

Why Do We Look for Easy Answers?

St. Matthew 22:15-22

Jesus often answered a question with a question which tended to frustrate his listeners. And the responses of Jesus were rarely easy. One of the reasons for Jesus' style was the Pharisee's attempts to trick him into committing some violation of the Mosaic Law or some act of treason against the Roman Empire.

The Pharisees were but one of many divisions of Jewish religious life. Each group had their way of living in a conquered land with oppressive taxation. The Main motivation of the Pharisees was exact obedience to God's Law, believing that this would earn God's mercy or at least, bring on the Messianic age. Saul of Tarsus was a notable Pharisee, who was notorious for his religious rage against Jesus' followers.

To the Pharisees, Jesus threatened the holiness of life that they worked so diligently to develop. The threat came from Jesus proclamation of the Kingdom of God's nearness, and his apparent taking the letter-of-the-Law not-so-seriously.

There were many reasons that the Pharisees hated Jesus: he didn't keep the Sabbath, he connected with 'sinners,' he didn't fast with any regularity, he exorcised demons, his actions pointed to the Messianic age, and he performed haphazard kindness. It drove the Pharisees bonkers that Jesus possessed the power to heal people and make their lives complete, and they couldn't!

In the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry in Jerusalem, the Pharisees made a push to crush Jesus. To do this, they entered a bizarre partnership with the Herodians. The Herodians were the legacy of Herod the Great, whose idiot sons tried to create a kind of proxy Roman government with a Jewish taste. They didn't fool Jesus.

The Pharisees were always looking for ways to entrap Jesus.

This time they tried to play the 'patriotic card.' If they could trip Jesus up by breaking either a religious code, or an imperial loyalty, they would have him. If they could get Jesus to choose who was number one (God, people, or the

Emperor) it would be a sinister predicament. But Jesus is hard to fool.

They asked Jesus, *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"* This is a religious not a civil question. Most Jews believed deeply that it was sacrilegious to pay taxes to Rome. They didn't like it, but they had to do it. *"So, Jesus, what do you say?"*

The Pharisees misjudged Jesus. Roman taxes must be paid with Roman currency. When giving to God, However, only kosher coins or ritual animal sacrifices were appropriate. What was important here was purity.

Jesus, as usual, simply pointed out the obvious. If you must pay Roman taxes, then pay with Roman coins. In giving to God make sure you do so from your total income. Then, Jesus turns the question into another question. Talk about frustration!

Holding a Roman coin, Jesus inquires *"Whose head is this, and whose title?"* Duh! Pointing out his point by inference, Jesus states, *"Give to God the things that are God's."* Hung on their own hook! Astonished, the Pharisees leave defeated.

There are some things all of us would rather not face. Does devotion to God supersede all other loyalties? Are there times when our belief demands that we not pay taxes toward the actions of our government that are immoral? What would we do if we ever had to choose between church and state? Or, what if patriotism and belief become allies? These are difficult questions with no easy answers. Often, we dismiss important questions to argue which side of the chancel the American flag should be placed.

Jesus has made it clear that loving God and our neighbor with everything we have in our heart, soul, mind, and strength, is the core belief. (St. Matthew 22:37-39). This is deeper than anything: church-state, currency, or the economy. Love goes deeper. St. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, *"If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."* (1 Corinthians 13:3)

Jesus keeps all of us out of the trap by experiencing the difficult choices, feeling the opposition, the revolting penalty and still uncompromisingly committed to loving God and neighborhood. We live in the hope that he confronted these choices, lived his life fully in the present moment, and loves both God and us completely. We ask God to gift us with the assurance that we too can live faithfully within the pressures of life a Christlike existence. Alleluia. Amen.