

"Whose Image?"

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[0 : 00] Which of us, I wonder, like paying our taxes? Honestly, even those of us who understand why they are needed, who appreciate them, and who are willing to pay them, I think it would be a stretch to say that we enjoy paying taxes.

Now, on the surface, this passage revolves around a question about paying tax. But, as with everything else in God's Word, it's about far more than that.

There's more going on here than we might see on the surface. Because this was a question with an agenda behind it. And that's one of the first things I want to look at.

That would be my first heading, if you like, the agenda. And then, secondly, I want to look at the answer that Jesus gave. Because this was a question with an agenda, and it got an answer beyond what they were expecting.

So, firstly, what was the agenda behind this seemingly straightforward question? To understand that, we need to first ask who it was who was asking Jesus the question.

[1 : 23] Now, the Bible tells us that this was a group sent by the Pharisees. And we might have some familiarity with the Pharisees. They're mentioned quite a few times in the Gospel accounts.

At this time, they were well on their way to establishing themselves as the religious leaders of Judaism. They were drawn predominantly from the laity rather than the priesthood.

But they were diligent and they were zealous for Judaism, for the law and the prophets. They often get a bad name for their legalism. But the rules they put in place were actually a sincere attempt to protect the nation from accidentally breaking the commandments.

And they were separatists. And they believed God's chosen people should hold themselves apart from the unclean, even nations. They would have found the Roman occupation with all its taxation very, very oppressive.

They would have hated the Roman forms of worship, which included many gods, including divine emperors, and worship of the Scythus, the state itself. Now, Matthew and Mark's accounts tell us that these Pharisees weren't alone.

[2 : 37] They were accompanied by people called the Herodians. Now, unlike the Pharisees, they aren't mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. So who were they?

Well, the Herodians would have been followers of the Herodian dynasty, the kings, the client kings, who were put in position by the occupying Roman Empire.

They would have been normally observant of Judaism, but not by much. Now, they would have been seen by the people as assistants of the oppressors, as collaborators.

They underwrote the building of Jewish temples, of pagan temples, and a lot of people would have viewed them just as puppets. Now, you don't need to be an expert in first century Palestinian politics to see that this was an unlikely alliance, this grouping, these Pharisees and Herodians working together.

So what had brought them together? And what was their agenda? Well, you see, for all their differences, the Pharisees and the Herodians had one thing in common.

[3 : 47] Jesus. Jesus was a threat to both groups. He criticized them publicly, and he threatened to undermine their position.

He challenged their seniority. He won the crowds over to himself. In fact, part of the problem was that he was too popular with the crowds for them to be able to afford to move against him openly.

So they form an alliance of convenience in the face of this common foe. And they come to him with a cunning question, which verse 15 tells us clearly was a plot designed to catch him out.

Is it lawful to pay the tax to Caesar? Seems like such a simple question. But what was this tax?

Well, one of the ways in which the Roman Empire enforced its power and its rule in conquered territories was a requirement to pay a set tax.

[4 : 55] And the tax was symbolic of the fact that the nation had been conquered. But it would also go on to financially support the continued occupation of the area by helping to fund the empire itself.

So the conquered people were actually paying for their own oppression. And as if this was bad enough, the tax couldn't be paid in goods or exchange or barter or even in local coin.

It had to be paid in Roman coin. Now, this coin, no matter who held it, was by law always the technical property of the emperor, as shown by his mark on it.

So the requirement to pay this tax to handle Roman currency would have been a constant reminder to a proud people that they had been conquered and that they were firmly under the imperial boot.

So you can imagine the silence that must have fallen as people waited to see how Jesus was going to answer this question.

[6 : 04] Because, you see, if he was seen to support the Roman regime and its taxation, he would lose the support of most of the crowd.

And then the Pharisees would be free to act against him. He would, in effect, be becoming a supporter of the Roman oppression. But if he spoke against the tax, then he could be accused of treason against the emperor and be handed over to the Roman authorities.

Meaning the Pharisees could be free of him without any blame attaching to them. And the Herodians would score points with their masters. But Jesus isn't falling for this.

They may have thought they were being pretty subtle. But he knows their hearts and their minds.

And he is not about to stumble into their hands. You hypocrites, he calls them in verse 18.

He exposes their false flattery for what it is. Why do you put me to the test? Or as other translations would read, why do you seek to trap me?

[7 : 18] And then he does answer their question. Our second point, then, is the answer. And it was more of an answer than they had bargained for.

See, the Pharisees and the Herodians have tried to entangle Jesus in a dilemma. They think they've presented him with two options. One of which will anger the crowd.

One of which will anger the authorities. Now, Jesus neatly sidesteps this dilemma. But he doesn't do so by giving an answer to please everyone.

In fact, no one is likely to be completely happy with his answer. Because what we have here is not just a clever debating trick.

What we have is Jesus taking a question that was designed to trap him. And turning it into an opportunity to teach the truth without compromising himself.

[8 : 20] Because the Pharisees and the Herodians, they may have needed the support of the people. But Jesus wasn't entering into a popularity contest with them.

He wasn't looking for public approval. He was looking for the lost. He didn't try to tell people what they wanted to hear. He told them what they needed to hear.

Now, we need to learn from that. Don't get me wrong. It's good to be able to coherently defend your faith. But it's not to hone our rhetorical skills that God has called us.

