

“Gotcha”

(Matthew 22: 15 – 22)

Have you ever been asked a trick question or a “Gotcha” question? You know what I mean, the kind of question that has no right answer. “Do you still beat your wife?” “Are you still cheating on your taxes?” How about a question where no matter how you answer it, you will make someone angry or get yourself into trouble—like, “Does this dress make me look fat?”

Around election time when politicians are out campaigning, the journalists are everywhere, interviewing people taking photos, and setting up debates. What they’re really hoping for is the chance to catch one of those politicians in a mistake, a lie or get them to say something that makes them look foolish. It is amazing that anyone wants to run for office.

Gotcha questions put that people on the spot have been around for as long as there have been public issues and leaders offering new programs. The question in today’s

scripture lesson, that was put to Jesus by the Pharisees has an obvious double edge. The issue of paying taxes to the Roman Emperor was one of the “hot button issues” in the Middle East in Jesus’ day.

Imagine how you would feel if you woke one morning and found that people from the other side of the world had marched into your country and demanded that you pay them taxes as a reward for having your land stolen. That sort of thing still causes riots and revolutions, and it had done just that when Jesus was a growing up in Galilee. One of the most famous Jewish leaders when Jesus was just a boy had led a revolt because of taxes. The Romans crushed it without mercy, leaving crosses around the countryside, with dead and dying revolutionaries on them, as a warning that paying taxes was not an option. So, the Pharisee’s question came, as you might say, with a health warning...kind of like on a pack of cigarettes. But instead of saying “smoking causes cancer”, it said “Tell people they

shouldn't pay, and you will end up on a cross." At the same time anyone leading a "kingdom - of-God movement" would be expected to oppose the tax, of face the reticule and resentment of the people. If Jesus had been a politician on the campaign trail, you can imagine the audience's excitement and the journalist's glee when someone asked this question.

Notice all the false flattery that is going on here as well. They come to Jesus with bright smiles on their faces. Surely, they have no bad intentions. They are trying to look so innocent and pious in front of the crowd. "Teacher," they say, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" And we are told that Jesus replies, "You hypocrites, why are trying to trap me?" Jesus doesn't fool around does he? The word trap

that Jesus uses here is the same used earlier in Matthew in reference to what Satan was trying to do as well. So, here, Jesus is saying that Satan and the Pharisees are playing the same role. They are working together, whether the Pharisees know it or not. Before Jesus answers their question, He asks them for a coin; or rather asking them for a coin is really the beginning of the answer Jesus gives. You see Jews were forbidden to make carved images. Exodus 20: 4 prohibits "graven images" of any kind. But whose image was staring coldly out at the world from the small Roman coin? Caesars! And there was an inscription around the edge of the coin that read, "Son of God...High Priest." That was who Caesar claimed to be. How could any Jew be happy or feel comfortable handling that kind of money? So, Jesus says, "Show me the coin used for paying the tax." He doesn't have one Himself, but the Pharisees, in the sacred Temple area reach into their pockets and pull one out—a Roman coin with its idolatrous

image and inscription on it. Can you see now why Jesus called them hypocrites? The Pharisees seem happy to do their business using Caesar's coins. Why then are they trying to trap Jesus with this question? Right from the start we find that their question has no integrity or validity. But Jesus goes on anyway. He turns the question around on them.

"Whose portrait is this and whose inscription?" "Caesar's, they replied," stating the obvious. "Well then," says Jesus, "You'd better pay Caesar back in his own coin, hadn't you?" "And you better pay God back in His own coin too!"

Let's be clear: Jesus wasn't trying to give an answer, for all time, on the relationship between God and political authority. That wasn't the point. Jesus was countering the Pharisees challenge with a sharp challenge in return. It appears that they were ones who had been compromised. Had they really given their full allegiance to God? Or were they playing games, keeping Caesar happy while

speaking about God? They got caught in their own trap. After all, there is a dark appropriateness about giving Caesar back his own blasphemous coin. Jesus seems to be saying "Better get rid of that stuff."

On the other hand, Jesus issues a challenge to Jerusalem, the Temple, its rulers, and their hypocritical underlings: "give to God what is God's." This is challenge to us as well. If the coin belongs to Caesar, if the likeness is that of the emperor, then what should be given to God? What belongs to God? What is stamped with God's likeness on this world? We know the answer to that. Way back in the first chapter of Genesis we are told, "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'" And so "God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God He created them, male and female, God created them." And God sent the human beings as God's agents in the world, to have stewardship over the creation on God's behalf. We are God's coin! God's likeness is

stamped on us. And we are to give God what is God's.

When the Pharisees heard Jesus say these things, "They were amazed. So, they left him and went away." They were convicted of the truth. They were given the choice. They could give their lives back to God or they could ignore God's claim on their lives. It's the same choice for us today. If we give to God what belongs to God: all the love in our hearts, souls and minds, as well as love our neighbors which is as strong as our love for self...if we do this, then the coin becomes a non-issue right? For human beings who have given themselves completely over to God will indeed use their money in a God-honoring and Kingdom-building way, no matter whose picture is on it. Jesus Himself is our Sacrificial Lamb, come to take away the sins of the world, once and for all...and in doing so, we are given the opportunity, the privilege to become fully His! Are we giving back fully What is God's?
Amen