

## **“Flattery Will Get You Nowhere”**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

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Let's talk about money this morning. This is what the Pharisees wanted to talk about the day they approached Jesus in the Temple during the busy week of Passover.

The Pharisees did not come alone on this mission of deceit. They brought some of the Herodians along with them.

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 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.

Why did they 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.

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)

This encounter between Jesus and his adversaries raises two questions for me. **Why did the Pharisees ask their question, and why did Jesus give his answer?**

**Why did the Pharisees ask their question?** Matthew clearly reveals their motive. It was to trap Jesus.

They were not interested in using this opportunity to seek a deeper understanding of life and faith. Their sole motive was to discredit Jesus and destroy his influence, which could not be disguised behind the hollow compliments they bestowed on Jesus as they began the conversation.

The Pharisees desire to trick Jesus with a "gotcha" question was the reason they brought the Herodians along. They were responsible for reporting anyone who did not pay this "head or census" tax.

This tax had to be paid with a Roman coin which had Caesar's image on it along with an inscription which read, "Tiberius Caesar, the august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." To the Pharisees, even carrying such a coin amounted to idolatry, and paying this tax gave legitimacy to the Roman occupation of their land.

If Jesus said this tax **should not be paid**, as the Pharisees believed, then the Herodians would immediately have Jesus arrested for breaking the law and encouraging others to be law breakers.

If Jesus said the tax **should be paid**, the Pharisees would declare Jesus to be an idolater and Roman sympathizer. Jesus' affirmative response would be used to put him in a bad light with his listeners and erode his influence.

It appears there was no way Jesus could escape the Pharisees' snare. At least this was what they thought. **So, what did Jesus do?**

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**Why did Jesus give this response?** Obviously, he wanted to avoid the Pharisees' trap, and he did. Their flattery got them nowhere, and their iron-clad plan did not work as they thought it would. All they could do was walk away in silence after Jesus' brilliant response.

Beyond this, though, Jesus used this opportunity to give his disciples a stewardship lesson. What was that lesson?

As children of God, they had a responsibility to support the country where they lived. It was important they be good citizens who did their part to build healthy communities and help pay for the goods and services they needed and enjoyed. For Jesus, this was true even under less than ideal circumstances.

At the same time, as grateful recipients of God's grace and blessings, each of them had a responsibility to financially support God's work. Just as no female twelve and older and no male fourteen and older was exempt from paying the "head" tax, so no individual was exempt from supporting God's work through the Temple.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," Jesus said to the Pharisees. You can't make it any clearer than this.

**Are you doing what Jesus instructed his followers to do?** Do you financially support our city, state and country by paying taxes, and do you support our church by tithing?

Like you, I began paying taxes the day I drew my first pay check. I believe I was fourteen years old.

Even before that, I began tithing and giving ten percent of what I received to the church. **Why did I begin this practice, and why do I continue to do it?** My grandfather taught me to do this when I was seven years old.

My grandfather came to our farm house one Saturday morning and gave me ten pennies before he left. His intent was to do more than give me candy and coke money for the movies (Yes, candy bars and cokes were a nickel apiece.) He felt it was time to teach me a lesson about stewardship.

There was a reason my grandfather gave me ten pennies instead of a dime. 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 penny belonged to God and should go in the offering envelope I would take to church the next morning.

That lesson was reinforced on many occasions by my parents. I don't recall going to church on Sunday while I was at home without an offering envelope. Getting it ready was a Saturday night ritual.

My study of scripture has reinforced this practice of tithing as well. Repeatedly, I read in the Old and New Testaments that the reason we are to bring an offering to worship is not to bribe God to love us or as seed money for more blessings. Neither are we to give out of guilt or obligation.

We give as an expression of thanksgiving to God for God's unconditional and eternal love and for the many blessings God has already given us. We give because we have been given to by a God who gives out of His fullness and love for us.

This is why it was inconceivable to an ancient Jew that he or she would go to the Temple without giving an offering. The story of the destitute widow who placed her last two coins in the offering containers at the Temple is an example of this level of faithfulness. (Mark 12:41-44)

When this widow went to the Temple the day Jesus was there, she humbly and quietly approached the offering receptacles where she placed her final two coins. Jesus was so impressed with her radical generosity that he informed his disciples she had put in more that day than all the others.

If there was one person in the Temple that day who would have been excused from giving because of her circumstances, it was this widow. No one would have faulted her had she not given. Yet, she gave all she had in her pocket without a whimper.

We need to be as dedicated and determined as this widow was to express her gratitude to God for the gift of life and all God's provisions. The failure to do this should be as inconceivable to us as it was to her.

The Bible has taught me there should be a difference between the way a believer and non-believer uses his or her money. If there is not, there is a serious problem which needs to be addressed.

**Why have I continued to tithe as an adult?** It is not because it has been easy. Like many of you, Jackie and I have had to make sacrifices to tithe. We know what it is like to buy shoes for children, feed hungry teenagers, pay for braces, insurance and telephones and send children off to college. Through it all, though, we continued to write a check to the church each week.

**Why have we done this?** Giving is an important part of our faith. We believe we are most like God when we are grateful and generous.

We discovered years ago that nothing we could buy would satisfy our deepest needs. This was a lie we were unwilling to accept.

We can purchase things which will satisfy our need for food, clothing, shelter, transportation and entertainment. These will not come close, however, to satisfying our need for meaning, purpose, guidance, direction, peace, security, respect, self-esteem, strength, courage, confidence, faith, hope, love, forgiveness and eternal life. These needs are met only through healthy relationships with God and those around us.

We would not trade the peace and joy which accompany being a faithful steward for anything in this world. What we give brings us far more pleasure than what we keep, and supporting God's work through the church gives us a great sense of satisfaction and contentment.

To be candid with you, I never wanted to get to the end of my life and have to scramble to make up for misplaced priorities. I don't think my grandparents and parents wanted to do this either.

The day after my father was buried, I sat at the kitchen table with my mother going over some of his papers. One of the boxes nearby contained cancelled checks. I asked my mother if I could look at them, and she said I could.

What I discovered as I looked at years of cancelled checks was what my parents' priorities were. Two things which were unmistakably important to them were their devotion to God and love for the church. Each week, a check was written to the church.

My mom and dad both died suddenly thirteen years apart. They had heart attacks at home and passed from this world to the next in one heartbeat. There was no time to correct anything they had done wrong or do something they had failed to do.

I believe they both died in peace. I pray I will, too.