

Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

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Year A

Test Questions

This is a sweet and dirty little set-up for Jesus today in the Gospel. Ten chapters before this, Matthew told us that the Pharisees had decided they would have to kill Jesus.¹ Now, in Jerusalem, in the very last days, we come to three attempts in succession to ensnare Jesus in controversy. Today's test question about taxes is the first. As soon as this set-up concludes, the Sadducees come at him with their resurrection test question. Resurrection was a belief the Sadducees opposed and the Pharisees supported.² And right on top of these two will come the Pharisaic lawyer who tries to trip him up with his question about which commandment of the Law is greatest.³ In every case, Jesus beats them at their own game...

Sometimes, when Jesus is under fire he uses silence to expose the violence. That's what he did with Herod and Pontius Pilate when they questioned him.⁴ Today it's more like "Button, button, who's got the button?" Only it's "Questions, questions, who has the real question?"

Today the set-up really is sweet *and* dirty. Notice how his questioners begin the conversation with: *Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and that you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think.* The words are so sticky with counterfeit sweetness, they haven't even asked their question yet and already we want to take a bath to scrape off their ooze.

And the set-up itself is much trickier than our 21st century ears can readily pick up. We just hear *the Pharisees plotted and sent their disciples to Jesus, along with the Herodians.* We too readily group all those who oppose Jesus together. Maybe we could try to think about them more in terms of the election warm-ups we're living with in the news these days...

The Herodians were supporters of the family of the infamous Herod the Great... That family could only hold onto its continued power by the favor of the Roman occupation. They would do just about anything to keep those taxes rolling in to Rome from the Jewish state Rome had given them to govern. On the other hand, the Pharisees who sent their disciples in to do the dirty work of this test question were bitter enemies of the Herodians and absolutely would not support payment of taxes to Rome. The Pharisees joining the Herodians to question Jesus make strange bedfellows, indeed. Their plan, of course, was to provoke Jesus into a reply that would identify him either with the Zealots who refused to pay taxes or with the two-timing traitors who had accommodated their morals and their allegiance to the Roman regime. The set-up was aimed at getting Jesus to make either a seditious remark (for which he could be executed) *or* one that would disenchant his nationalistic followers when they found they had mistakenly placed their hope in him as Messiah...

*"Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and always teach the way of God in accordance with truth... Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you play actors? (Hypocrite, he said. *Hypocrite* was a Greek word that would have been in Jesus' vocabulary from the Greek theaters in his region. *Hypocrite* simply meant *actor*.) You play actors – let me see the coin you use to pay your taxes."*

Jesus has taken the test question – along with the coin - into his own hands. He asks, *Whose image and name do you see on this coin? You see the emperor's. Tiberius Caesar. It is clear you acknowledge his authority, for you are carrying money marked as his. So, give the emperor back his coins. They're his already, whatever good they will do him. You owe to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.*

And then comes one of Jesus' famous fry-your-brains-they're-not-working-as-well-as-you-think-they-are zingers. Jesus says, *Of course, the coin of the empire belongs to the empire. It bears the image of Caesar. You, however, he says, bear the image of God, and your debt to God is what bears God's image: your very self, your whole self, all that you have, and all that you are.*

Jesus' question for all of us Herodians and Pharisees, is: Will we give to God what is God's? Or, *when we hear this, will we, as they did, leave him and go away?* From the kingdom point of view, from God's point of view, this is the question we have all faced or dodged, are facing or dodging, will face or dodge again: *What is God's?* Jesus, in other words, puts *us* to the test: Will we trust God with all of ourselves? Will we trust God with all our thoughts? Will we trust God with our possessions, our family, our retirement, the state of our health? Will we trust God with our pet peeves and controversies? Will we trust God with our dreams and our nightmares, our loves and our jealousies? Will we give them all up to God and be freed of their impossible burden? God will not decide for us. We must choose the answer for ourselves. Will we give to God what is God's?

Did you hear God take charge the test question in our Exodus reading and turn it around? Moses has an artful test question for God: *Will it not be by Your going with us that I and Your people may be distinguished from every people that is on the face of the earth?* God answers: *I will make all my goodness pass before you.* That is all that matters. My face and glory you could not survive. You simply aren't built for it. But *all my goodness*, my *tuv*, you need to see. Because when you see my goodness, even for a moment, you will know that the real question to ask is not, *Will I, your Lord and God, be going with you?* but *Will you – you, Moses and you, my stiff-necked people – will you be going with me?*

So, what shall *our* answers be to God's real test questions? Shall we stop asking God to go with us and put all our attention on following God's lead? Shall we, who *bear the image of God, give to God the things that are God's* – our whole self, all that we have, and all that we are?

When we answer No, we defraud God of our life that bears God's image, and God's goodness cannot be seen. When we answer Yes, then we are seen and known as the bearers of God's image, all goodness of God. Then we become the coin of God's kingdom, the currency to pave the roads that welcome strangers and clothe them for the banquet. We become the currency to heal the sick, to feed the hungry in body and soul, to bring the peace that passes understanding.

You and I can be all the goodness of the one whose image we bear. It is one of the very last things Jesus begged of us on this earth: *Give to God the things that are God's.*

¹ Matthew 12:14

² Matthew 22:23-33

³ Matthew 22:34-46

⁴ Luke 23