

“Gotcha!”

Matthew 22:15-22

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I wonder how long it took them to come up with this plan to humiliate Jesus and discredit him. I also wonder what it must have been like for the Pharisees and Herodians to work together.

You have heard that politics makes strange bedfellows. This was certainly true that day in the Temple.

The Pharisees and Herodians were two powerful groups in Jerusalem who had a great amount of authority. Their interests and priorities were radically different, though.

The Pharisees wanted to run the Romans out of Judea and to return to the glory days they thought existed when David reigned and ruled. The Herodians, on the other hand, worked for the Roman Empire and swore allegiance to King Herod and Caesar.

Most days the Pharisees and Herodians were like oil and water; they just didn't mix. Their common disdain for Jesus compelled them, however, to put their differences aside and work together, at least on this occasion.

Why did both groups dislike Jesus? He was too prophetic for them, especially when he criticized them for abusing their power and mistreating people. They were incensed over Jesus' characterization of them as selfish, greedy, insensitive and corrupt.

They bristled as Jesus called on them to repent and to turn from protecting their own self-interests to pursuing justice and peace for everyone under their jurisdiction. As far as they were concerned, his reputation had to be smeared and his voice silenced.

So, the Pharisees and Herodians concocted what they thought was the perfect plan to discredit Jesus or have him arrested. Listen to the way this plot is described in Matthew and how Jesus responded.

“Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.

‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent said, ‘You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’

They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?’

‘Caesar’s,’ they replied.

Then he said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.” (Matthew 22:15-22)

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

This has turned out to be one of Jesus’ most memorable statements. Let’s put the spotlight on it and examine it a little more closely.

Why did Jesus say this? I am confident there were many reasons.

Obviously, Jesus wanted to deny the Pharisees and Herodians an opportunity to humiliate him and to undermine his credibility. They thought they had developed a fool-proof plan.

If Jesus said this tax should not be paid as the Pharisees believed, then the Herodians would have reported him to the authorities. Immediately, they would have arrested Jesus for treason.

If Jesus said the tax should be paid, the Pharisees would accuse Jesus of being a Roman sympathizer. This, in turn, would infuriate those who insisted that paying this tax gave legitimacy to the Roman occupiers.

It appears there was no way Jesus could escape the Pharisees' snare. At least this is what they thought until Jesus asked for a coin and said upon receiving it, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Shocked and speechless, Jesus' detractors quietly walked away.

I also believe Jesus uttered these words because he wanted to declare that Caesar was not God, contrary to what many were led to believe by the inscription on their coins: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest."

Certainly, Caesar was an important and powerful man, but he was merely a man who happened to hold the reins of power for the time being. Yes, the disciples owed Caesar some things as Jesus mentioned, but it was not their highest loyalty. This belonged only to God.

Perhaps there was another reason Jesus made this bold statement about giving to Caesar and God. He wanted to send his followers a clear message about what it meant to be a disciple and live in community. **What was that message?**

Responsible citizens who wanted to create safe and healthy communities would pay taxes. In addition, faithful disciples who wanted to build peaceful and healthy communities would give money to support God's work.

It was not either/or; it was both/and. Even in Jesus' time, establishing safe, prosperous, peaceful communities required that individuals pool their financial resources to meet common needs and to achieve common goals.

This is true for us, too.

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

There is an unmistakable distinction between these two statements in our culture. The first is mandatory. If we don’t pay our taxes, we face stiff penalties or imprisonment.

The second is optional. In our free-church tradition, we must choose to support God’s work. We are not, however, fined or imprisoned if we don’t. As a matter of fact, few, if any, would ever know.

Based upon statistics I have seen, there are many Christians who choose not ‘to give to God the things that are God’s’. I find this reluctance to give to God interesting in light of all we are eager to give to God.

You see, we have no problem giving God our fears, anxieties, worries, concerns and challenges. Our prayers are full of petitions for help.

We even give God our hopes and dreams and ask God to bless them.

Often, we offer God our weaknesses in exchange for his strength, our sorrows in exchange for his comfort, our doubts in exchange for his assurance, our confusion in exchange for his guidance, our restlessness in exchange for his peace, our emptiness in exchange for his purpose and our loneliness in exchange for his companionship.

We give God our past with all its mistakes for him to forgive, our present with all its complexities for him to sort out and our future with all its uncertainties for him to smooth out.

Why are we so reluctant to give God our money? Why is this hard for us to do?

I have often wondered if I would tithe if I were not the pastor of the church. A tithe is ten percent of my income that is given to the church. I have concluded that I would.

I was tithing before I became a pastor. I began tithing as a seven-year-old child when my grandfather showed me what a tithe was.

My grandfather came to our farm house one Saturday morning and gave me ten cents before he left. This time, however, he did not give me a dime but 10 pennies.

He placed nine of them in a jar where I kept change, but he placed one of the pennies under the jar. When I asked him why he placed one penny under the jar, he told me that particular penny belonged to God, and I should take it to church the next morning and put it in the offering plate.

From that day forward, I do not recall going to church as a child or adolescent without an offering envelope. Getting it ready was a Saturday night ritual.

As the years rolled on, Jackie and I married and children came along. From time to time, I wrestled with the temptation to use my tithe to pay for bills or purchase things we wanted. I formulated some strong and convincing arguments for temporarily reducing or withholding my tithe.

Each time I just about buckled, I was reminded that my tithe was an expression of gratitude to God for all his blessings. The only way I could withhold my tithe was if I was ungrateful, which I wasn't.

Furthermore, I came to my senses and realized if I used God's money to buy something off a shelf, I would be accepting one of the biggest lies this world has ever put forth. And what would that be? Something I could buy that man has made can do more for me than God can do.

But tithing is not just about me. It is also about those who are on this journey with me in my community, nation and world.

I cannot ignore their needs and live in a bubble. I cannot sleep at night unless I know I am doing something about helping those who are struggling to survive.

This is one reason I have chosen to be the pastor of a church for over four decades. I believe Jesus' disciples gathered together in the local church can change the lives of people more effectively than any other single entity.

The church Jesus envisioned would be an extension of his ministry. Through his disciples in every church, Jesus would continue to feed the hungry, heal the sick, shelter the homeless, encourage the discouraged, comfort the grieving, forgive the sinner, teach the curious, confront

injustice, right the wrong, lift up the lowly, liberate the oppressed and build bridges of goodwill, understanding, hope and reconciliation.

Through the church, Jesus would continue to make hope visible to those living in deep despair because his disciples would band together and pool their resources to make it happen. Jesus believed his disciples would not just give to Caesar what belonged to Caesar but also give to God what belonged to God.

Was Jesus right about you?