

**False Dichotomy**  
**Matthew 22:15-22, Genesis 1:24-2:3**  
**November 5, 2017**  
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In the early 1960s, our nation was engaged in a great national struggle over civil rights. There were “freedom riders” putting themselves in danger in the south, there were demonstrations in many cities, there were marches from small towns in the south to our nation’s capital. Much of this struggle was led by a young Baptist preacher, named after one of the saints that we talked about last week, Martin Luther. In March 1965, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called on ministers of all faiths and races to join in a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to call for voting rights for all people. A Presbyterian minister in suburban Philadelphia responded and took time from his church to join Dr. King and thousands of others in the march. This did not go over well with the leadership of his home church. The elders let him know that this was something that was inappropriate for their minister to do, that he should be their spiritual leader and not become involved in politics. But compelled by his conscience, he not only remained involved, but preached on issues of civil rights, equality, and social justice. Opposition to him in the church increased and he was eventually forced to leave and take another church. But he was emotionally devastated by that experience and he eventually left the church and left the ministry for several years. But God had called him to be a pastor and God kept calling, so he and his wife began to look for another church, one that he could care for and that would also care for him, a place for healing. And so, in 1976, Dr. Evor Roberts came to be the pastor of this church, and found among you the healing that he needed. Evor was my predecessor, he became my mentor, and this time of year, when Reformation Sunday and All Saints’ Day come around, I think of people like Martin Luther, and Martin Luther King Jr., but even before them, I think of Evor Roberts. For me, he showed me what a life of integrity was, that life is whole, and that God is Lord of all of life. When I hold this pastor’s staff, I remember that this was a gift from Evor to me. A symbol of all that he gave to me.

Integrity. The passage we just read from Matthew is one that is a challenge to the integrated life. Should faith and politics mix? The interesting thing about this passage is that it is challenging to both ends of the political spectrum. The passage says that Jesus was approached by the Herodians and the Pharisees. In first century Palestine, the Herodians were a group that favored going along with the government, keeping their institutions intact, paying taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were constantly at odds with the authorities, trying to change things, questioning whether they should pay taxes to Rome or not. But both groups found themselves threatened by this rabbi from Galilee. He had come into the Temple at the beginning of the week and turned over the tables where money was changed and sacrificial items were purchased. He was making everyone angry. Confronted by the religious leaders regarding the authority behind his actions, Jesus tells several provocative--even threatening parables--that we've looked at over these last few weeks; parables which called into question the leaders own authority and, indeed, what standing they had before God.

It's for this reason that these two groups that normally wanted little to do with each other, declare a temporary truce in order to work together to trap this upstart rabbi. They approach him using false praise, a manipulation to flatter him and get him to put his guard down. Then, they pose this clever question, asking Jesus whether it was lawful to pay the poll or imperial tax because it was this tax that funded the Roman occupation. It seems an honest and straightforward question on the surface but underneath is a deceitful objective to sabotage Jesus and his ministry. Should Jesus say yes, pay the tax to Caesar, the adoration of the crowds would likely turn to opposition. They hated the Emperor and hated having to pay the tax. But should Jesus say no, don't pay it, then he will have positioned himself over and against the Romans, never a wise thing to do. So they've got him trapped. Either the crowds will hate him or the Romans will arrest him. Either one would fit the goals of the Herodians and the Pharisees.

Or at least that's what they think.

Because if their question is clever, then Jesus' response is ingenious or, more appropriately, inspired.

After asking if any of his questioners has a coin of the Empire – the only coin that could be used to pay the tax in question – they quickly find one. Jesus asks whose image is on it, and they answer, “The Emperor's.” There's more going on here than meets the eye, because along with that image is an engraved confession of Caesar's divinity, “Augustus, high priest, Son of God.” Any Jew who uses that coin is using something that depicts an image of a divine Caesar, and proclaims him the Son of Roman gods. Any Jew holding the coin is breaking the first two commandments—thou shalt have no other God before me and thou shalt not make any graven images.

So, should Jesus go against Rome or go against God? Finally, he replies: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” And with this one sentence, Jesus does not simply evade their trap and confound their plans, but issues a challenge to his hearers that reverberates through the ages into our sanctuaries.

Give to the Emperor the things that are the emperors and to God the things that are God's.

