

## A Question About Jesus' Allegiance

Luke 20:20-26

With the cross weighing heavily on Jesus knowing that His time was short, He still found time to teach in the Temple the transforming power of the gospel. The religious leaders continued to challenge Him and went so far as to confront Him about His authority. They wanted to know who had given Him the authority to do the things He was doing, like clearing out the Temple of those who had turned it into a market with the pretense of selling animals for sacrifice. It was nothing short of religious corruption by which the religious leaders were growing rich at the expense of the people. Unfortunately they had to go along with the system if they wanted to worship and offer sacrifices.

Scripture is silent on the matter, but I have to wonder how many worshippers built up some resentment toward the religious elite for the stiff regulations they had placed on everyone else. Remember that at one point Jesus condemned the religious leaders for placing a heavier burden of the law on people that they themselves were unwilling to carry.

A representative group, the ones opposed to Jesus, had come and questioned His authority.

In our passage today found in Luke 20:20-26, we find that they questioned something else. Not only did they question His authority, they questioned His allegiance.

Before we look at our passage, stand with me to honor the reading of God's Word.

There are three truths from this passage I want to convey this morning.

Deception

Discernment

Direction

## I. DECEPTION – vs. 20-22

Enter the religious leaders. We see first that their deception is malicious.

## A. Their Deception was Malicious – v. 20

It's an account of espionage. Since Jesus seems to be able to counter their every move and turn the tables on them, since they seem to be too obvious, maybe a different tactic would serve them better. They bring in spies. It's a word that means to sit in ambush, to lie in wait. I don't think they were hiding in the shadows behind one of the pillars in the Temple Courtyard. I believe they were hiding in plain sight mingling with the crowd who has gathered to hear Jesus teach, feigning interest in what Jesus is saying, all the while mentally recording everything. Listening. Waiting. Watching. We will see that they are the ones who pose another question to Jesus. But notice something about their character. Verse 20 says they were pretending to be honest or as your translation may read "righteous" or "just". The root word comes from the word translated hypocrite. They were acting the part of someone honest and upright, pretending to be interested in what Jesus was teaching. I see them nodding at Jesus' words, maybe even shouting an occasional Amen. But make no bones about it. These spies were unscrupulous. They were pretending to be something they were not. They were no more honest than the religious leaders who had sent them. They gave a pretense of morality but their heart was far from it. We might say they were rotten to the core.

Now their plan was simple. Listen to what Jesus was teaching and watch what He was doing in order to catch Him in something that would incriminate Him. Keep in mind that the religious leaders had laid other traps for Him to trip in, but He saw through their plans and turned the tables on them, which further infuriated them in their desire to get

rid of Him. But there was one problem. They were afraid of the people.

Luke 19:47

Luke 20:19

In spite of their efforts, Jesus continued to openly teach in the Temple. It wasn't the time for His death and it wasn't the method by which He would die. So these spies were sent to watch Him. The word means to watch with evil intent. They weren't there just to observe His actions. It wasn't like going out into the woods and watching the wildlife for pleasure or scientific observation. Their intent was malicious and murderous. Notice again what the verse says, "They hoped to catch Jesus in something He said so they might hand Him over to the power and authority of the governor."

That word "catch" means to grab hold of or to grip onto. The intent being that they were listening to every word He said in order to grab hold of even one thing that could be used against Him so they could deliver Him up to Pilate.

We see that all the time, especially now, when the media takes one word and grabs hold of it and spins it in a way that makes a candidate look incompetent or even criminal.

The religious leaders were unsuccessful at killing Jesus, so if they could find something that He said that would incriminate Him in regard to the Roman government, they would arrest Him, hand Him over to Pontius Pilate and let the Governor be the one to put Jesus to death.

Isn't it interesting that a malicious person can always find someone else to do their dirty work for them? If Pilate did it for them, they would be off the hook. They could still give a pretense of piety. Besides, in the parable Jesus had just told, the religious leaders, identified as the tenants of the vineyard, were the ones who put the owner's son to death. Everyone knew the parable was spoken

against them. The religious leaders also knew that only Pilate could condemn Jesus to death. If they could get Pilate to do that, Jesus would lose some popularity with the people because His story would prove to be false.

