October 22, 2023 **LIVING MESSAGES**

The gospel passage for this Sunday St. Matthew 22:15-23, the odd thing about Jesus’ words in today’s gospel is the answer Jesus gave. Many Theologians and Bible commentators have taken Jesus' words and have drawn conclusions from them, the theology of two kingdoms: the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God and how these two kingdoms are supposed to relate to one another. God and Caesar are what JESUS’ enemies are asking about but Jesus turns their attention to something else.

This Sunday we will focus on what Jesus wanted his hearers to understand. Let's see yet another encounter between Jesus and his enemies among Israel’s religious leadership. It is the far-right-wing Pharisees and the far-left-wing Herodians who end up conspiring to trip up Jesus. They put the question to Jesus this way: “What do you think: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

The Romans levied several taxes on the Jews. It was this poll tax that was the subject of the question put to Jesus by the Pharisees and the Herodians. It was a special tax because it had to be paid in Roman silver coinage. Other business and tax matters could be paid in copper coinage, or in gold bullion, or similar mediums of exchange. But the poll tax had to be paid with the silver denarius. And, these coins bore the image of Caesar, and they were inscribed with an inscription saying “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the divine Augustus.”

Now, this tax was a point of great controversy among the Jews. The Herodians, of course, were all in favor of the tax. They were in favor of all the Roman taxes. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were very much opposed to paying Caesar any taxes at all, for they still supposed that they were citizens of a theocracy (Priest rule in the name of God), and that to pay Caesar taxes was to acknowledge his sovereignty in Israel. But the poll tax really made the Pharisees angry, because they had to use a coin which bore a graven image of someone who claimed filial descent from a god. For them, to pay this tax involved them in violation of the commandment against graven images, and it also involved them in the commandment to have no other gods but the God of Israel.

I think you can see the trap that the Pharisees and the Herodians together had crafted for Jesus. If Jesus answered their question about the poll tax “yes, it is lawful to pay this tax to Caesar,” then they would be able to turn the crowds against Jesus, for most of Jews were opposed to taxes anyway, and the more religious among them had the same aversion to the poll tax that the Pharisees had. the Pharisees, of course, for they paid the poll tax even though they judged it to be a violation of two of the ten commandments.

On the other hand, if Jesus answers, “no, it’s not lawful to pay the poll tax,” then the Herodians would have promptly brought a charge of sedition against Jesus, the Romans would have arrested him, and that would neatly put Jesus out of the way.

Jesus’s response turns the tables on them. “Show me the tax money,” he says. And they bring him a denarius. “Whose image and inscription are on this?” Jesus demanded. “Caesar’s,” they reply. “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” Jesus says. Jesus didn’t stop there. He added the words, “And, render to God, the things that are God’s.” At that point, the tables are fully turned on both the Herodians and the Pharisees.

I don’t think the Pharisees would have missed Jesus’ point in the least. He has been hammering them for days for exactly this failure: they who bear the image of God have not been rendering to God the things that are God’s. If you like to learn more about the kingdom of God, please join us in worship on Sunday at 11: 00 AM.

Peace!

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