

Matthew 22:15-22^v vi

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

^v About the Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

The question on the payment of the Roman tax was designed to force Jesus to offend some group, for the Jewish people were bitterly divided on the issue. To advocate payment of the tax as legal, as did the Herodians (the supporters of the ruling family) whose policy was complete loyalty to Rome, would alienate the general populace.

At the other extreme, to advocate nonpayment, as did the Zealots, would signal treason and reinforce all the nationalist hopes and fears aroused by the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. (Resistance to taxes and the necessary census that preceded them was often the catalyst of insurrection). The Pharisees also hated the tax, which implied their submission to a pagan sovereign rather than to God.

Taking the coin, Jesus counsels them to "give" (v. 21; literally to "give back") to the emperor what is his and to give back to God what is God's. Jesus refuses to take sides on the political issue, but uses the situation to address their failure to repay God with what belongs to God, as delineated in 22:34-40.

vi Reflection and Response

We see the power of the word in today's readings, as various words are inflated with meaning or deflated by hypocritical use. The words to Cyrus recorded in the book of Isaiah sound a theme that runs throughout scripture: "I call you by your name" (Isaiah 45:4).

Being known personally and intimately to God is at the heart of our faith. It far surpasses any territorial divisions or ethnic boundaries humans may erect. Although Cyrus the Persian is a pagan king, he is honored as God's anointed one who restores the homeland for God's people. The reign of God cuts across divisions and centers on the individual.

Matthew's gospel offers an example of empty words in the Pharisees' speech. Plotting to trap Jesus, they begin with a compliment. We sometimes mistrust compliments because they can be insincere. The oily voice on the phone, solicitously inquiring about our health, wants ultimately to sell us aluminum siding.

Jesus responds to their flattery with the simplicity of God, in which divisions are artificial and all is one. He eludes their trap and avoids the question on taxes. He doesn't really address the moral issues raised then by paying tribute to an occupying power, nor now by taxes that finance weapons. What he does do is strike a balance on a difficult, age-old question. The state has its own legitimate sphere—and its limitations. When it oversteps these bounds inappropriately, the danger lies in its assuming the role of God.