Their deception was malicious.

Their deception was methodical.

## B. Their Deception was Methodical – vs. 21-22

They begin with flattery.

They use a term or title that is reserved for respected and honored rabbis. They had no more respect for Jesus than the man on the moon. Notice how they address Him. We find it in verse 21. "Teacher, we know that You speak and teach what is right, and that You do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth."

What they actually said about Jesus is true because He is the Truth, He always spoke what was given Him by the Father.

He did speak and teach what was right.

He never showed partiality to one group over another.

He did speak the way of God according to the truth. But they didn't believe that for a minute. If they did, they would have obeyed His teachings.

Think about that for a moment in relation to your own life. If we believe Jesus is who He says He is and what He says is the truth, do we obey Him? Jesus said that when we keep His commandments, that shows we love Him. (John 14:21)

Openly endorsing what Jesus taught was part of the plot. Scripture reminds us that the heart is desperately wicked.

John Phillips writes: "How deep are the depths of wickedness in a human heart that would actually design and deploy such tactics against God's beloved Son!"

They were banking on Jesus' propensity to always be truthful. They baited Him with an oozing display of flattery. The hook was cast out. Now it was time to set the hook. Here it comes...

"Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

The KJV uses the term "lawful to pay taxes".

"You're a respected teacher, Jesus. What do you think, should we pay taxes or not?"

By lawful, they weren't referring to Roman law. After all the Roman government was the one who set up the tax system. They were referring to God's law. They believed that because the land had been given to Abraham by God and deeded to them, if you will, because it was the Promised Land, they shouldn't have to pay a tax because the land and the produce from it belonged to God. Consequently, as you would expect, they didn't like paying taxes to a Pagan entity and there were a number of them they were required to pay. There were income taxes, property taxes, import taxes, and transport taxes. But the most hated was the poll tax. It was a tax every person living in occupied territory had to pay just for the privilege of living under Roman rule. It was especially offensive because to them it gave the impression that Caesar owned them. They believed they belonged to God.

The issue of taxation played a significant role in the uprising that began in A.D. 66 and ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. Some scholars believe that they paid over 30% in taxes.

From their perspective, Jesus had only two options to choose from.

If He said that taxes should be paid, He would lose disfavor with the people who hated paying tribute to Rome.

If He said that they had every right not to pay taxes then He would be branded as a militant by the Roman government.

These spies must have been secretly wringing their hands with glee, gloating that they had Jesus

painted into a corner.

Again from the pen of John Phillips we read: "The tribute they paid was the detested poll tax, which the Pharisees in particular paid only under bitter protest. They took the position that, as the people of God, they had no right to be paying taxes to Pagan Rome."

Are you getting the picture here? They believed they had Him no matter what He said. Side with Rome and the people would be after Him. Side with the people and Rome would be after Him. From their vantage point it was a no win scenario. If Jesus said they should pay taxes then according to them He was violating the law of God. If Jesus said they should not pay taxes He would be condemned as leading a revolt against Rome, which incidentally the religious leaders falsely accuse Him of when He goes before Pilate on trial.

They believed Jesus had only two options and both came with significant ramifications for Jesus either way He responded. How would Jesus respond? Unlike them, we have the benefit of what is written in God's Word. It's like starting a book and then jumping ahead to the last page to find out the end. But the middle is just as important in helping us understand how and why the end ends the way it does. They really were cunning in their scheme.

In verses 20-22 there was deception.

In verses 23-26 there was discernment.

## II. DISCERNMENT – vs. 23-26

Now let me ask you some questions that you know the answers to.

Who are they talking to? Jesus.

According to John 1:1, 14 who is Jesus? He is God in the flesh.

According to Psalm 139:1-7 what do we know about God?

So what does that passage tell us about God?

He's omniscient. He knows everything, even my thoughts.

