

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22

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Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.
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.
Tell us, then, what you think: is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said,
 "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?
Show me the coin used for the tax."
And they brought him a denarius.

Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"
They answered, "The emperor's."

Then he said to them,
 "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,
 and to God the things that are God's."
When they heard this, they were amazed;
and they left him and went away.

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The structure of this story is as follows:

- The Pharisees' plot and the trap set for Jesus
- Jesus' request for a denarius
- The statement about the character of the denarius and who's head and title it is
- Jesus' concluding response and the departure of his antagonists

There are four episodes. If you think of the story with this episodic structure in mind, it will be easier to remember. The first episode is an episode of political baiting in which the Pharisees' disciples and the Herodians praise Jesus as a set up for the question that could not be answered in any way that would avoid political damage. If Jesus answered, "It's lawful to pay the taxes," he alienated the vast majority of people who were opposed to paying taxes and hated the emperor. If he said, "Don't pay the taxes," he would have been charged with sedition and would have allied himself with the zealots and those who were advocating not paying taxes and revolt against Rome.

An issue in the telling of this story is whether to follow the NRSV in translating "Caesar" as "the emperor" or to leave it as "Caesar." The translators of the NRSV have decided to translate a proper name into an English title. "Caesar" was a family name of Julius Caesar that was associated with the emperor for the next 100 years because the emperors until

Vespasian were descendants of Julius Caesar. In this instance I recommend retaining the name Caesar. It sounds stronger and it preserves the character of the term as a family name. People today know and recognize the name Caesar; it does not need translation.

This is a conflict story. It begins with a series of statements of praise. The tone of the statements is fawning—fake and exaggerated praise. It might even be told with big bows and laudatory gestures. It's a set-up. Jesus' response indicates that he sees through their hypocrisy and his tone may well be cutting, even angry. This tone of Jesus' voice continues throughout the story. It is also probable that the leaders pronounced Caesar's name with disdain. An advantage of translating Caesar vs. the emperor is that the word Cesar in English can be virtually spit out.

The argument of zealous Jews was that everything was due to God. All things are due to God. That's what the zealots steadily said. A contrary position was a kind of separation of church and state, as this story has often been interpreted, the view being that taxes were due to the emperor—Caesar—and ultimate loyalty was due to God. The question is what does ultimate loyalty mean and what is due to God? There were different opinions about that.

Jesus' response to this question is to ask for a coin. His opponents then say that the coin is Caesar's, to which Jesus replies, "Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's..." (namely, the coin) "...and to God the things that are God's." Does this include the coin or not? Some said yes, some said no. Jesus' response meant that they had to answer what is due to God. They were amazed that he had avoided this trap and that he had instead put the question right back where it belonged: each one of them had to answer it for themselves. The logic of the story (what is due to God) Jesus requires each listener to decide for himself.

Jesus' first response—give to Caesar—implies that they should pay the taxes. The second part of his response—give to God—is ambiguous. The answer will depend on the listener's answer to the question "What belongs to God?" This is a classic demonstration of political skill. If you ask the question, "What does Jesus really think?" the answer is that we don't really know. My hunch is that he would have thought that all things are due to God. But he would not have agreed with the Zealots' conclusion that faithful Jews should be zealous with the sword.

The impact of the story is that Jesus escapes the trap. It is a sign of his wisdom and of his ability to think on his feet, to carry authority, and to require people to think for themselves. The other dimension is that in its context, it is a story about Jesus' intellectual power and his ability to handle politically difficult things. It has the same dynamics of what happens in the midst of the political campaigns, when reporters and various people are always trying to catch the candidates in a mistake, in some miscalculation in relation to a statement that they make. The same dynamics that were going on then are going on now. Jesus is presented in this story as a great campaigner. Jesus' campaign is for the extension of the government of God in the world.

What do you think is due to God? Many Christians over the next three hundred years were martyred because they refused to burn incense to the emperors of Rome as a sign of belief in their divinity. In those years belief in Jesus' divinity was politically dangerous. What do you think is due to God?