk politics they can distract from, redirect, and de-legitimize his message for many of his listeners.

Not only can a fixation with the kingdoms of this world become an incredible black hole for our time and our energy and our attention, but it can actually damage the work God has given us that is meant to be the higher priority. We see it here actually.

This can be an issue in our day, too. In their recent book *The Great Dechurching*, Jim Davis and Michael Graham talk about the younger generations, some of whom have left their parents and grandparents' churches, not because of theological disagreement, but because they perceive the churches to be more about politics and voting than about an eternal and transcendent message. For many young people, it seems like their families are more excited about earthly kingdoms than about the eternal kingdom.

Now, I do not believe Christians or churches ought to do what they do based solely on the question of what will keep people from leaving or will draw more people in. Churches should not be guided by exit interviews.

But perhaps we should consider that there has been an element of truth in what some of these departures were talking about. Many church members are far more excited about

voting than about God. That's not good. So we should consider that perhaps we do often seem more excited to talk politics than to talk Christ.

Perhaps we do get more fired up about listening to a political talk show than we do about hearing a sermon. Maybe in some cases these criticisms are accurate. We should be willing to hear it and take it to heart if it is true.

This past week, Carl Trueman made a statement that I think reflects what we see in the New Testament. Here is what Trueman says:

“The secret to political integrity and discernment for Christians is a high view of God, his Word and his gospel. Only when this world is set in context of the next can we hope to avoid allowing the perceived demands of our political moment to overwhelm our fidelity to God and, by way of consequence, to those made in his image.”

Do you hear what Trueman is saying? The antidote to unhealthy politics is not to double down on them, but to have a higher view of God, to live lives that place Christ at the center. It's not that we should care less about the world, but we should care more about God. And when we do that, suddenly we have an antidote to the other idols we're tempted to set up in his place, and we become more effective citizens.

Jesus has perspective. Because he knows there is a near infinite distance between kings and rulers... and the creator of the universe. Psalm 9:20: “Let the nations know that they are but men!” Psalm 22:28: “For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.” Even a godless heathen can be a legitimate earthly ruler, but the Scripture is abundantly clear: God is God even over such a king. And we might even add in our own context, even over such a president of congress or any other branch of government.

And this means that because we have a high view of God, when kings and nations shake, we are not shaken. It means that when the nations are raging, we don't join in their raging. It means that when the nations forget God, we refuse to.

Let's pray.