

Sermon Notes: Oct 18, 2020.

Focus: Sovereignty in the Gospel

All Readings

I hope this analogy helps you understand the Pharisees and the Herodians in the gospel today. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.* They both wanted to shut down Jesus, but normally could not abide each other. They agreed that they could put aside their differences to deal with the *Jesus problem.*

Pharisees – They were hostile to Rome. The bleeding edge was how Roman influence continually corrupted the purity of Judaism. They were “true believers.” At their best, they were deeply committed to ethical living and high standards of personal conduct. Today, the Pharisee stronghold would look like middle-America-suspicious-of-government group while policing personal behavior.

Herodians- This was a Jewish group as well. They were a subset of “Hellenistic Jews”. This means they were Jews open to Greek culture. They were early adopters of the culture and customs of the day. They were considered hopelessly diluted and deluded by the Pharisees. They hoped that one day a Jewish child of Herod the Great would sit on the throne - independent of foreign influence, but until then they would go along to get along with Rome. The Herodians would be like political-lobbyist-insider-Washington-DC-beltway group.

The Trap Their attempt to trap Jesus with a coin is sort of like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Mitch McConnell working together to provoke an embarrassing and politically deadly response from their shared enemy. Jesus avoided the trap by letting God be in charge, aka sovereign, while focusing on people instead, either proclaiming ethical purity or succumbing to political accommodation.

17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.

The tax they are referring to is an imperial poll tax for non-citizens of Rome. Practically everyone Jesus knew would be taxed this way. The Pharisees hated the tax as an encroachment on Jewish self-determination, and the Herodians would be either neutral or positive on the tax. Herodians benefitted directly and indirectly from their Roman accommodation.

Jeannine K. Brown, Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary, St. Paul, MN writes,

The tax is a census tax, a per person tax of a denarius (22:19). The conundrum for Jesus is this: If he answers yes (pay taxes), then he could be perceived as in collusion with Rome, justifying Roman occupation and oppression of the Jews. This would not be a popular answer among the Jewish people. On the other hand, if Jesus answers no (don't pay), he could be suspected of revolutionary sentiment against Rome. With glee and malice team Pharisee/Herodian think they have set the perfect trap for Jesus in this question. But...20 *Then he said to them, “Whose head is*

this, and whose title?”²¹ They 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.”²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. The beauty of Jesus’ answer is that he both concedes payment of the census tax while subverting the reach of the emperor. If read one way, Jesus’ answer is simply an affirmation of Christian submission to governing authorities. Yet if read from another angle, Jesus affirms the all-encompassing reach of God’s ownership in a way that relativizes imperial claims of right to rule.

The denarius which Jesus called his questioners to produce read, “Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus” on one side and & “Pontifex Maximus”; (high priest) on the other. Into the reverberation of such all-encompassing and even idolatrous claims, Jesus here reasserts God’s ownership and rule. If we see the world as Jesus does. We don’t have to ‘do’ anything except look to God. After this, we will have the strength to tear down the walls of injustice. Everything is under God’s control and we should act accordingly. There is nothing that is powerful enough to subvert God’s will - nothing beyond God’s reach. Ironically, when we know that there is nothing we can do to “help God out,” then we get the strength to stand up against impossible situations, horrible tragedies, and human malice. The more we see God’s sovereignty in the world, then the less we tolerate the systems that obstruct God’s will. This is a mysterious way of living in the world.

Personal note I have a hopelessly idealistic streak in me. This fervor has been tempered by the endless of obligations of being a human adult for nearly a half century. College and post college, this idealism consumed much of my mental horsepower. I would likely fall for the purity trap set for Jesus. “Of course, I care for those stepped on by endless taxes. Taxation without representation is *bad*. Revolution!” If I were in Jesus’ shoes, the authorities probably would have drug me into court right then.

I am learning to be a little cagier. I have learned over time that collective action is incredibly fragile, and that the web of human relationship that achieves collective goals needs constant tending. There have been a few times when I have stood up to prove my bona fides for whatever issue I was passionate about. I would get a few pats on the back, but would see little change. When I commit to supporting others to discern and find their groove, more gets done, I get less pats on the back, and all our goals often become realized.

I have spent a lifetime trying to be ideologically pure without the messiness of group relationships. I am more interested now (remove comma) in the really difficult work of getting groups of Episcopalians together. If great results happen, wonderful, but the group is the center of the goal. I am finding that my best work, my most enduring work, is not in heroic accomplishment, but in connected community. I think Jesus was confident enough in the fact that God is in charge, so that he could focus on his rag-tag group of followers, loving them and trying to get them to love each other. That’s not a bad approach for us too.

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