

## High St Uniting Church Matthew 22:15 - 22

### Who do you serve?



Jesus in Jerusalem. The stories in these last chapters of the story of Jesus' life have a real strength to them. This isn't Jesus and the hungry crowds in Galilee; this is Jesus in confrontation with the religious leaders. And, while those confrontations set some of the justification for Jesus' crucifixion, the stories also carried importance for the early Christians who were in confrontation with the synagogues.

And they continue to be important lessons for the church in all generations to hold to faith and not slip into religion or self-serving behaviour. There are issues for readers beyond the telling of Jesus' life. That is the context that I was talking about last week. An importance that shows in this week's story – the Pharisees and Herodians asking about taxes – being in three Gospels. Every new Christian in the first four centuries faced the issue of serving God, following Christ, and trying to live in the Roman Empire. They all needed to hear, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar's and give to God what belongs to God."

However, beyond context, this little story exhibits another feature of scripture passages - layers. This is a very simple story at first glance that yields great depth when studied.

These chapters in Matthew – and the same pattern is in Mark and Luke – have not just important teachings and parables, there are also these confrontations, more serious than those when Jesus was walking around Galilee and Judea. Here are the beginnings of the rejection of Jesus by the institution of religion and state that is gathered in Jerusalem. First the Chief Priests, then the pharisees and the Herodians, then the Sadducees, and then the Pharisees have another go, people who considered themselves custodians of the Law. And Jesus answers and outsmarts them all and sets them questions that they cannot answer. Here is Jesus the true Rabbi, the real scholar and interpreter of the Law. This is not just an account of Jesus to give confidence for new Jewish Christians talking to the synagogue and their friends and family, this is for all of us to learn that legality and religious observance are not the right interpretation of God's way for people. We are called to the way of love and faith.

In that general setting we have this little story. The Pharisees gathered the Herodians – a group we know next to nothing about but who presumably supported Herod and so supported the Roman occupation – and set what they thought would be an excellent trap question for Jesus, complete with a full dose of flattery as an intro. 'Is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor?' If Jesus answers yes, he is betraying the people and the very Temple he was standing in. If he answers no, he is guilty of sedition. Either way, they have a reason to break through his popularity and arrest him. Jesus sees through the plot and sees far more in the question than a simple yes or no. Paying tax doesn't mean a full vote of support for Rome, it is simply the reality in which your lives are set, the coin belongs to Rome, give it back to them. But remember that your lives belong to God, that is where your vote of support should go. They had flattered Jesus by calling him impartial and they got an impartial answer; that is impartial to the simplistic Israel/Rome argument, but very partial to God.

For many that is the important story beyond the telling of Jesus confronting the religious leaders; how to live in a world where your faithful obligations to Jesus and God conflict with the civic obligations to Rome. Do what you must for the world but remember that all belongs to God. But there is more here for those who want to dig.

The Pharisees didn't ask Jesus whether they should pay tax, they asked if it was lawful. And they didn't mean Roman law. The Roman tax required a Roman coin, and all Roman coins bore the image of Caesar. But the Law, The Commandments, says: "Do not make for yourselves any engraved image." The question, "Is it lawful to pay tax?", is not just about being subject to a foreign power, there is an issue here about de-facto worship of an idol. The background to Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers is because Roman coins, with the engraved image, weren't allowed in the Temple. You had to go to a moneychanger to get Temple coins that obeyed the Law. This is a trap question because answering yes is a religious problem, answering no is a political problem. Pharisee and Herodian. Jesus saw through that hypocrisy as well. If they were so concerned about the legality of a coin with an image in the temple, how did they produce one?

And there is more here for those who question and compare and know their scripture. Jesus holds up the coin and asks, "Whose image is this?" And he could easily have pointed to all the people around and asked, "And whose image are these?" In the beginning God made people, male and female, in God's image. Far more important than some possibility of handling a coin with the image of a remote emperor in Rome being idol worship, are the people around you, whom God calls you to love, not rule over. Or a step further, the ancient hymn included in the letter to the Colossians praises Jesus as 'the image of the invisible God'. Instead of worrying if the image of a remote emperor is a threat to God, consider the image of God seated before you, with whom you are engaging in trivial challenges instead of respecting and listening.

Some will argue that the layers I'm talking about are just alternate ways to understand the same message; but is that so bad? You're still digging deeper into the story and looking for connections to other scripture and to life itself. And exploring those other ways of understanding – those other layers – gives you explanations for the stories of Jesus that will appeal to people you talk to who think differently or deeper and want more than the simple surface, moral teaching. Scripture is so much more than simple stories of Jesus; there is depth and complexity. Depth and complexity that can be opened up for those in this modern world who need to hear more than a simple story, more than a moral tale. I titled this sermon *Who do you serve?*, because that is the heart of the answer Jesus gives to the Pharisees question. Where is your allegiance? To the state? To the church? To God? Give to God what belongs to God seems to answer that question. But what belongs to God? Our love, our community, our faith, and our willingness to dig deeper and to learn more.