

“Smart Answer”

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Matthew 22:15-22 + render unto God

Have you been following the primary debates lately? Not much the debaters agree on, but they do agree on one thing – no new taxes. Here in America of late, taxes are a four-letter word. Almost everyone feels their tax burden is too great and government services are not what they should be. Wrangling over taxes has pretty much reduced governance to gridlock in our country. This parable of Jesus is as close as today’s newspaper or the daily procession of news on Yahoo or Goggle.



We Americans have a love-hate relationship with government – polls consistently show that we demand the services and protection government provides but we don’t expect to pay for it. We are highly skeptical of government even as we recognize we have the best governance in the world. Folks of faith in one breathe talk about how special America is in God’s eyes and in the next breathe criticize it for being ungodly.¹

Just proves people are people – and politics is politics.

The people of first-century Palestine had a much greater right than we to complain – even more right than we to revolt which they did just three decades after Jesus with disastrous results.

The first century Jews were taxed not by a government they had elected but by an empire which occupied their territory – a brutal empire which had taken their land by



force. This was a live question in Jesus' day. It was the hot-button political issue of the nation – like today rolling into one all the burning questions of the day – the tax code, global warming, government regulation and jobs.

But people are people and always will be – and politics is politics and always will be. So Jesus' enemies conspired to bring him a 'gotcha question' on the subject – “Where do you stand on Roman occupation?”

This is the way politicians argue and debate. They try to trap each other, twist what the other says, use previous statements ripped out of context, trick the other into saying something unpopular. We see these weasel words every day. The Pharisees and the Herodians never before made common cause on anything, but they could come together in their desire to muzzle Jesus – to stop this popular preacher in his tracks. This same question had tripped up so many would-be messiahs before him.

If Jesus sided with the people and the Pharisees and said that it was against the Torah to pay the tax, he would be arrested by the Romans for sedition. If he said it was permitted in the Torah then he would be siding with the extraordinarily unpopular puppet regime of the Herodians who profited richly from Roman occupation. There was no way for him to win this one – or so they thought.

It was not the amount of the tax that was the issue. A denarius represented about one day's wages per annum – not a whole lot in the scheme of things nor a very heavy tax burden as these things go. Rather the controversy was that the coin required for the annual head tax was a form of religious propaganda of the worst kind – blasphemous to every Jew. A common Roman coin of the day would say:



“Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.”



This broke about half the Ten Commandments. It would have been a breach of “You shall have no other gods before me” and “you shall not make any graven images” nor “worship them” as well as greed and covetousness. To even possess the coin would have been a felony transgression of the law, much less to use it in commerce or to pay any tribute or taxes. To use it to pay the temple tax would have been blasphemous yet many of those opposing Jesus were suborning just that.

Think of it – what if our coins last decade had said:

“George Walker Bush, august son of the divine George Herbert Walker Bush, President of the United States, the most powerful man on the planet?”

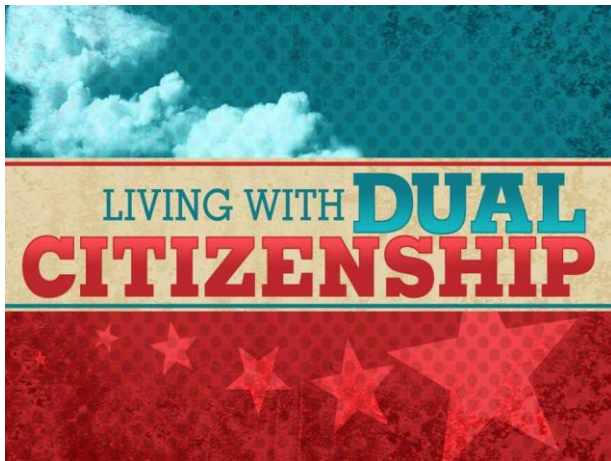
If that were the case, those who are Democrats might view that money as evil. What if our coins currently had an image of Barack Hussein Obama on them and a saying about his virtues and divinity? Certainly many Republicans would refuse to carry or use such money.² Such was the dilemma placed before Jesus – a legitimate concern, but it was still a trap question set to trip Jesus up.

The question they asked Jesus was political. Jesus turned it into a question of faith. Jesus saw through their intentions, so sweet sounding but dripping with honeyed hypocrisy. He parried turning their gotcha question back against his opponents. The real question, the central question was for Jesus and is for us: “Whom do you worship?” “Whom do you serve?”



When he asked for a coin, someone reached into his wallet and brought out the blasphemous coin revealing the total hypocrisy of the

opponents – to even have it in one’s possession was a violation. Notice Jesus himself did not touch or ever in any way possess the coin.



The real question for us is “What does it mean to live as a Christian and a citizen of this nation?” There are no easy answers to this question. Jesus’ answer is a very smart answer but ambiguous at the same time.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

All right – seems straightforward, but wait a minute – what are the things of Caesar’s and what are the things which are God’s. Jesus doesn’t say. His smart answer begs the question of where the boundary is between the two.

