

## Lent in Plain Sight: Coins

*Tell us: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*

Mark 12:14 MSG

Third in a Lenten Series

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### Introduction

It is an argument as old as time. A sore spot throughout civilizations around the world. A topic of political, social, economical, and religious tension that has led to division, revolt, and even war. The mention of the word can make your heart rate increase, your palms sweat, and a sense of dread wash over you. And every year as the time draws near, the pressure mounts. Taxes.

Prayer - God, grant us wisdom to see the heart of things and to give ourselves completely to you.

### Message

Jesus was always stirring up trouble and the reason was that he was not what people expected. He knew the ways of the Old Testament and the history of God's people - from Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Aaron, the wilderness experience, the promised land, the words of the prophets, and the ways God's people had over and over again been conquered and divided. He knew they had long awaited a strong and powerful king, to come and rule on their behalf; to overturn the oppression they felt at the hand of the Roman Government. The poor and marginalized were waiting

for healing, stability, and deliverance while the religiously educated, employed, and secure were waiting for a military king to come and wipe out their enemy all in God's name.

It was into such strong pre-existing expectations and assumptions that Jesus brought a message that turned it all upside down. He engaged with people in a way that no one thought a "king" would or should. He connected with people that others callously pushed aside or ignored. He challenged the religious leaders - the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees and others who were educated in the Law of the Torah, or the first five books of the bible that contained the history of God's people. These learned men were the interpreters of God's law to the Jewish people.

Jesus presented a new message. A message of new life - a new way to treat one another and live in community; a way that involved self-sacrifice and servanthood rather than punishment and servitude. He preached compassion, unity, and peace rather than vengeance, disparity, and chaos. He embodied God's mercy and grace rather than God's wrath and judgment stating he was the fulfillment of the law. He took ordinary people and called them to an extraordinary love.

It is easy to see how those in power and authority didn't like what Jesus taught. It is easy to see why those who established religious practices and taught the religious rules based on the old Levitical Law (Old Testament) didn't like what he stood for and promoted. It is easy to see why they wanted him silenced and why they put great effort into disrupting his plan. It is easy to see why they wanted to put an end to his divine

agenda. They could not grasp that he was the fulfillment of the very law they were so desperately clinging to.

The primary way they tried to disrupt Jesus' purpose was by publically challenging him with difficult, political topics, and emotionally charged issues. Multiple times throughout Jesus' ministry, those in authority found ways to publicly put Jesus on the spot with the sole intent of embarrassing, shaming, or catching him saying or doing something that was against the law of the governing body.

We find one such moment in today's reading. Let us then open our eyes, sharpen our vision, and see God at work in plain sight; may we see what God is up to through ordinary objects.

Read text: Mark 12:13-17 MSG

Although a challenging text to preach, I love this text because it is packed with history, entrapment, assumptions, sarcasm, humor, and brilliant recovery. With your mind's eye and an open heart, watch and listen to how Jesus lays out the truth of who we are and where our loyalty belongs.

This section of text contains a series of four questions all trying to challenge Jesus' authority, trip him up, or trap him and get him either arrested or make him unpopular with his supporters and the growing number of followers.

To understand the situation, it is important to at least give a glance at the story behind the story - the context. There is a long history of struggle, bitterness, and power plays behind their questions. The short version is as follows: Herod the Great ruled Palestine as a Roman tributary king and had been loyal to the Romans, which gained their respect and a great deal of freedom. When Herod the Great died, he divided his kingdom into three. To Herod Antipas he gave Galilee and Peraea. To Herod Philip, he gave the northeast district around places I can't pronounce (Trachonitis, Ituraea and Abbilene). The third and southern piece, including Judea and Samaria, went to Archelaus.

Antipas and Philip ruled wisely and well, but Archelaus was a complete failure and the result was that in A.D. 6 the Romans had to step in and introduce direct rule - they had to take control. This province fell into the class of Roman rule that required boots on the ground military oversight by Roman soldiers and Emperor rule. Of course, the Emperor appointed a governor for the region, and that governor was Cyrenius. One of his first jobs was to take a census in order to calculate taxation and general administration. Then of course there was the enforcement of such taxes.

Now that's exciting stuff right there. But wait, there's more!

