

True to Form

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Please turn again with me to Matthew 22, paying the poll tax to Caesar.

Back in 1997, as a senior PhD student in Aberdeen University, I was asked to give a lecture at the Christian Union on the topic of politics and the Christian.

The lecture theatre was packed because the lecture had been advertised in the university's politics department and so there were many lecturers and students from that department present.

They were there because they wanted to know what I, a well-known Christian in the university and also very politically active in one particular party, had to say about the role of Christianity in politics. There were certain phrases these people were desperate to hear. A Christian party or evangelical republicanism. I imagine they all left very disappointed because after detailing the history of Christians in British politics, I spoke about our need as Christians to engage with and be part of the existing political system, including the tricky question of party politics.

[1 : 31] Many Christians might turn to this passage in Matthew's Gospel to define the relationship between Christians and the state. I've got no doubt that the Bible does lay down principles for a Christian's political views, but I'm sorry to burst your bubble, you won't find it here.

From a secondary perspective, perhaps we can take something from what Jesus says here about our attitude toward the state, but of far greater importance than our relationship to the kingdom of men is our relationship to the kingdom of God.

As political animals, we all too often cut Jesus' statement short and merely hear the words, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, rather than unto God what is God's.

This isn't about human taxation, about what we reasonably owe to those God has set in authority over us in the world. Rather, it is about our attitude to the kingdom of heaven, our faith in God.

Most everyone here, I'm sure, pays their taxes to civil government. But how few in our society give to God what is his. The worship, the honor, the glory he is due by believing in the name of his son, Jesus Christ.

[3 : 07] Well, the issue was precipitated by a question Jesus is asked. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? It's an insanity question which Jesus, true to form, turns back on itself, using it to emphasize the importance of faith in him as Messiah.

The vital issue does not concern our relationship to Caesar, but to Christ. And I'm asked to consider this passage from two perspectives this morning.

Firstly, first, Jesus' enemies are always true to form. And secondly, Jesus is always true to form. In the House of Commons, one of the things our American friends find quite amusing about the House of Commons is the way in which parliamentarians will signal their approval of something by stamping their feet and banging their hands on the benches and saying, yeah, yeah, yeah.

To which the Speaker of the House will often say, order. Let me ask us all, which of these parties? Jesus' enemies or Jesus?

Will we stamp our feet in approval, bang our hands on the benches, and loudly say, yeah? First of all, then, Jesus' enemies, true to form.

[4 : 35] The reason I'm using this phrase, true to form, today is that I want us to understand nothing really changes when it comes to people's attitude to God, especially to Christ. Whether you're in first century Israel or 21st century Glasgow, we will observe the same patterns of animosity directed against him.

The name of his enemies might change, but the way they act is predictably the same whatever they are. There is conspiracy, collusion, and conundrum.

The same three issues, true to form, in any age and in any generation, the same three issues for Jesus' enemies then as it is today.

So let's recognize it for what it is. First of all, conspiracy. Conspiracy. You'll notice this passage closely follows the three parables Jesus told concerning the kingdom of heaven, and in particular, who are its citizens?

Who are the people of God? And we saw over the last three weeks that the subjects of the kingdom aren't those we might expect them to be. They are little children. They are tax collectors.

[5 : 47] They are relative strangers. The religious authorities in Israel, particularly the Pharisees, knew exactly who Jesus was directing these parables against.

They knew that Jesus was telling them that no amount of good works on their part, no amount of religious devotion, no ethnic purity was sufficient for entry into the kingdom of God.

The only prerequisite was the grace of God demonstrated in and through his son Jesus Christ. And so we read in Matthew 21 verse 45, When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them.

And so our passage begins in verse 15. Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. Thus begins our conspiracy.

One can almost imagine these Pharisees. They're gathered in a smoke-filled room. They're talking furiously as they sit around an old wooden table. Because in this room they feel safe about venting their anger against Jesus and trying to figure out a thousand ways in which they can trap him.

[7 : 04] Or even better, to get him to trap himself with his words. To force him into a contest, but he can't win. A contest between God and Caesar.

And so fully aware of what they're doing, the Pharisees conspire. And when they come up with a potential course of action, you can imagine them patting each other on the back, getting the cigars out, and saying, We've got him now, boys.

