

SACRED CLAIMS

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 96:1-9
Matthew 22:15-22

The story of the confrontation between the Jewish religious authorities and Jesus on the question of taxes is a familiar story about the tension that existed between Jesus and his detractors. It reads almost like folklore, a legend establishing the cleverness of Jesus when pitted against the surly wiliness of the Pharisees and Herodians who were out to embarrass him in front of his followers.

These conservative figures are out to get Jesus, so they bushwhack him in Jerusalem in this exchange, catching him off guard. The scene takes place in the latter days of Jesus' public ministry, when the tension was rising and the plot to take his life was still forming. The Pharisees were picking around the edges to see what Jesus was made of. So they had cued a few of their more ardent young supporters to go and ask Jesus a question about whether or not they should pay taxes.

Taxes, of course, are a favorite topic in politics as well as religion. Were then, are now. Republicans and Democrats have a fundamental disagreement over how and whom among us to tax; it seems sometimes that government is all but paralyzed because every issue gets hung up on the question of tax policy.

The confrontation between Jesus and the young Pharisees over taxes was a bit different than that, however. This was a battle of wits and a test of loyalty.

Caesar's likeness was imprinted on all the coins, like Lincoln on the penny and Washington on the quarter. But Caesar claimed to be a god; so for many Jews, even to touch the coins bearing Caesar's image was blasphemous. They wanted nothing to do with the Emperor or his claims of godliness. For them even a coin bearing the Emperor's likeness was over the top.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus whether they should pay taxes, they were really throwing him a curve ball with plenty of spin on it. If Jesus said, "Yes, you should pay taxes," he would have alienated the purists among his followers who wanted nothing to do with Rome. But if he said, "No, don't pay your taxes," he would have been in trouble with another Jewish party, the Herodians, who argued that accommodation to Rome was the only practical route to living peacefully in a world that they did not control.

So much hung on Jesus' answer, even though it was a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't trap.

Seeing the bait they were putting out for him, Jesus asked for a Roman coin, and held it up before the crowd.

"Whose image is on this coin?" he asked his inquisitors. And they answered, "The Emperor's."

Jesus replied, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Matthew tells us that when the Pharisees and Herodians heard this they were amazed; and they went away speechless.

We think of this as a story scoring one for the good guys, a sign of Jesus’ cleverness in the face of theological and political attack. We marvel at his wit, and wonder at his quick thinking. Would that we all were as quick on our feet as he.

But the story has its problems, too. We are left hanging with the question, what *does* belong to Caesar, and what belongs to God? The edges have blurred in our society between public policy, governmental power, and matters of faith and morality. Where does what is Caesar’s end, and what is God’s begin? Is anybody clear about that anymore? Religion is always encroaching on politics, and vice versa, haven’t you noticed?

Which is why we cannot put the issue of reproductive rights to rest, or gay marriage, or stem cell research, or even how we provide for all of our children. It’s why many people advocate the teaching of Intelligent Design in the schools as co-equal with evolution. It’s why we get stuck trying to nominate and approve Supreme Court Justices. Religious values and ethics have strangely encroached on public policy and the lines that separate Caesar and God are becoming as blurred today as they were when Constantine set out to embrace Christianity for the Roman Empire, three centuries after Jesus died.

Ironically, a democracy when it is at its best, makes it hard to live with Jesus’ teaching, especially when people with differing religious convictions try not to step on each other’s toes, but rather create a society in which people may live respectfully with one another allowing even competing religious claims to be held without trammeling on one another’s most cherished beliefs. Democracy is particularly difficult when one set of religious convictions is affirmed to the exclusion of others. The essence of a democratic republic, after all, is lively discussion and informed public debate. Not lock-step uniformity or unquestioning loyalty. When private religious faith becomes public policy, neither faith nor public policy is well served, and democracy becomes theocracy—something our forebears fled.

Jesus held up that coin and declared that we owed Caesar what is Caesar’s and God what is God’s, but he didn’t settle much, other than taxes, by saying so. What he did was to throw the ethical ball back into our corner.

“Whose image is this?” Jesus asked with the Emperor’s coin in his hand, carefully choosing his words. “Whose *image* is this?” And it’s a loaded question. *Image* is not a neutral word in our Christian vocabulary.