There were three primary taxes the people had to pay: a ground tax which was one-tenth of all the grain and one-fifth of the wine and fruit produced; the second was the income tax which amounted to one percent of a man's income, and last was the poll tax, which was levied on all men ages fourteen to sixty-five and on all women ages twelve to sixty-five. It

was the tax that everyone had to pay simply for the privilege of existing. In addition, there were local taxes and for Jewish believers, temple taxes. The Romans taxed everything and were hated for it. Not to mention the very coins used to pay taxes often bore the image of Caesar and according to Jewish custom and law, it was blasphemous to own, touch, or look at graven images imprinted on anything for this was considered a form of idol worship by those of the Jewish tradition. (Barclay)

And you think we got tax problems today?

Jesus comes on the scene saying he, and he alone, is the fulfillment of God's law and that he came to give life and life abundant, therefore the strict rules, regulations, practices, and elite hierarchy put in place by the Jewish leaders was not God's way. The Pharisees could not lose control and so they devised a plan. If they could get Jesus to say the people of God should not have to pay taxes to Caesar he would be reported and arrested by Roman authority. If they could get Jesus to say the people of God should pay taxes regardless, his followers and growing popularity will turn against him. Either way, they win and retain their power and authority.

Right before the encounter we read for today, Jesus entered Jerusalem with fanfare, great excitement and celebration and what is the first thing he does following the parade and the self invitation to Zacheaus' house? He enters the church and finds and market place in the lobby and runs the money-changers out.

With that fresh in their memory and with tensions high, they approach Jesus, their trap at the ready. They begin with empty flattery, as if to say, we know who you are, how politically correct, impartial, knowledgeable, and profound you are, so tell us o wise one, how do you handle this - and they proceed to set the trap and hope Jesus takes the bait.

The brilliance happens when Jesus volleys the question back into the court of the Pharisees and Herodians, putting them on the spot with all eyes on them. By asking them to show him the coin used to pay the tax they are referring to, and by asking them whose image and name appears on the coin. Jesus (again) turns their assumptions and expectations on end.

Jesus turns their question from a sociopolitical issue - who has political power and governing authority, to a theological one; What does God require of human beings? Who by the way are made in and carry within them *not* the image of Caesar, but the image of God (NIB 673).

According to Bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, Jesus did three things with his answer:

1. It is as if Jesus says ‘give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, yes pay the tax but without the sting of saying yes you must submit to the Romans as your masters.’
2. His words echo a long standing Jewish slogan, “pay the Gentiles back in their own coin.” Jesus is reminding these “learned” men of a long ago rally cry from their own people - but all the Roman authorities hear is “pay your taxes.”

3. The command to give God what belongs to God is the most brilliant piece of this whole puzzle. Could it mean that Jesus was saying because humans bear God's image, that all humans owe themselves, their lives, to God and should give those lives back, as one might give a coin back to Caesar? Did he mean, standing there in the Temple courtyards, that the sacrificial system, which was supposed to be the way of giving God his due, needed to be superseded by a more complete worship? Did he mean - against normal revolutionaries - that if you really gave your whole self to God you would discover that using violence to fight violence, using evil to fight evil, simply wouldn't do?

A lot of folks try to make this text about separation of church and state but that idea was not born out of this context. That whole idea of compartmentalizing our lives into sections of religion, politics or social units didn't happen until much later in the 18th century, and more and more we are discovering that to do so is inadequate and dangerous. (Wright 164).

If this text is about anything, it is about discipleship - learning, seeking, and knowing how to live life more and more like Jesus. It is about realizing that the Kingdom of God goes beyond the either/or questions and answers we so desperately seek. It goes beyond our compulsion or need to arrange, color code, file, alphabetize, and categorize all the hard parts of life so that we can feel like we are in control. The text, like many of Jesus' teachings, challenges us to think beyond the either/or and walk through the both/and discoveries that come when we fully give ourselves to the wisdom

of God. This text is about how we live in and bring about the Kingdom of God here and now.

An ordinary coin. An extraordinary lesson. A deeper insight into who Jesus is, who we are to be, and a greater understanding of how God is at work in plain sight. May we all have eyes to see and ears to hear.

AMEN

### Sources Consulted

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