He'll never get out of this one. I wonder whether the Pharisees know they're just the latest villains in a long-running story. A story which has been ongoing since the beginning of the human race.

Even in the Garden of Eden, Satan conspired with Eve. And Eve conspired with Adam, against God.

The builders of the Tower of Babel conspired against God. Let us make a tower. Joseph's brothers conspired against him. King Saul and his servants conspired against David.

[8 : 11] And so on and so forth. These smoke-filled, anti-God, polit-budo-type rooms don't just belong in the ancient world. They equally belong today, where behind the scenes, Christ's enemies conspired to rid society of any God talk at all.

These Pharisees, they're true to form. They're not just talking among themselves in secret. They are conspiring against God and his son, Jesus Christ.

You know, conspiracy theory is a very big business in the world today. We were watching on our telly yesterday a conspiracy theory which suggests that there are two suns in our solar system. Not just one, but two. This has been hidden from us by the American government. A worldwide conspiracy to conceal the existence of aliens.

A worldwide conspiracy to promote capitalist values. Whatever. The greatest and oldest conspiracy of them all is living and well today. The conspiracy against God and his son.

[9 : 26] Beware of the voices of this conspiracy. Voices we may even hear in the church. And remember, just as Solomon said, there is nothing new under the sun.

There is conspiracy. But then there is collusion amongst his enemies. Collusion. International relations in every age has always been governed by the maxim, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Wikipedia credits the quote to a 4th century BC Indian manuscript. But I'd prefer to go back to Psalm 2 in the Bible. See there how people who by nature would be enemies of each other unite as one to fight against God.

The psalmist asked the question, why do the nations conspire? Why do the peoples plot in vain? This age old tendency of the human race explains why in Matthew 22 verse 16, the disciples of the Pharisees collude with the Herodians entrapping Jesus.

The two were natural enemies. The Pharisees were ethnic Jews. very few of them were taken from the middle or upper classes.

[10 : 46] They were religious men. They were devoted to the traditions of the rabbis. Most of them were zealous nationalists who despised the Romans and any Jewish collaboration with the Romans.

The Herodians were ethnically mixed and taken from the ruling upper classes. They were followers and sycophants of King Herod. For them, religion played second fiddle to politics and their primary interest was in courting the favor of Rome.

These two groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians were natural enemies and yet, true to form with Psalm 2, the enemy of my enemy is my friend and they viewed Jesus as a greater threat than they viewed each other and so they collude together as enemies against him.

Again, there's nothing new here. This has always been, it's always been true that natural enemies will collude against God and against his son, Jesus Christ.

In our society, we face the ridicule of both secular, secular pluralism and also evangelical atheism. I'd love to say different, but whatever you turn in our society, Christianity doesn't have many friends, especially if we should insist upon the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the supremacy of his grace in the gospel.

[12:17] Jesus is here confronted by the collusion of his enemies and make no mistake, if we are faithfully standing in the line of Christ, we shall also. Take it for granted and be ready for it.

And then thirdly, the third issue, the third way in which they are true to form the enemies of Jesus is in the conundrum they set to him. The conundrum they set to him. Now comes the switch and bait in verses 16 onwards.

Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity and you teach the word of God in accordance with the truth. Really? Is that really what they think? Because if they did, surely they'd be listening more carefully to Jesus and believe what he said.

Surely, they'd not be trying to trap Jesus in his own words. You know, many people will say nice things about Jesus, but they don't really believe a word he says.

And we need to be very discerning because true to form, Jesus' enemies have always had a common strategy. Tell us then, they say, what is your opinion?

[13:24] Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? If Jesus says, well, of course it's right to pay taxes to Caesar, he falls foul of the nationalistic Pharisees who can then accuse him of collaborating with Rome.

If Jesus says, no, it's not right, he falls foul of the Herodians for whom collaboration with Rome was important, who can then accuse him of rebelling and fomenting nationalism against the Roman authorities.

See what they're doing? They're trying to snare him in a political trap, a zero game, damned if you do, damned if you don't, conundrum.

I may be being a tad harsh, but I suspect that's why so many students and lecturers from the politics department of Aberdeen University came to hear my lecture over 20 years ago.

They wanted me to fall into a political trap from which there was no easy exit. Even the I don't know option, it's not an option for Jesus.

[14:33] And so they're sure they've got him in a snare. As Christians, we've got to be really careful to discern whether the questions we are being asked are sincere or they're being asked to trap us.