That seems to set up a nice separation, doesn't it? Many have interpreted this passage that way. On one side is the loyalty that belongs to the government and on the other side is the loyalty that belongs to God. Is that the way it is with us? We owe loyalty to our nation, our government, our flag, our heritage—and so we pay taxes, we say the pledge of allegiance, we encourage service in the military, we might even risk our lives. We have our secular lives that are ruled by loyalty to our country, we love our country. On the other hand, we have loyalty to God, and so we belong to a church, we pray, we try to follow the commandments, we pledge a portion of our income, and we have our religious life that is ruled over by God.

Separation of church and state. That's how it works, right?

Well, that's the way it has been tried, not just a separation of church and state, but a separation of faith and politics. God on one side and the government on the other. In January 1933, after frustrating years in which no government in Germany was able to solve problems of economic depression and mass unemployment, Adolph Hitler was named chancellor. By playing on people's fear of communism and revolution, he was able to persuade the Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. As he consolidated his power, Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. He soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own "People's Courts," initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and he got the support of many Christian leaders because he argued, the church should be concerned about the soul, the government with the body; the church is about religious life and the state about secular life—some parts belonged to the Emperor and other parts belonged to God.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, some in the churches sought to maintain their integrity and they resisted. In May of 1934, a group of pastors, church members and university professors gathered in Barmen and passed a short declaration. Eventually called the Theological Declaration of Barmen,<sup>2</sup> one of the points the delegates made was to quote I Corinthians, proclaiming their faith in "Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (I Cor. 1:30.) Then they said, "As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness is he also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures. We reject

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Confessions, PC (USA). Introduction to the Theological Declaration of Barmen.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.”<sup>3</sup>

God's mighty claim on our whole life.

In the parable, Jesus is not advising us to create columns in our life—one for the secular and one for the sacred. The line separating what is God's from what is the governments is not a vertical one, over here is the government's, and over here is God's, but rather think of it as God at the top of the page. From the top, God has claim on all of our lives. Yes, we owe loyalty to our country. We pay taxes, we vote, we do the work of good citizens. But it is part of our life of faith. Our first loyalty is to God. Jesus is essentially saying that Caesar has his place on the page but God rules over the entire page, the entirety of our lives.

It is interesting in this passage that the Pharisees and Herodians are ready to accuse Jesus of blasphemy if he says it's okay to use this image of the Emperor to pay taxes, or to accuse him of sedition if he goes against the Romans and say not to pay the tax. But when Jesus responds to them, he accuses them of something else—hypocrisy. You're being hypocrites, he says. A hypocrite is someone who says one thing but does another. They are so concerned about the image of the Emperor, they have forgotten the image of God. Jesus wants them to remember that they have been created in the image of God. They present themselves as religious leaders but they have failed to remember that they were created in the image of God and they've turned the Temple into a vehicle for their own glorification and greed. They have forgotten who they are. In the words of Genesis, as Lee read today, God said, “let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness.”

Jesus wants to remind us of the same thing. We are all created in God's image. We represent God to

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<sup>3</sup> Theological Declaration of Barmen. 8.13-15. *The Book of Confessions*. PC(USA)

the world around us. When people looked at a coin in the Empire, they were reminded of the Emperor and the extent of his rule. When we pull out a quarter we are reminded of George Washington and we know what country we are in and what government exists here. What about when people see us? Who do they see? Whose image do we bear? Who do we look like? We are the image-bearers of the one who made us. The creation story reminds us of this. Sundays, we set apart a time for rest, a time for God, but that does not mean that's the only day that belongs to God and--come the first day of the week-- we do whatever we want. All the days belong to God. All the world belongs to God. All of our lives belong to God, everything we have, everything we are is by the grace and mercy of God. We have integrity. And we show this by being the image of God in the world.

As we head into the Stewardship season, of course, you are hearing some about different things the church is doing and how we hope you will support those efforts in education and worship and mission. But Stewardship is not really about what we *do*. It's about who we *are*, children created in the image of God. Bearing God's image, we approach the world in love, self-sacrifice, humility; we care for the world, nurture, seek justice. All the things our God is to us, we are to be for one another. We seek integrity with God first as individuals and then—quite miraculously—when two or three are gathered in his name—we become The Church, the Body of Christ. Making a pledge during this time is about deciding who you are and whose image you bear and who we are and whose image we bear. We don't put our lives in convenient compartments; to live like some of your life belongs to you and some belongs to God is a false dichotomy. We are not our own, but we belong, body and soul, in life and death, to the one who made us, loves us, and gave himself for us.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.001. *The Book of Confessions*. PC(USA).