

"Praise to you, 0 Christ?"

Matthew 22:15-22

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"Praise to you, 0 Christ?" How can you say that? Here Christ says, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," and then I reply sweetly, "The Gospel of the Lord." What on earth is gospel, good news about that? What our Lord says is a put-down. Not a politician's petty, rhetorical put-down as in a presidential debate but a deadly serious, utterly devastating put-down. And those whom it puts down are not the Pharisees alone, that is, not just those Pharisees. In this put-down there is room enough for us all. The original Pharisees, "when they heard it, ... marveled," and they at least had enough self-honesty that "they left him and went away" in silence. They did not, still one more time, try to land on their feet by replying. Oh, thank you, kind sir, for that good news, or "praise to you, 0 Christ." Now, either you and I know something the Pharisees did not know, or we have something to learn from them. Maybe both.

The original question was, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" There is nothing inherently wrong with that question. What was wrong was that it was addressed to the wrong party. The question by itself, as Martin Luther observed, is a marvel of logical directness. It comes right to the point, demanding one simple answer, either Yes or No, and either way the question incriminates the one who answers - that is, everyone except this one, Jesus. But for everyone else the question as it stands is open and shut. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Yes or no? Whichever way you answer you stand condemned. If you oppose Caesar's tax, you are guilty of insurrection, and the Herodians are on hand to take note of that. If you defend Caesar's tax, you are aiding the oppressor, and the oppressed are on hand to take note of that. And so is God on hand, taking note, both ways. You have to pay the tax, and yet you have to not pay it. One way or the other, you have to be wrong.

Well, that all depends on who the "you" is. Jesus implies by the way he deflects the Pharisee's question away from himself that their question does not really apply to him. Which is not to say that their question does not apply at all. It does, but to themselves and to us. Jesus, presumably, does not have to pay the tax, but neither does he have to oppose it; in fact, he might just choose to pay it. But the Pharisees and we, by contrast, have no such choice. Of them and us it is indeed true that we are obligated to pay Caesar, oppressor that he is, and thus to conspire in evil and thus to alienate God. What really incriminates the Pharisees is not whether they do in fact pay tribute to Caesar but rather the prior fact that they are already so deeply in debt to Caesar that they now owe it to him to pay him back. Not to pay him is no longer even an option for them, "lawfully." But that, their very indebtedness to Caesar, is what keeps them from giving God what is God's, "lawfully."

Notice how graphically Jesus gets the Pharisees to implicate themselves with their own question. "Show me the money for the tax," he says. (Evidently he had none on his own person, which here is significant.) "And they brought him a coin. And Jesus said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'So give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'" It is as if Jesus had asked them. What are nice Jewish men like you doing with the oppressor's coinage in your possession - not to mention Yahweh's prohibition against having any graven images at all? Give it back to the one whose image is engraved on it. To that, however, the Pharisees might have protested, What, you ask, are we doing with Caesar's coinage in our possession? We'll tell you what we are doing with it: it is what we have to buy groceries with, pay tuition with, make a living with. How could we pay it back? We need it to survive.

And Jesus might reply: That is my point exactly. Your whole life is mortgaged to Caesar. You are in to him for millions of dollars, way over your heads. Yet you have the presumption to try to embarrass me with the question whether we really owe Caesar anything when in fact I do not and you already owe him more than you can ever repay.

You ask loftily, Is it lawful to subsidize oppression, is it godly to pay taxes which then are squandered on nuclear weapons and terrorist activities. As if you were still free enough to even ask the question, as if the burden were on me to answer it, as if your whole economic existence weren't already deeply dependent upon and indebted to the arms race, off of which you and much of your world and your religious establishment prosper. My answer, since you asked me is this: Let's see you pay back what you've gotten from that vast enslaving system. Yes, let's see you do it. No wonder you would have nothing left with which to repay God.

That is what I meant before, sisters and brothers, by calling Jesus' retort a put-down. That is hardly your standard bumper-sticker Jesus. It is not the Hallmark school of theology. Bonhoeffer was right: Jesus' answer about God and Caesar was not really meant as guidance for the Christian life; in fact, it was not even an answer so much as it was an interrogation, putting us under question.

Still, you and I were on to something before when we, with our evangelical persistence, greeted Jesus' putdown with "The Gospel of the Lord" and "Praise to you, O Christ." I hope to God you will never allow yourselves to be talked out of that stubbornly upbeat response of faith.

What is Gospel, Good News about this story - this Christian "wisdom" literature - is, first of all, that this Rabbi whom it is our privilege to follow must be wise indeed to be able to turn such a brilliant Pharisaic test-question against the Pharisees themselves, against the Pharisees ourselves. That was a debate worth winning. And better that he should win over us, and win us over, than that we should win against him. You were right: "Praise be to thee, O Christ."

But the Good News is even better than that. This same Jesus the winner who did not have to stand trial under Pharisaic interrogation and who owes the Caesarean world-system not a penny, nevertheless chose to be a debtor with the rest of us and as a fellow loser chose to accept the same lawful consequences. Out of tender mercy, he did. In fact, he

identified not only with the tax payers but even with tax collectors, with the very agents of Caesar. He wedged himself, Christ did, into the bind we are in between our conflicting creditors, God and Caesar, and he suffered that bind and suffered it out of existence - in a benign conspiracy with his Father. That was an even bigger debate worth winning, for us and for our liberation. And so, out of that liberation, feel free now to ask whatever questions you like about taxes, about God and Caesar, about debt repayments and the nuclear future and this candidate or that one. And why stop with the questions. Keep going, enjoy the answers as well. "The Gospel of the Lord."

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