

Gotcha!!!
Bob Stillerman
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Matthew 22:15-22
October 22, 2017

A Senator is asked for comment on successful legislation that will greatly enhance the lives of her constituents. There's only one rub: the legislation was introduced by a political rival.

A software developer is asked for comment on an innovative new product that will revolutionize the industry. There's only one problem: the product is made by a competitor.

A college football analyst is asked to pick a winner for tonight's game between two rabid fan bases.

These are what we call gotcha questions. There's really no good way to answer them, because no matter the response, it's going to anger some, if not all of your constituents: voters, shareholders, fans, supporters will all say: "How dare you answer that way? What about us?!?"

And the reporter who asks the question will say, "Gotcha!!!"

In today's lection, Matthew tells us that the Herodians and the Pharisees are ready to launch a gotcha grenade at Jesus. The Herodians were those Jewish families of privilege who supported King Herod and the Roman establishment. The Pharisees were a rigorous and devout religious sect. They sought to follow Jewish law and tradition to the letter.

Jesus is not overtly patriotic. Nor is Jesus an extremist. But Jesus does have a great deal of appeal among the largest population in the region: Jewish peasants. And because he's different and influential, Jesus is a threat to both the Pharisees and the Herodians. And his movement must be stopped!!!

The Pharisees decide they are going to trap Jesus into answering a gotcha question that will divide his support, and ultimately, destroy his influence. They put their best interns on the case. These disciples of the Pharisees join up with a few of the Herodians, and head over to where Jesus is preaching.

They decide they're gonna try to sweet talk Jesus. They'll lure him into their trap. "Hey Jesus," they say, "We know you to be a really impartial person – someone who answers questions about God openly and objectively. We really value your opinion. You are such a good teacher. Oh, and are those new sandals you are wearing? And is that a new tunic, too? Old Navy, right? You are lookin' good!!!

Anywho, we were just wondering if you'd answer a question for us: 'Does the law allow us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' Boom, Gotcha!!!"

The question is a trap. The tax these students refer to is the census tax. The census tax was not only a source of revenue for the Roman government, but Stanley Saunders tells us it was also a source of domination and authority. To participate in Rome's economy, one needed to use Roman coinage. And the images on the coins bore out that authority. Each coin had the image of the Roman emperor Tiberius, who was not only the political authority, but was also the high priest of Rome. In other words, the coin implied that the emperor was Lord of all – Caesar controlled every transaction, big or small, public or private, personal or corporate.

The majority of Jewish people, Pharisees included, don't like this tax, and not just because of the financial burden. Torah says to honor God alone. Paying a tax to someone who claims to be God is a desecration; it's unholy. If Jesus answers yes, he risks alienating himself from the Pharisees and from the people – Not only is he unholy, but he supports an abusive tax.

On the other hand, the Herodians are quite content with the status quo. It's good to be a steward of the king. If everyone will keep paying their taxes, the rich will get richer. If Jesus answers, no, he will anger the Herodians, and he risks being branded seditious. Arrest will be imminent.

Jesus, will not be trapped.

"You hypocrites," he says. "Why are you putting me to the test? You want a yes or no answer, but I will not give it."

He looks into the crowd, and he says, "Who's got a denarius I can borrow?"

One of the Pharisees tosses him a denarius. And Jesus inspects the coin.

"This is the coin you use to pay the tax?"

The crowd of Pharisees nod their head yes.

"And whose picture is on this coin and whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," the crowd says.

"Well, then," Jesus says, "Give to Caesar's what is Caesar's."

And when I read this passage, I imagine that Jesus hesitates for just a moment. The Pharisees get ready to do a little chest-bumping, thinking, "We've got him now!!!"

He tosses the coin back to the students.

And Jesus continues, "But give also to God, what is God's."

The little victory celebration of the Pharisees and Herodians is cut short. That's not what he's supposed to say. This was a yes or no question, and his response has left us speechless!!!

Stanly Saunders describes Jesus' response as masterful. Saunders beckons us back to the baptism of Jesus. When John baptized Jesus in the Jordan waters, Jesus threw away his dependence on earthly powers, and he entrusted his whole well-being into the hands of God. Jesus became a full participant in God's economy, not Caesar's. And because he was wholly and fully invested in God's economy, he had no need or desire to participate in Caesar's. Wealth and power were currencies that held no value for him. And who shops in a market full of stuff they neither want nor need?

