

Sermon Notes: Oct 22, 2023

Focus: Paying taxes to Caesar

[Lectionary Readings](#)

Often, I will look back to what I preached three years ago. Why? Because every three years, the same scripture reading comes back around in the lectionary. This cycle was a little humbling. In 2020, I preached about paying taxes to Caesar. I got really cringy excited. It was the first year of COVID, so I give myself a little slack. I went down the rabbit hole of the American prohibition movement to understand paying taxes to Caesar. Inspired by Dan Oakrent's excellent book called *Last Call*, I barreled into *all* the different nuances of the prohibition movement and got a little lost in the weeds.

So, with that trepidation, it is still a good idea, just maybe *less* of an idea. This gospel highlights the idea that *the enemy of my enemy is my friend*. When the US enacted the constitutional prohibition of alcohol, the suffrage movement, white supremacists, xenophobes, tent revival preachers, and Walgreens all joined forces to wreak havoc on the American landscape. In the biblical story today, the odd alliance of Pharisees and the Herodians attempted to shut down the problem of Jesus' popularity.

Pharisees, first strange accomplice They were hostile to Rome. They hated Roman influence continually corrupting the purity of Judaism. They were "true believers." At their best, they were deeply committed to ethical living and lofty standards of personal conduct. And sometimes they could be punctilious and rigid – aren't we all sometimes? They were not friends of the sycophant Herodians.

Herodians, second strange accomplice 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. Pharisee considered Herodians hopelessly diluted by the world and the powerful. They hoped that one day a Jewish child of "Herod the Great" would sit on the throne, but until then, they would go-along-to-get-along with Rome.

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

They attempt to trap Jesus with a coin. If Jesus said "of course: pay taxes," he would provoke disgust from Jewish nationalists. If Jesus said, "don't worry about taxes, focus on spiritual vibes," both Pharisees and Herodians would gleefully rat hit him out to the Roman equivalent of the county tax assessor.

Jesus skillfully avoided the coin trap by letting God be in charge, aka sovereign. Oxford defines sovereignty as: a supreme power especially over a body politic:

Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” 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.”

The tax in the story is an “imperial poll tax” or census tax. Everyone Jesus knew would have been 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 depending on how it served their goals.

The following professor puts a nice focus on the coin itself:

Jeannine K. Brown, Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary: The tax is a census tax, a per person tax of a denarius (22:19). 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.

If the ‘trappers’ thought God was in charge, they would not have been working so hard to ‘help God out’ by attempting to betray Jesus to Caesar or the populist masses. Jesus seems notably unconcerned about the tricks being played on him. His trust in the sovereignty of God frees him to respond playfully in today’s scripture.

I hope we can find a road to trusting in God’s power. I am not all the way there. At my less than stellar, I still try to ‘help God out’ a little by trying to make things happen to my advantage. However, as a work in progress, I occasionally find new ways to trust in God’s care.

A little Bob Marley might be for experiencing God’s sovereignty.

Don’t worry about a thing cause every little thing’s gonna be alright.

It is going to be alright even when it is not alright. I would rather be wrong believing the world can be better than it is now versus being ‘right’ that the world is terrible and doomed to get far worse. We are better off, I think, believing our world has more potential than less.

My prayer as we move to the end of our stewardship drive is that we all keep learning to trust in God. May we find more freedom from worry and not fall into the trap that everything is up to us.

In this stewardship season and year-round, all will be well. Find less worry, more generosity. Less fear, more trust. More relaxing into God’s capable hands and less white knuckle driving as if everything is up to you.

Todd