But then of course, primarily, this isn't a passage about our apologetics. It's about Jesus and the kingdom of heaven. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that not every question you will be asked as a Christian is being asked out of a sincere search for the truth.

Our Lord was confronted by the same questions behind which he could hear the voice of Satan's laughter. Jerusalem or Rome, Jesus, where does your ultimate loyalty lie?

This conundrum is born out of the collusion of common enemies born out of the conspiracy of a Pharisee's mind. As we might say, plus a change, the enemies of Christ will always act true to form whether in 21st century Israel or 21st century Glasgow.

Not everything is as innocent as we might hope. This calls for a careful and prayerful guard over our minds, hearts, and lips, and in particular, that learning from Jesus himself, we see through the distractions to the central issue, that of a person's attitude to Jesus and the kingdom of heaven.

[16:13] Jesus' enemies true to form. But then second, Jesus true to form. As I said earlier, I'm using the phrase true to form because nothing's really new either concerning people's attitude to God or God's attitude to people.

whether you're in 1st century Israel or 21st century Glasgow, God's attitude to you remains the same. Jesus is true to form, working by his Holy Spirit in the same way today as ever he has done

before.

He has no intention here in Matthew 22 of speaking about politics, of favoring the nationalism of the Pharisees over against the liberalism of the Herodians.

His interest is not in the abstract, it is solely in his relationship with us and in our relationship with him. And so with these two groups they're nipping at his heels, Jesus turns the table on them and reveals the loving heart of God to them.

In the first instance in this passage, God is not interested in political principles but in personal priorities and he's challenging these men and saying to them, you give to God what's God's.

[17 : 43] Now Jesus' response here works once more at three levels. It's perceptive, it is practical and it's personal. It is in the first instance perceptive, perceptive.

Look at verse 18. We read there, Jesus knew their evil intent. He knew that their question was not a sincere quest toward truth but an attempt to trap him.

As I said earlier, not everything is as innocent as we might hope. And Jesus, seeing through the mask of their question, perceives their evil intent.

the particular word Jesus uses here at the NIV translates as evil. He also uses earlier Matthew 5, 37 and 6, 13 in the context of the evil one, the devil.

What we're learning is that Satan can use all kinds of people to do evil. Yes, even religious people. And his tactic throughout the gospel of Matthew has been to divert Jesus from the purpose for which he came, that of pursuing the path of a suffering savior.

[18 : 56] If here Satan can trick Jesus into banging a political drum for the nationalists or for the liberals, he will have won. But Jesus, he's just so perceptive.

He sees through the question to the evil one who hides behind the mask of religious hypocrisy. And he says to them, you hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?

You know, Jesus never minces his words. He tells them straight what he knows them to be, you're hypocrites. You're hiding behind your religion and your politics, but all the time your hearts are very far from God.

Forewarned is forearmed, and Jesus, with that spirit-given perception, sees the trap they've set for him. He doesn't like it one little bit. You know, in Psalm 139, King David tells us, God knows all about me.

He knows all about us. He says, God perceives our thoughts from afar. God even knows what you're thinking right now.

[20 : 08] He knows why we're here in Glasgow City Free Church today. He knows our motive, whether it's for good or for evil. Whatever we do or don't do in life is founded upon motives no one else can see.

God knows what they are. Consider Jesus the Messiah. With spirit-given perception, he sees behind the masks of these Pharisees to the real intention of their hearts.

Do we honestly believe that God cannot see our intentions? X-rays in hospitals, they look beneath the skin and highlight different aspects of our internal structure.

The radiographer can see what's behind our skin in a physical sense. God sees behind our words and deeds, behind our questions for him and our objections to him.

And you know, 99 out of 100 objections come down to this, this one objection. 99 out of 100. I don't mind giving to Caesar what is Caesar's.

[21 : 12] I don't mind going along with the rest of society and its morals, and its spirituality. But under no circumstances will I give to God what is God's.

It is too steep a price to pay. God is real with us. Let's get real with him. Rather than put that mask on, let's tell him what we really think.

Second, practical. Not just perceptive, practical. I love the way in which Jesus with such pointed practicality asks to be shown a denarius, the tax demanded by Roman law.

And of course there's a Walter among the Pharisees who produces a denarius. this. And then Jesus asks those present, whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?