Not so for the Pharisees.

By owning and providing the coin given to Jesus, the Pharisees acknowledge that they participate in Rome's economy, an economy of wealth, power and privilege. They use coins to acquire and pay for the things they need, even if these coins represent an authority they find repulsive. Regardless, Jesus says if you are going to participate in what belongs to the emperor, you must give the emperor what he is due.

I told you that I imagined Jesus flicking the coin back to his audience, and I think his gesture implies, "Buddy, if you wanna pay that tax, you go right ahead. It's your choice to make. I'll not stop you."

"But you must also remember that you have another obligation. You participate in God's economy, too. And if you want a full part in that economy, you must give to God what is God's."

But that's where Jesus stops. He never says what we should give or how much we should give. He implies that it's our choice to make.

This shouldn't surprise us.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus spends his entire ministry describing the Kingdom of Heaven: God's system, God's economy, the world which God intends to bring about. Jesus never offers a prescription for participation. There's no required dose of time, or energy, or love, or any other asset. It's beyond measurement. It's not about more. It's not about less. It's about enough. Manna, Love, Grace...these gifts of God are always available and always enough.

So Jesus teaches in parables. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who has two sons. The kingdom of heaven is like a master who owns a vineyard. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding party for his son. The kingdom of heaven doesn't have decimal points. And it's hard to paint a full picture. All we can do is describe it in glimpses. God requires what is God's.

But Caesar's kingdom, well that's something we can describe. It's a game of King of the Hill. And it is certainly measurable. There can only be one winner, and that winner can only be a winner by keeping others down. And that winner can only be a winner as long as they have the stamina to keep others down.

In Caesar's kingdom, resources are finite. More is better. Less is worse. Questions require yes or no answers. Kindness requires payment. And manna, love, and grace, well they're rarely available.

When Jesus says, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's," he refuses to play a game that requires finite answers to gotcha questions. He refuses to trivialize the importance of God. And he will not tell us in measured terms what's required of us.

Jesus, did however, provide an example for us to follow.

Jesus did not offer his political loyalty to purchase his safety. Jesus did not sacrifice his integrity to gain power. Jesus did not praise God to gain the favor of religious leaders. Jesus would not trade his convictions for earthly comforts. Jesus emptied himself of every gift reserved for God: selfless acts of love for God and for others. The only value such currency held in Caesar's economy was death on a cross. But the value of this currency in God's economy: it was full and whole communion with our Creator.

In other words, Jesus did not allow the demands of Caesar's economy to prevent him from fulfilling the requirements of God's kingdom.

I think the question Jesus asked all those years ago is: "What are you giving to Caesar that prevents you from rendering unto God what is God's?"

St. Augustine wrestled with this question, too. He wanted to know which earthly treasures and desires cause us to lose focus on God, to love God a little less?

And we wonder the same thing. What are we most dependent on? Is it a job that pays big money and buys nice things? Is it the status that a document provides? Does a photo ID, or birth certificate, or social security card, or marriage license, or diploma, or bank statement, or house deed, or any other piece of paper afford us a sense of privilege and status that we don't want to give up? We love the comforts we find in Caesar's system.

But what are the burdens of those comforts? Do we spend so much time chasing after the finite rewards of Caesar's kingdom that we fail to value the enoughness of all that God provides and will provide.

Jesus says, "Render unto God what is God's." And what is God's?

Stand up if you are able. Look around. We are God's. And God asks us for our best selves. (*You may be seated.*)

I cannot tell you what your best self looks like. That's for each one of us to figure out. But I can tell you this for certain. We worship a God who has endowed each of us with remarkable gifts and unlimited potential, and who has an expectation that we use those gifts to make this world a better place. But unlike Caesar, Our God is not a Lord who will coerce you; Our God will not zap you; Our God will not tax you, Our God will not seek to dominate you; Our God will not play a game of gotcha. The God we serve is one of love and forgiveness and grace. Our God invites us into a new kind of living. And better still, our God gives us the space to figure things out.

As we walk this exciting, difficult, and hopeful path of giving to God what is God's, sometime we'll feel confident, sometimes we'll feel clumsy, sometimes we'll feel confused. No matter. There's one other thing we can always offer that is God's: our gratitude.

(*Congregation in Unison*). THANKS BE TO GOD!!! THANKS BE TO GOD!!! THANKS BE TO GOD!!!

Amen.