Psalm 19:14 "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

To be acceptable comes from the idea of the sacrifices that were offered. The psalmist is literally saying then that he wants his words and thoughts to be just like the sacrifices he brings to be offered in worshipping the Lord. If the psalmist is asking the meditations of his heart to be acceptable to God, it stands to reason then that he understood that what he thought about could be known by God.

Does that strike you in any way that if God knows what I am thinking how carefully we need to monitor our thoughts. God not only sees what we do, He also sees into our heart and mind.

I don't know if that puts the fear of God into you or not. Jesus made it clear that even our thoughts can be sinful even though we may not act on them.

We can still think lustful thoughts and commit sin.

We can still think ill intentions toward another and commit sin.

We can still sin by cursing someone in our mind without saying the words out loud.

Jesus knew through their plot. He was discerning.

#### A. His Discernment Was Intuitive – vs. 23-25a

Even today paying taxes isn't popular. It's a hot debate topic right now among the presidential candidates. Each has his or her own idea about how our tax system should be renovated from a flat tax to an increase in taxes. Taxes aren't a voluntary contribution. If it were left up to us no one would pay taxes. It's that simple. But pay them we must or risk penalty and punishment from the government agency that has more power than any other entity in the government.

In order to function, government must have money. And to get money they must exact taxes from its people. If we fail to pay taxes or pay less than we are supposed to brings the wrath of the IRS. Paying taxes is a symbolic act. It says we are submitting to the one to whom those taxes are being paid. In return there are certain benefits from the government – things like an infrastructure, education, military, medical care for seniors, etc. Paying taxes demonstrates our acknowledgement of the government's right to rule over us as we submit to its authority.

Jesus discerned their evil intent in the question and asked them to give Him a denarius. Little did they know they were playing right into His hands. Without thinking someone reached into their tunic, pulled out a money bag and handed Him a coin. A denarius was worth about 25 cents and was equivalent to a day's wage. The coin bore the image of the head of Caesar on one side and an image of him in priestly garments sitting on the throne on the other side. Some believe it was the image of Tiberius Caesar considered by many to be the most depraved men to sit on the throne. The image itself was offensive to Jews because they viewed it as a direct violation of the second commandment not to have any graven images (Exodus 20:4). So it's interesting that even though they detested it, they still used it for their own benefit to buy merchandise or make a profit. By using the coin themselves, they had indirectly submitted themselves to Roman rule.

Holding the coin up, He asked them whose inscription was on the coin. The answer was obvious. It belonged to Caesar. Understanding their motive His discernment was intuitive. His discernment was also instructive.

#### B. His Discernment Was Instructive – vs. 25b-26

Jesus gave a very simple answer to their question about whether or not they should pay taxes.

Give to Caesar what belongs to him.

Give to God what belongs to Him.

The word “render” or “give” speaks of giving back something that is owed to another.

Because they owed taxes to Caesar, they should give him what they owe.

The same is true with God. We owe Him. All that we own belongs to God. I hope you understand that. Some argue that since they worked for it, it belongs to them. But who allows you to have that job? Who gave you the ability to do that job, to earn that paycheck, to own that home or car? God owns it. We are its steward and we are to give back a portion of it to God. But it’s more than finances. We owe Him our very lives.

Jesus is saying whether it is in the temporal or the eternal realm give back what you owe to the one to whom it is owed.

So should we pay taxes to the government?

Absolutely, like it or not.

Should we give ourselves to God? Absolutely.

The religious leaders were deceptive, using spies to try and trick Jesus so they could hand Him over to Rome for punishment.

Jesus was discerning instructing them that they have an obligation both to government and to God.

Let me close with one final point – Direction.

### III. DIRECTION

God’s Word provides some clear instructions for us as well, both here and elsewhere. Jesus first teaches us about our obligation to government.

#### A. Our Obligation to Government

Let’s first of all remember that whether we live in a country that is ruled by a democracy or a dictator or anything in between, God is the one who set up that rule and He is the one who will take it down.

Proverbs 8:15 “By Me kings rule...”

