

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

**What Are the Things of God?**

David Orendorff     Matthew 22:15-22     October 16, 2005

Here is a thick political intrigue worthy of our own complicated politics, both national and international. There are three parties involved; the Pharisees, the Herodians and Jesus. The plotting party is that of the Pharisees who pride themselves in being faithful Jews. They are dedicated to obeying all the biblical law, committed to being pure according to the word of God and loyal to the temple in Jerusalem.

The Pharisees want to get rid of Jesus since he is a threat to their power. Jesus' teachings lead the people away from the temple, away from purity (as they understand it) and away from God. Because Jesus would have every child be the child of God, the special people of God lose their identity, their uniqueness. The Pharisees know they must stop Jesus or they shall be out of jobs.

The Pharisees also want Herod to be gone. Herod, appointed to be king by the Roman emperor, represents the military occupation of God's nation. Israel is, in their belief, meant to be ruled by God and not by an emperor or his lackey. And more, Herod has interfered with the priesthood of the temple by murdering high priests and appointing successors pleasing and loyal to him.

If the Pharisees could get the Herodians, supporters of Herod, angry enough with Jesus, the Herodians might persecute and perhaps kill Jesus. This would end the Pharisee's Jesus problem, leave their hands clean of murder, create bad publicity for the Herodians, weaken Rome's hold on Israel and maybe create some new allies in the fight against Rome. It is party politics to the nth degree.

So, the Pharisees set the trap for Jesus by inviting some Herodians to observe a questioning of Jesus. The Pharisees have carefully thought of a question that Jesus cannot answer without making some one angry (how little things change). They begin with flattery, "We know you (Jesus) are honest, that you truly teach the way of God, and that it is not important to you what people think." Then comes the trick question. The Pharisees want to know, yes or no, "Is it permitted to pay the poll tax to Caesar or not?"

Everyone there can see the dilemma Jesus has in answering. The Pharisees are asking a question of Torah, of Biblical Jewish law. The poll tax is the Roman census and registration of the Jewish people. It must be paid before the people can sell their crops or trade their goods and it is enforced by the police. The taxes go to support the Roman army that occupies Israel, Jerusalem and even the temple. For the Pharisees and most of Israel the poll tax is the symbol of Caesar's oppression of God's chosen people.

And it is a question of idolatry. The denarius had on it the face of Caesar, who was Tiberius the Emperor, with an inscription in which Tiberius describes himself as "God and high priest." Since Tiberius is claiming to be God and the high priest of God then when the poll tax is paid one is also acknowledging Caesar's claims to divinity. And if this is true then to use the denarius in any way (and everyone does) is to engage in idolatry, the placing of another god before Yahweh.

The Pharisees want Jesus to declare what side the God he teaches takes in the Roman occupation and on idolatry. They hope he will say what they believe, that it is not permitted by Torah, by God, to pay the poll tax. This will, of course anger the Herodians, make Jesus guilty of insurrection against Rome, hopefully end his life and draw new followers to the Pharisees.

But the Pharisees really can't lose for if Jesus says, "Yes, God permits it" then he is saying that God permits Caesar his claims to be god, and that God permits the Roman occupation of God's holy nation. For Jesus to say paying the poll tax is permitted is for Jesus to be a heretic

and stand both against the first commandment “to have no other God’s before Yahweh” and the Jewish belief that Israel was given to the Hebrew people as the Promised land, and all those who are truly Jewish and raw from Roman rule will be angry. Jesus will lose followers, perhaps his life, and the Pharisees will gain strength. It is a good plan. It is a very good plan.

Jesus has a choice of heresy or insurrection; there is apparently no right answer. But Jesus thinks in categories and ways that are neither Pharisaical nor Herodian. First, he calls the Pharisees for what they are, hypocrites. They come claiming interest in truth, but they care neither for Jesus’ honesty nor the honesty of his teachings concerning God. They have come to trap him for their own reasons of power, if possible, to destroy him because they are afraid for themselves. Jesus knows it, and he says it.