Say the word *image* and the Second Commandment should come to mind, “You shall not make any graven image or bow down to it.” Can’t worship that coin, can’t worship the likeness that is on it.

And we know, too, from the creation story in Genesis that it is in God’s image and likeness that we all are made.

What Jesus was saying as he held that coin in his hand was that nothing on earth can override the relationship and accountability of each one of us to God.

It was St. Augustine who pointed out that as Christians we are citizens of the heavenly kingdom before we are citizens of any earthly kingdom, which undermines the claim of any earthly power to place itself on the throne of God. Beware the nation therefore, that claims to arm itself with the sword of God, and sets out to change the world by force into God's image. It's most likely not God's interests that that nation is defending.

From time to time there have been Christians who have sensed their nation on the wrong course and who have stepped forward to reassert, at no small cost, their prior citizenship in heaven.

It was with that conviction that brave Christians in Germany in the Confessing Church movement wrote the Barmen Declaration of 1934, opposing the Third Reich, and reaffirming the division between church and state which had become blurred in Hitler's drive to unite both for his political purposes.

It was in that faith that brave Koreans in 1973 published a Theological Declaration confronting the injustices and oppression of the dictatorship of General Park Chung-hee, inspiring Christians in Korea to work for human rights as an expression of the coming messianic kingdom.

It was in that faith that brave Christians in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa wrote the Belhar Confession of 1986 calling for an end to Apartheid and racial injustice in South Africa.

Again and again in history long past and contemporary, Christians around the world have guarded the right to call their earthly and temporal governments to accountability against the higher measure of the kingdom of heaven and the greater justice of the reign of God.

Whenever any government imagines that it can embody the goodness and justice that is God's alone, it is the duty of Christians to stand up and oppose such idolatry.

In that vein, I watch with considerable concern the co-opting of the Christian faith and the manipulation of evangelical as well as progressive Christians of good will for political ends using issues like immigration, global warming, income inequality, reproductive rights and gay marriage as chips in a political game to win votes.

I cannot remember a period in my life when politicians have so shamelessly fanned the flames of theological and ethical controversy within the church to turn Christians against one another as is the case today. And the deployment of certain segments of the church for partisan political purposes does neither politics nor religion any good.

All around us today we see the blurring of politics and religion in this nation, and it is a dangerous thing, a trend the founders of this nation—*who were not all Christian*—warned against. They were themselves fleeing religious persecution. They knew what happens when the state is ascendant over the church. And so they were protective of the separation of the two. Let each citizen be guided by his or her deepest religious convictions when we go to vote, but let no one expect the body politic to adhere automatically to any one religious line.

As a child I remember hearing politicians talk about “This Christian nation.” But as an adult, I came to realize that that is an utter misunderstanding. This is a nation whose strength is its *many* faiths, Jewish and Muslim and Christian and Buddhist and Sikh and Unitarian and on and on and on. Which is why we have the first amendment to the Constitution insisting that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or the free exercise thereof.”

Jesus drew an indefinite line between what is Caesar’s and what is God’s, and we have been trying to figure out how to differentiate the two ever since, how to render to Caesar whatever is rightfully Caesar’s, and to God what is rightfully God’s, knowing that ultimately it’s all God’s, and that any earthly power that seeks to act as if its citizens have no higher commitments than to the state is woefully misinformed.

I wish Jesus had made it a lot simpler than he did. I wish we didn’t have to do the math on what is Caesar’s and what is God’s. I wish it were easier to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven while at the same time being a citizen of a kingdom on earth.

On the other hand, I look at the theocracies of those countries where the law of the land is based on the Holy Book of the people, and I realize that for all of its flaws ours is the best form of governance I know. Winston Churchill once said that “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried.”

I hope and pray that we can keep it, our democracy, that others around the world can respect what is right in it and keep the best of it as well, mostly because it helps us more than any other form of governance I know to walk the line between rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.

But we will do so only if we prevent those lines from blurring. Only if we keep looking for the arrival of that heavenly city in a place where the river runs past the gates of pearl and its borders through the streets scented with jasmine, but not in any city on earth.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.