

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/22/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, October 22nd

Matthew 22:15-22

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The political trap

The preceding long dialogue between Jesus and a delegation from the Sanhedrin in which Jesus outmaneuvered a direct challenge to His authority is now over. Jesus' response of three polemic parables discussed in the lectionary over the last three weeks must have embarrassed His opponents. In these parables, the Jewish leaders were compared to the unsatisfactory son, the wicked tenants, and the disinvented wedding guests. Only the fact that the crowd thought Jesus was a prophet prevented the leaders from arresting Him (21:46). The conflict is thus far from over. The Pharisees are the first group to engage Jesus in another round of conflict as the text picks up again from where last week left off. In this week's text a strange alliance between the Pharisees and the Herodians attempts to put Jesus in a lose-lose position over taxes. Instead, Jesus responds with a timeless principle which challenges us to reflect on how we lead our lives today, particularly at a time when the people's trust in the government is all time lows.

Matthew 22:15-22 Commentary

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.

The nature of the plot is revealed in this verse. The Pharisees attempt to use Jesus' own words to trap Him. The assumption here is Jesus is still some hick from Galilee who will succumb to the more politically sophisticated.

¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.

The Pharisees send their disciples (Pharisees in training). Perhaps they thought their disciples would be perceived as less of a threat and thus cause Jesus to let His guard down. Herodians also accompany them. The Herodians were a loosely organized political party of Jews who supported the Herodian dynasty and thus were in favor of submitting to Roman rule. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were more of a conservative religious party who were often at odds with the Herodians. Their collective hatred of Jesus brought them together. Their approach is to flatter Jesus and attempt to use His integrity and lack of any political motivation to their advantage.

17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

Having just set Jesus up as one who gives truthful answers regardless of who it will offend, they pose this loaded question. If Jesus responds in the affirmative, He will alienate all the Jews who felt paying taxes to any pagan ruler was against God's lordship. With this answer, Jesus would lose the support of the crowds. If Jesus responded that such taxes were unlawful for Jews, then His political opponents have what they need to bring Jesus before the Romans as an insurrectionist.

18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 21 They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus reveals He is much more sophisticated than they think. His response artfully dodges the trap. Jesus asks to be shown a coin of the type that would be used to pay the tax. On the obverse of a denarius (the typical value of a day's wage for a laborer) was the profile of Tiberius Caesar. On the perimeter was the inscription in Latin, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus." On the reverse of the coin was an image of the Roman goddess of peace (Pax) with the inscription, "High Priest." Jesus asks his opponents a question they could not fail to answer: "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" (v.20). They have no choice but to respond, "Caesar's" (v.21). Jesus responds with a teaching that is a timeless principle rather than a rule that may only hold for a given context: Give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and give to God the things that belong to God.

22 When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

His opponents marvel at Jesus' response. This is the same reaction that typically occurs when Jesus performed a miracle (8:27; 9:33; 15:31; 21:20). Their plot fails and they go away.

Reflections

The fact that Jesus was able to unite the opposing Pharisees and Herodians reveals much about these groups. At the core, their political and religious differences fell by the wayside when their power and status was at risk. Ultimately Jesus revealed who their true god really was. Those who love worldly power and status are always going to hate Jesus, no matter what the century. It is perhaps ironic that Jesus was able to bring together members of two factions that were even more opposed to one another – a tax collector and a zealot – and make them His disciples.

Every Christian has a double citizenship. We are citizens of the country we live in. We benefit from the nation's infrastructure including clean water, power, transportation, food production and distribution, healthcare, education, welfare, law and order, and protection from external threats. With such advantages come certain obligations. Christians have a duty to be good citizens. Many people today living in cities that are burning under protests and riots are perhaps realizing just how dear the benefits are we take for granted.

On the other hand, as Christians we are also citizens of the Kingdom and there are Kingdom matters in which we owe our allegiance to God. Our Kingdom citizenship trumps our earthly citizenship. It may be that some of us will never experience a situation where the citizenship duties of the nation we live in conflict with the obligations we have as citizens of the Kingdom. Others may not be as fortunate.

Over the centuries, Christians have had different ideas about where the boundaries between God and Caesar lie. Today we have some Christians who can wrap themselves around the nation's flag and champion wars against other nations under the guise of a religious cause. On the other end of the spectrum, there are Christians who are protesting the existence of national borders and thus are undermining the very existence of sovereign nations.

When many of our cities were burning with civil unrest, some Christians prayed for law and order while others prayed for law and order to be defunded. Some Christians speak out against abortion and infanticide while others champion reproductive justice. Where do the boundaries exist between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God? Jesus does not say. We must use our own conscience and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to carefully and prayerfully determine where this boundary exists in our time and place.

Jesus' response in this text not only has implications for how the church behaves within the context of civil authority, but it also has implications for our individual behavior. Jesus invites us to examine some tough questions. Which is the primary kingdom citizenship our day-to-day lives reflect? Do we compartmentalize our respective citizenships? Where do our allegiances really lie? Who is our Lord? When it comes to following Jesus or the gods of prosperity, comfort, status, health, and security, where do we really stand? The recent COVID-19 pandemic challenged some fundamental assumptions and revealed there are other High Priests that many Christians are in deference to.



For feedback or to be added or removed from the mailing list, please e-mail david.r.lyons@gmail.com