

**“Show me the coin.”**  
**Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church**  
**Wichita, Kansas**  
**October 22, 2017**

Matthew 22:15-22<sup>1</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ <sup>21</sup>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.’ <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

So much has come to hang on the phrase “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” One can fairly track Christian history by various perspectives on this cryptic statement: from the gradual assumption of the Christian Church into the processes of the Roman Empire which seemed to neutralize it; to the Protestant Reformation with its objection that the Pope had become, in some measure, the emperor; to the Radical Reformation, to which gave rise to we Anabaptists, with its insistence that we had lost our way from the command to give to God what is God’s and which sought a new awareness of what we call in Mennonite thinking the “two kingdoms”; down to our present day controversies on the relationships between Church and State.

And the narrative that the evangelist of Matthew gives us is, indeed, compelling. Jesus is approached by a single group, which has the purpose of entrapping him in saying something that will compromise him to the people or to the authorities. The Pharisees, who espouse – if not necessarily practice – resistance to the Roman Empire, will wait for Jesus to say the tax should be paid so they may denounce Jesus as a collaborator with the hated Romans. The Herodians, followers of King Herod, who maintains his Jewish kingdom with the cooperation and tolerance of the Romans, will wait for Jesus to say the tax shouldn’t be paid so setting the stage

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<sup>1</sup> All Biblical citations from: New Revised Standard Version Bible. Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. 1989.

for them to denounce him as a rebel threatening the public order.<sup>2</sup> Jesus asks for a coin which, if the Pharisees were serious about the uncleanness of images of the Emperor, they would not be able to produce in the Temple; as they proceed do. Jesus perceptively gives them an answer that is not quite satisfactory, but not quite offensive. It is also not terribly specific. As he often does, Jesus leaves the Pharisees, the Herodians, the disciples, and us to work through as we can what his meaning may be.

Yet for all the weight that has since been placed upon it, this confrontation has in the Scriptures a rather curious isolation. If we speak of politics as having to do with civic structures, it is the only statement of Jesus that can remotely be interpreted as “political”. There are no prior statements concerning God and human authority in Matthew and, more to the point, there are no subsequent restatements of it, at least not of any direct kind. There are no instances of Jesus instructing his disciples “Now this is an example of giving to God what is God’s, and this is an example of giving to the emperor what is the emperor’s.” There is nothing like that in any of the Gospels.

When we have a particularly unusual and vivid occurrence in the Gospels, we can take one of two approaches to figuring what it may have to teach it. We can study it as a singular message, or we can examine it to see where it harmonizes with a more familiar, larger message. The problem that the single, isolated approach presents us, it seems to me, is that if we become too caught up in this dialogue as being the grand statement of Jesus on political/civic arrangements we run the risk of giving ourselves over to the difficulties that accompany that other great consideration of politics in the New Testament: the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, who was, after all, executed as a political criminal. Pontius Pilate cannot, in the end, understand anyone who speaks as Jesus speaks in any context other than that of being a political commentary. If Jesus can make any sense to him at all it is only through that lens, through that viewpoint. In a certain way the real “crime” of Jesus is not that he is rebellious against Rome, but that he is indifferent to Rome. If we wish to avoid creating for

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<sup>2</sup> “Although the Herodians play no role in Matthew’s time, he retains them from Mark, for they represent the overt supporters of the Roman regime and would support paying the tax. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were popular with the people because they in principle resented and resisted the tax, but did not go as far as the radical nationalists who publicly resisted its payment.” Boring, M. Eugene. “The Gospel of Matthew” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. p. 420.

ourselves the mental trap that Pilate created for himself; we cannot narrow ourselves to seeing Jesus in a narrow political context. Jesus challenges us to something greater than that.

Let us, therefore, consider how, in this confrontation with the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus demonstrates what he has taught us before in Matthew, and will teach us again. We will note that later in Matthew 22, Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment and he replies “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”<sup>3</sup>

As he does throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks very personally and immediately to those who approach him. However universal his themes might be, he is always careful to give proper acknowledgment to those who engage his attention. We should be mindful then that he is not speaking to Caesar, or to Herod. He is speaking to people immediately before him who out of their own emotional smallnesses wish him ill. He says to them, as he says in some way or another to all of us, “Show me the coin.” They proceed to do so. They show him the coin because they want to see if Jesus knows, as they know, what it is they should do to live in God’s love and favor. The coin they show him is their very lives. And the lives they live are ones where they believe that if they do the right thing, go to the right places, be with the right people, follow the right procedures, God will love them. They know the right things and do the right things as Jesus and his disciples do not and cannot. The only “coin” that the bedraggled n’er-do-wells who follow Jesus have to show is that somehow their experience of Jesus has made them love the Lord, their God with all their hearts, all their souls, and all of whatever minds they have. And the vision that Jesus gives them is that through such a love they will do the right things, whatever place they are in will be the right place, and that God will make them the right people they cannot make themselves into.

When we undertake to *do* what we perceive we need to do to induce God to love us we become the coin that is Caesar’s; for that is how the world teaches us to get things done, to make our way, to accomplish what we want to accomplish. When we undertake to love God, in the confidence that the God we love will give us

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22: 37.

what is necessary to *be* what we need to be, and that out of that will grow a life that properly serves the God we love; then our lives become the coin that belongs to God.

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