Paul in Romans 13 writing at a time of relative freedom under the protection of Roman law speaks of the Roman empire and counsels:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities [that is, Rome]. For there is no authority except from God.”

The Roman authority is from God? Jesus would not necessarily agree. Writing at a different time, under Roman persecution, that same Roman Empire is called in Revelation 13 the Antichrist and the “whore of Babylon.” Which is right? Both are – and neither.

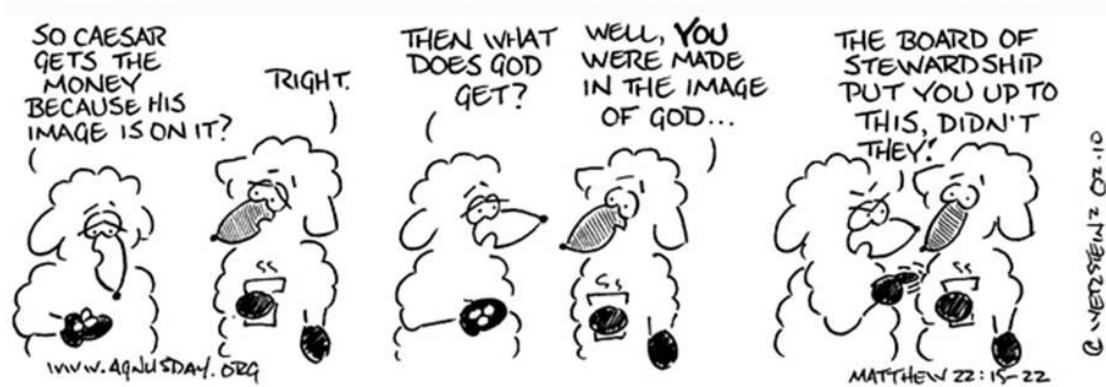
Sincere, devoted and Biblical Christians will have different interpretations and come to different conclusions

- For some of the dividing line between the “things of Caesar” and the “things of God” means the separation of Church and State as we have it in the US. [Generally Mainline Christianity]
- For others, it means that allegiance to God is no different than allegiance to nation – that our patriotism is obedience to God and



being unpatriotic is disobedience to God's law. [Particular old Cold Warriors]

- For others, Christians are released from all obligations to the state and should refuse to participate in the state. [as represented by Mennonites and the Amish]



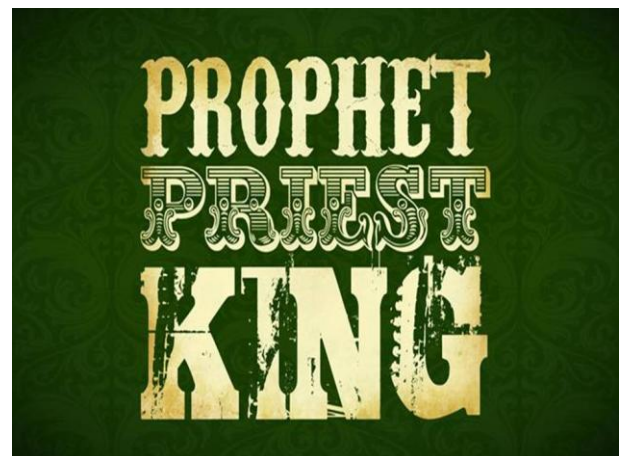
- For still others, this directs Christians to bring government into closer accord with the will of God. [some of Mainline Christianity and surprisingly as well some of the Christian Right today]

All these bewildering conclusions can follow from this same text – different interpretations of where the “things of Caesar” end and the “things of God” take over. Ultimately the relationship between faith and our obligations to the nation are a paradox.³

Which do you chose? How do you fulfill your Christian citizenship?

Almost every nation has seen itself at one time or another as the kingdom of God fulfilled. Almost every nation claims in one sense or another divine authority. Even atheistic nations substitute ideology for faith, but still make an ultimate claim nevertheless.

Yet God's reign stands in stark contrast to every nation – it transcends every nation. In God's kingdom justice is perfect, righteousness is universal. By this standard, no nation is the kingdom of God and making believe that any fulfill God's plan even partially forces us to overlook



way too much. All have fallen short of the glory of God – way, way short. Jesus does not counsel us to put our trust in any earthly nation, but rather to work for God’s global network which transcends every nation.

Jesus is awfully smart.

He gives us a smart answer to a trick question.

Yet he still leaves us hanging.

How do you tell the things which are God’s from the things which are Caesar’s?

Whose image is on us?

¹ Mary W. Anderson “*Reflections on the lectionary*” *Christian Century* 10/4/2011 p. 21

² Brian Stoffregen, < <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/>> “Proper 24 // Lectionary 29 A: Exegetical notes on Matthew 22:15-22”

³ *Lectionary Homiletics* for 10/16/2011 pp. 19, 24