

Bible Study Guide: Week of 10-12-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 22:15-22

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

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The Pharisees, who came up earlier in 21:45 as those “in league” with the chief priests and elders of the people, are here presented as Jesus’ primary opponents. This is a continuation of the preceding passage that consisted of a series of parables Jesus told in response to the religious leaders’ question about Jesus’ authority. The issue of authority continues here as they come to ask this question about paying taxes to the Roman ruling authorities. We are told up front that this is an attempt to entrap Jesus. The Pharisees were opposed to paying taxes to Rome, at least in principle, because they supported a Jewish state independent of Roman rule, even as they benefitted financially under Roman rule.

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Here the disciples of the Pharisees (in direct contrast to the disciples of Jesus) come to Jesus at the request of their masters, along with the Herodians. The Herodians would have been those who supported the Roman regime, which included Herod Antipas (who was instrumental in Jesus’ coming trial and execution). Unlike the Pharisees, the Herodians would have openly supported Roman taxes. So here, two bitterly divided rival groups join forces to try to trap Jesus. Their words to Jesus here are obsequious to the extreme. We can hear them “laying it on thick” trying to flatter Jesus and butter him up so that he would fall unwittingly into their trap. Their question is indeed a clever trap. It is designed to turn the crowds against Jesus if he supports the Roman tax. The people, remember, have just shouted “Hosanna to the Son of David” as Jesus rode into town as a triumphant king. They are expecting a Messiah figure to come and free them from Roman oppression. If Jesus says, “Pay your taxes to Rome,” the people would reject him. On the other hand, if he says “don’t pay your taxes to Rome,” the Romans would arrest him and try him for sedition. It seems they have left Jesus no way out here.

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Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy here because they are trying to force him into an unholy alliance with Rome—a bargain the Pharisees themselves had already made. They publicly opposed Roman rule, but privately gained from it. Therefore, they were hypocritical. When Jesus calls for them to show him the Roman coin in v. 19, he reverses the trap on them. It is the religious leaders, not Jesus who are in possession of the denarius. Remember that the Roman Emperor liked to style himself as divine. Part of his authority was conveyed by minting coins with his own image and title on them. Remember also that God’s people were prohibited from making for themselves any graven image or idol. Here, the Jewish religious leaders are holding an idolatrous coin while in the temple. The leaders reveal that they are in fact quite comfortable with Roman authority despite their outward gestures of wanting separation from Rome.

Jesus’ response to them: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” is not a direct yes or no. Given two options, Jesus chooses a third that his opponents hadn’t considered. Jesus’ somewhat cryptic response here has inspired many philosophical conversations about what we would call “the separation of church and state”—a concept relatively foreign to the Biblical text. His reply can also be used to justify secular authority and taxes, “Give the emperor what you owe him; Give God what you owe God.” On the other hand, it can also be used to argue against the paying of taxes—after all, everything ultimately belongs to God. The emperor has no power apart from God. The key here is that this is not, ultimately, a text about taxes or about government. It is a text about authority. The question here is fundamentally the same as the one the religious leaders asked in 21:23: “By what authority do you do these things?” Who has power and control? Who has authority? To whom do we owe our loyalty and our life? Jesus is pointing out that the religious leaders of his day had hypocritically turned their back on God in order to gain more authority for themselves. This is why they went away amazed—Jesus not only successfully wiggled out of their perfect trap, he also pointed out their own failings and faults.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. In what ways do we find ourselves trying to twist God’s word and the church’s teachings to suit our own agendas or to fulfill our own desires as the Pharisees and Herodians do here?**
- 2. Do you think it is possible to determine which things belong to “the emperor” and which things belong to God? Can we make such a clear distinction? Does anything ultimately belong to anyone other than God?**
- 3. Practically speaking, how do we or how can we “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”? How do we live out this teaching in our daily lives?**