The coin itself was an affront to the Pharisees who believed that any kind of pictorial representation was idolatry and given that the inscription of the coin probably read Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, to them this was red rag to bull.

[22 : 30] But Jesus says she was not with the image nor with the inscription it's with those who are trying to trap him. And so he calls for a coin to be brought to him so that every time these people

look at the denarius they'll remember what he told them.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. But the point I'm trying to make is not about Jesus' teaching technique rather it's how Jesus draws them back from the abstract hypothetical into the real.

He is not going to allow himself to get drawn into a debate on politics. The minute he allows himself to be diverted is the minute the devil has won. Both the Pharisees and the Herodians are trying to trap him.

That's their motive. And on this occasion it suits them to use politics to do so. But all the time Jesus aware of their motive is drawing them back from the hypothetical into the real.

people. This isn't a question about the popularity of Rome Jesus is saying. It's a question about the popularity of the true and living God of the Bible.

[23 : 42] And you know that's so awkward. No one likes having these kind of conversations where the abstract becomes practical. Where the what if questions become the well what now questions.

As we'll see in the following three confrontations over the next few weeks between Jesus and the religious leaders he's not interested in hypothetical what ifs. He's interested in solid what now truths.

I've met many people over the years who would not themselves profess to be Christians but have extremely violent opinions on matters which are virtually inconsequential in the church.

Should someone wear a hat? Should someone wear trousers? Or what kind of things should be seen? They themselves aren't Christians but they have incredibly strong opinions on these matters. They don't realize it but what they're doing is falling into the Pharisees what if game. Rather than getting serious with Jesus what now challenge.

[24 : 51] Look at the image on the coin. Read the inscription. Hear the words of Jesus. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Jesus through his word today is not playing a hypothetical abstract game of what if with us.

Rather he is directly addressing each of us here today and challenging us as to where we stand not before Caesar but before a greater king altogether before him.

Perceptive practical and then lastly personal personal. At the end of the day the central challenge of this passage isn't about a Christian response to taxation or a Christian attitude to politics.

I remember on one occasion as a student going to church I'm not going to tell you who it was that was preaching suffice to say it was not Alec Macdonald. It was a visiting preacher that day.

And the minister chose this text Matthew 22 verse 21 to preach from and he proceeded to spend 45 minutes discussing the interface between Christianity economics and politics.

[26 : 10] And I'm sure it was very interesting indeed but I for one did not listen to a word of it. I think it was the week after I'd done my own lecture. I'd come to church that day having received some terrible news and my heart and my mood were in my boots and what I needed to hear was the word of grace.

Not Trotsky grace. Not Thatcher grace. The central challenge of this passage is about our personal response to Jesus challenge.

Give to God what is God's. And precisely what is it that we are to give to God's? Well the previous passage Matthew 22 verses 1 to 14 is the parable of the wedding banquet where the king invites the guests to celebrate the marriage of his son but they refuse.

come the king says celebrate the wedding of my son but they neither pay attention nor are willing to come.

They make nothing of him the king and they make nothing of his son. They repeatedly refuse his invitation. What is it then that Jesus calls us to give to God?

[27 : 29] Answer. Accept his invitation. God calls us to come and celebrate with him the glorious achievements of his son Jesus Christ.

He calls us to faith in him and obedience to him. He calls us not to trap him but to trust him. Jesus is always true to form in generously inviting those who oppose him to change sides.

To do something out of character as it were and rather than collude and conspire against him to break ranks and to come to him in faith. To do something which in the world of his day was terribly politically incorrect and to accept that Jesus does not need an inscription on a coin to tell the world he is the divine son because he really is the divine son.

I know that if a general election was to be held tomorrow some of us here would vote for the Scottish nationalists.

Others would vote for Labour. Some others the Conservative Party. Still others the Green Party. And still others the Liberal Democrats.

[28 : 49] Some might even vote for the Brexit Party. Let's be honest it really doesn't bother me who you vote for and I do not want to know.

But it does bother me if you do not vote for Jesus. It does bother me that having given to Caesar what is Caesar's you fail to give to God what is God's namely to accept his invitation to have faith in his son.

So what today will be our response to how Jesus turns the table and hoists us on our own petard? What will we say to Jesus today?

Let us pray. Let us pray.