

Matthew 22:15-22
Exodus 33:12-23

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
October 19, 2008

Jesus' Final Exam

Any of us who have attended school, no matter what grade or level, has probably had to take a test of some kind. Almost always, there is a test at the end of something whether it is the end of a unit, end of the marking period, end of the semester, or end of the year. Tests can be oral or written and come in different forms. Some tests are true and false, some fill-in-the-blank, some multiple-guess – oops! Sorry, multiple choice, and some are short answer and essay questions. In Jesus' day, the tests are most likely oral since most people are not taught how to write or read. In the gospels, there are many passages in which Jesus is asked legitimate questions by His disciples and by the common folk who follow Him around seeking His messages, His love, forgiveness, and healing. In other passages, the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees also ask questions; but they have different reasons for their questions. Today's passage is a good example.

There is more to this passage than simply Matthew 22:21b, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." The other parts of this passage are critical for serious wrestling with their meanings. The text begins with the plot of the Pharisees who try to rig their conversation with Jesus.

Those who approach Jesus to question Him are representatives of the several strains of Judaism who step forward to present a series of difficult theological problems. In each case, Christ responds with exceptional

wisdom. The questioners have the not-so-hidden motive of discrediting Jesus, of putting Him in what they believe to be an embarrassing position, and hopefully stripping Him of His popular support. What they place before Jesus is so challenging and tricky that these verses could be called, “Jesus’ final exam,” not only because of the sense of difficulty but also because of a sense of finality. These conversations actually show Jesus to be wiser than the best and brightest among the religious leaders. But eventually His wisdom in answering seals His doom with the authorities.

The first examiners are composed of Pharisees and Herodians, followers of Herod, a strange and unlikely alliance. Only a mutual distaste for Jesus could have brought these groups together. The Herodians are a priestly group whose power base in Israel is founded primarily on a set of loyalties forged with the occupying Roman government. The Pharisees, by contrast, are a lay group within Judaism with a passion to obey the law of Moses and to keep alive the passion of the prophets. For the Pharisees, to compromise with the pagan Romans would be unthinkable. By Matthew’s day, rabbis who are loyal to views of the Pharisees become the dominant force in synagogue-based Judaism. Matthew tries to show this first conversation with Jesus is actually a sinister trap which is master-minded by the Pharisees and their followers.

The verbal exchange begins with a little flattery from the Pharisees, which is simply a setup for the trick question to follow. The question deals with the legality of paying taxes to the Roman emperor. The questioners attempt to put Christ on the spot. They ask, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” A yes-or-no question like this is certain to get Jesus into trouble, the

Pharisees determine. If Jesus says yes, they assume much of the crowd will be disillusioned with Christ because there are many voices arguing that paying the Roman poll tax is an act of treason. Even handling the coins bearing Caesar's image is offensive to some. But if Jesus answers no to the question, then He is guilty of treason; and the Herodians are in the audience to bring their accusations against Christ. Adding insult to injury is the fact that the tax, which amounts to a denarius (about one day's wage for a laborer) is most often paid with the common denarius coin. This coin bears the image of Caesar Tiberius together with the offensive (to a Jew) inscription "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest." All that on a small coin!

In other words, to bring up this question of paying taxes to the emperor is like pulling a scab off a political and theological wound. This is exactly what the questioners do. This question is being asked in public for the purpose of putting Christ in an obviously precarious situation. If Jesus answers, "No according to the law of God, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," then the Roman government would quickly move in on Christ as a dangerous political agitator. On the other hand, if Jesus answers, "Yes it is lawful to pay the Roman tax," Christ would lose credibility with many of the people, who pay the tax with complaints since they consider the tax an illegal act of an oppressive government and offensive to their religion.

Fortunately, Jesus is aware of the treachery of His questioners; and He cleverly sidesteps their trap. He asks them for one of the tax coins. When they produce one, He asks them whose image is on it. When they answer,

“the emperor’s,” Jesus says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Basically, there are two ways to understand Jesus’ statement: a mild way and a more radical way. The mild way interprets Christ’s words to mean essentially, “Look, the tax is not the issue. You pay the tax with Roman coins, and the coins bear the emperor’s image and belong to the emperor. So give the emperor his coins back and get on with the more important business of giving your lives to God. The coin is created with the emperor’s image, but you are created in God’s image; so give your whole self to the God who makes and owns you.”