But to share his message. And it's important that that always takes primacy. We are not called to win debates. But to win souls.

So, what does Jesus say? Excuse me. What does Jesus say? First, if we look at verse 19.

[9 : 28] He asks to be given one of the coins. Now, this is more than just a typical rabbinical flourish of using a visual prop to focus attention.

Jesus is making a point. Not only does he not carry this much despised denarius. But his questioners do. And being forced to concede this in front of the crowd and to hand it over.

That must have stunned. And I suspect that by this point, some of them have realized that they are not walking away unscathed from this exchange. Jesus isn't finished asking them questions.

He asks them, whose portrait is this? Whose picture is this? And whose inscription? Note that he's involving those who would catch them out in their own fault.

He doesn't just accuse them. He lets them set themselves up. He lets them show themselves for what they are. And again, this question would have been a barb to them.

[10 : 34] Not only do they have to concede that the coin carries Caesar's picture. But Jesus also asks about the inscription on the coin. Now, this inscription would have blasphemously named the Emperor Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus.

And to be reminded of this inscription on their coin would have been further salt in the wound for the Pharisees. The very coin which Jesus' accusers carry is in itself a blasphemous idol.

The same Pharisees who thought themselves defenders of Judaism had literally bought into the Imperium by carrying this coin. And now Jesus comes to the meat of his answer.

Listen to what he says in verse 21. Listen to this. He says, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Now, our modern translations lose a bit of the impact of this answer.

The ESV gives us render. It means something more like give up or give what is due or give back. In other words, this coin is already Caesar's.

[11 : 52] So give it back to him. It could be argued that Jesus was here saying that if the people accepted the Roman coin, with it all the other benefits of the state and belonging to the Empire, what all that brought, then they could hardly balk at paying the tax.

I don't want to go too deeply into that tonight, but it certainly doesn't leave much wiggle room for those who argue that taxation is theft or in some way unbiblical. Jesus' answer doesn't end there. He has more to say. Again, listen. He says, Give or render or return to God what is God's. So what does he mean by this?

Well, on the surface, it might seem like the meaning is obvious. Give Caesar what is his due and God what is his. Obedience to the state and to God within their appropriate spheres.

What is God's due? What does Jesus mean when he says, Render unto God what is God's? Does he mean the tithe?

[13 : 05] Does he mean regular worship? Does he mean obedience to God's law? Well, all of the above.

But more, much more. You see, the Pharisees managed all of that. And Jesus' response stings them. No, there's more to this answer than that.

Because if we return to Jesus' first question regarding the coin. Whose portrait is on this? Whose likeness? Whose image?

The word we have here is icon. And it's the same one that's used in Greek translations of Genesis in the creation narrative.

Whose image does the coin bear? It bears Caesar's image. So it belongs to Caesar. And it must be rendered to him. So if we are to follow this logic through to the next part of the answer.

[14 : 13] What should be rendered to God? That which bears his image. Consider the words we have in Genesis chapter 1, verse 27.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. See, Jesus wasn't telling his listeners to give God their money.

Or their time. Or their good works. Or any of that. He was telling them to give back to God what was his due. Themselves.

Ourselves. It's no wonder then that, as Luke's account tells us, astonished by his answer, they became silent.

They had asked him a simple question about money. And while Jesus had answered it, he'd effectively said, But what you do with your money isn't nearly as important as my question.

[15 : 23] What are you going to do with your life? So how do we answer that question?

Are we hoping that he will make do with our spare change, so to speak? Are we giving ourselves grudgingly, the bare minimum? Do we treat our service to God as a tax that we pay only because we have to?

Because that's not how it is. Or at least it's not how it should be. It's just like that coin. We should be saying, you know, my entire life, my very self, my being, is already God's by right.

So I should give it back to him. All of it. And the fantastic thing is, when we do that, we get so much more back in return.

Because just like that coin, if we are rendering our lives up to God, if we are returning, giving back our lives to God, if we acknowledge that we belong to him, body and soul, and we are dependent on him for every good thing, then we should bear his image.

[16 : 50] Just as that coin was stamped, so God's likeness should be visible to everyone who looks at our lives. And the inscription on us should bear testament to the fact that he is our God and our master.

Is that true of your lives? Is it true of mine? We need to ensure that it is so. We are inclined to believe that we need to work hard to be what we should be.

The best versions of ourselves. But that's not what I'm telling you. And it's not what the Bible tells us. We need to stop trying to hold on to ourselves.

We need to hand ourselves over to him and ask him to make us what we should be. It's not about giving generously.

It's about giving ourselves. Are you ready to do that? Are you ready to render to God what is God's?

[18 : 14] That's what he asks of us. Are you ready to do that? To render to God what is God's?

Let's bow our heads briefly in prayer.

Lord God, we ask that you would bless your word to us as we consider it. That you would speak through it. That you would speak through what we've considered.

That you would help us, Lord, to recognize that as those who are made by you and as those who belong to you, we can only reach our full potential in service to you.

There is no shame to work at the task for which we were made. Not only by doing that, only by realizing that potential can we be truly happy.

And as we do so, Lord, we pray that we would bring glory to you. That we would glorify your name.

That when people look at us, they would see your image stamped on us. And that would draw them to you for themselves so that they might come to me.

[19 : 20] We can't do this alone, Lord. And so we pray that you would help us, empower us and enable us through your Holy Spirit. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.