Secondly, Jesus exposes the shallowness of their question and pushes them to consider a deeper wisdom. He asks to have the denarius brought to him and asks, “Whose head is this and whose title?” The Pharisees answered the obvious, “The emperor’s.” Obviously this coin belongs to Tiberius and it is Tiberius’s coin to command. And so Jesus says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

Now the Pharisees must consider the deeper question, a question that in their political maneuvering they had not considered, I think Jesus’ intention was to make the Pharisees, and all those listening, the Herodians and disciples included, to stop and consider “What is the emperor’s and what is God’s?” This is the question of basic claim on one’s life – what part of my life belongs to the things of Caesar (the things of economics, party loyalty, nation, professional responsibility) and what part of my life belongs to God? I think Jesus intention was to make the Pharisees, and all others who think they know what is God’s and what is Caesar’s to stop and reconsider.

Callum: (age 4): “Is God everywhere?”

Mother: “Yes, dear.”

Callum: “Is he in this room?”

Mother: “Yes, he is.”

Callum: “Is he in my mug?”

Mother (growing uneasy): “er–yes.”

Callum (clapping his hand over his mug): “Got him!”<sup>1</sup>

God cannot be trapped in our mugs or in a debate about taxes. Jesus gives no answer to what is a thing of God’s but leaves the question open to the hearer. The Pharisees and the Herodians are amazed, they don’t know what to make of it and so they leave unsure whether they trapped Jesus or he trapped them.

We too are challenged to reconsider what are the things of God. When we look at our check books and monthly budgets, and we line out to whom and what we give our support, to whom are we giving loyalty? What do we give to the emperor (what or whoever that may be in our lives) and what do we give to God? Who or what do we make the god of our lives by our giving?

Vickie once worked in an L.A. accounting firm that did the tax returns of some movie stars. I will never forget the actress who spent more monthly on makeup than we were earning annually. Who was her god?

And the issue here is not just money. What people do we make god of our lives? Are we only happy when our children are happy? Do we only like ourselves when our boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse smiles upon us and grants us time and peace? An old and good friend,

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Donaldson, *Human Minds: An Exploration* (New York; Penguin Books, 1992), 80. Quoted in *Homiletics* (October-December 1993), 12.

Margaret Novak, once told me “You know you are co-dependent when at the moment of your death someone else’s life passes before your eyes.”

And what activities are of God? Is our work that which controls our life? Are family things the only worthwhile things? Have we volunteered ourselves to death? What is of Caesar and what is of God?

And what of our thinking; what are the things of Caesar in our minds and what are the things of God? I am left wondering, pondering, “What are the things of God?”

By his life, Jesus, of course, makes the answer very clear. Jesus belongs to God, all his heart, all his mind, all his soul and strength, lock, stock and barrel. There is no doubt that for Jesus everything belongs to God, the denarius, the poll tax, Caesar himself, the Pharisees and even the Herodians.

With his life and death Jesus sings with Diane Gibbons:

I can say nothing of God, except  
that I saw the red flames of a  
Cardinal against the snow this morning as I drank tea.

I can say nothing of God, except  
that the warm smell of potato soup  
and the sharp tang of cheddar cheese  
shimmied up my nose when a friend  
made lunch for me.

I can say nothing of God, except  
that in the afternoon I washed my  
face in a cold mountain stream,  
and it stung my skin and left me feeling  
fresh and clean.

I can say nothing of God, except  
that two nights ago a cricket  
sang a funny song in my closet  
amidst the socks and silence.

I can say nothing of God, except  
that stones can speak,  
and deer fly in my dreams,  
that a strange child smiled at me  
in the supermarket,  
and that each blade of green grass  
wears a locket with God’s face inside,  
and that on every hair on my cat’s face  
is written “Alleluia!”

I can say nothing of God, except  
that the rough texture of  
grainy bread on my tongue

and the sweet, liquid acid of grape  
in my throat  
are bittersweet memory of  
compassion  
and a taste of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

It turns out that all things are God's. But Jesus does not tell to the Pharisees or Herodians of his love for God. Jesus asks about their love for God. He has turned the question away from himself. The ones who questioned must now ask themselves about their lives and about their loyalties. What belongs to God and what shall we give to God? It is a good question to ponder as we consider our stewardship, don't you think.

Shalom and Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Diane Gibbons, *Rune Hill Newsletter*, 20 (Spring/Summer 1993), 1.