The more radical way, which some say is the likelier version, is that Jesus refuses to answer the question and actually turns the table on His questioners, showing them up as the two-faced hypocrites they really are. The question they ask Christ is designed to allow Christ two equally bad alternatives. What they ask is, “Are you a foolish uncompromising revolutionary whose loyalty to the kingdom of heaven is actually a political revolution in disguise, or are you a smooth-talking street preacher who stirs up people with talk of God’s majesty but who underneath advocates a different policy with the Roman Gentiles?”

Jesus responds to their trick with a question of His own. When He asks them for the tax coin, they unsuspectingly reach into their purses and withdraw the evidence which exposes them, instead of Him, as deceptive, hypocritical compromisers. They are the ones carrying Caesar’s money, not Jesus; they are the ones who have already bought into the pagan system. In this more radical version, Jesus’ words mean, Everybody has to decide

between Caesar and God. No one can serve two masters, as Matthew quotes Christ in Matthew 6:24. You seem to have made your decision, based on your convenient compromise. But what about your obligation to God? Choose this day whom you will serve.

This more radical version does not provide any formula for resolving the tension between God and secular pressures. Whether we call it taxation, tithing, or stewardship, there is the temptation to compartmentalize life by saying, “Ok, I set aside this part for God, and the rest belongs to me and Caesar.” What Christ says is that, although we may have to live under this or that Caesar and we may have to pay this or that tax, we are never, never Caesar’s. We belong, body and soul, to the living God, and we give to God what is God’s.”

This passage is not a series of unrelated questions. There is movement toward the climax of identity of the Messiah and His authority. There is a contrast between Jesus’ emphasis on love and the power play of the leaders. The Pharisees understand the intent of Christ’s teaching in the temple, and take deliberate steps in determining how to trap Him. They send their followers with the Herodians even though the Pharisees and Herodians have different views on the issues. They present the question with words of flattery which are basically true, describing Christ as an honest teacher of the ways of God. Their question is intended to elicit a yes or no response. But Jesus perceives their purpose and bluntly answers, “You hypocrites, why do you test me?”

Jesus shrewdly asks them to show Him the tax money. Jesus convicts them by the simple fact they are using it. To pay taxes for the benefits received from earthly powers should be a reminder of greater dues owed to God. Jesus' answer emphasizes the positive, "to give God the things which are God's."

Another way to put this is to say the passage does not make God and Caesar to be equals, nor are they symbolic names for separate realms. If this is so, one could be led to the idea that the emperor has his realm in which ultimate allegiance can be demanded and God is relegated to another realm. Quite the opposite is inferred from the text. Humans are created by God in God's image. Wherever humans live and operate – whether in the social, economic, political, or religious arenas of life – we belong to God.

While Matthew is clear that loyalty to God is a different and higher category than loyalty to Caesar, this passage is not instructional on how people who live in this complicated world of competing loyalties may determine what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. It simply states the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God must be made. The passage allows us as readers in our own situations to be "Jesus theologians" who, in the light of Jesus' life and teachings, are to make our own decisions in each situation.

When we stop to think about it, life itself often seems like one big test or many little ones. I know whenever I have a test scheduled of any kind, I always pray to God for help and guidance. Jesus knows better than we do how to face tests and how to be successful. Before answering the scribes

and Pharisees, Christ undoubtedly gives serious thought to what they are really asking and then determines how to answer them. One habit we may consider using in this kind of test is to think before we speak. It is easy to simply blurt out an answer. In fact, sometimes we are advised to answer the first thing which comes to mind. One important thing to remember in taking any test, though, is to listen to or read the question carefully before answering. Jesus does that. Christ listens carefully to the question the Pharisees and scribes offer before He answers. Then He chooses His answer just as carefully. When God asks us to serve Him, do we listen to what we are being asked before we answer? Do we choose the words for our answer carefully? May we give careful consideration to questions we are asked, and how we answer. We do not know which question is being asked by God and may be God's exam. Amen!