Daniel 2:21 “He sets up kings and deposes them.”

Romans 13:1 “There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”

Every government and every leader in every country has been placed there by the Almighty, Sovereign God. What then is our obligation to the government in the country in which we live, and in our case to the United States?

I Peter 2:13-17

We must submit to that authority for the Lord’s sake. Peter goes on to explain that by doing so we will silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Daniel comes to mind here. He lived under the authority of a ruthless king and he submitted himself to him and God honored Daniel for his respect for the king.

*That said*, when obedience to man is in direct conflict with obedience to God, we must put God first. Daniel demonstrated this principle when he and his three friends chose to stand against what was served them in violation of their dietary laws given by God, they chose to obey God.

Later on the three would not bow to the golden image. (Daniel 3:28 – God is glorified)

The Hebrew midwives chose to disobey the edict of Pharaoh by refusing to kill any boy that was born. Peter and John refused to obey the Sanhedrin when they were ordered to stop preaching about Christ.

If the law given by man is in direct violation of God’s Word, then God’s Word is to be obeyed. It may come to a point in this country where if I refuse to marry a gay couple because it stands against what I believe God’s Word teaches about marriage, I will risk jail.

If your company asks you to cheat or lie then it is your obligation to stand on the authority of God’s Word and refuse to obey man’s edict because it is in violation of God’s Word.

God gave to Jeremiah a word to give to Israel who had been carried off into captivity. He instructed them to settle down in the land and make for peace in the land.

We are to seek to be good citizens so that God is glorified and the unsaved are attracted to the gospel. So, what is our obligation? Let me give you three. Romans 13:1-7

1. It is our obligation to pay taxes as good citizens.
2. It is our obligation to obey government.

I Timothy 2:1-2

3. It is our obligation to pray for our government.

Although aliens of this world because earth is not our final home, we still have an obligation while here to pay, obey, and pray for our government. We have an obligation to it.

Jesus teaches us one more thing from this passage. We have an obligation to God.

## B. Our Obligation to God

Just as currency is our government's coinage, we are God's coinage. From the beginning Genesis 1:27 makes it abundantly clear that we are created in the image of God. We therefore belong to God. We bear His likeness, not in form, but in character. And laws are being passed that would serve to undermine or eliminate any idea of being made in the image of God. Understand that the movement for homosexual and transgender rights isn't about equality, it is about stamping out the image of God in our lives and in society so that mankind can do whatever it wants free of guilt because he was made in his own image, not in the image of God. Without any image of God, he is free to do what is right in his own eyes. There is no morality or immorality, there is only amorality. Let's not forget that no matter what the law of the land says, the Word of God says we are the image of God. He has

ownership of us and therefore we have an obligation to Him. What is that obligation?

Romans 12:1 "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – that is your spiritual act of worship."

This is an exhortation to present our bodies to God as living sacrifices. Because of the saving grace He has given to us, we are to give ourselves entirely to Him.

Have we wholly given ourselves to God?

Are we giving Him our time or do we just give Him enough to take the edge off our guilt? Or maybe we don't give God any time?

That could be time in serving Him in some way in the church or outside the church.

That could be time in studying His Word and prayer.

That could be time each week gathering with other believers in corporate worship.

Are we giving Him our offerings? Are we holding back our offerings? The prophet Malachi called it robbing God. Have you ever thought that not giving God an offering was robbing Him?

Are we giving God our talents and spiritual gifts? If you are not using your spiritual gift you are robbing others of benefiting from the body and withholding glory that is to be given to God.

The religious leaders wanted to make allegiance an either/or situation. Jesus said it's both/and. There is an obligation to both the government and to God. Our allegiance to God begins by acknowledging our sinful state and accepting God's remedy by trusting Christ as Savior. The communion table is a reminder of the price that was paid for our sin. If you know Christ as your personal Savior today, we invite you to participate with us by spending some time in quiet contemplation and confession.

If you don't know Christ then today is a great day to begin a new and eternal relationship with Him by accepting Him as your Savior.