

Jesus reframes the question (Matthew 22:15-22; 29A)

The Herodians' topic of choice could have been plucked from the moderator's cue cards in a presidential debate.

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Everybody, it seems, is out to get Jesus.

This time it's the Herodians and disciples of the Pharisees who conspire to trap him. Their topic of choice (taxes) could have been plucked from the moderator's cue cards in a presidential debate.

At first they sound like big-money lobbyists seeking to influence a congressional committee chair, offering slavish praise of their target's character. Beneath the flattery we might imagine closed captioning that reveals their unspoken thoughts:

Teacher, we know that you are sincere

[To be honest we think you are full of it],

and you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth

[we might call it fake news],

and show deference to no one

[by the way, why don't you defer more readily to our authority?];

for you do not regard people with partiality

[of course, everybody knows some people are inherently better than others].

They press on and ask: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

Of course, their coalition party would not agree on the proper answer to their own question. As agents of Rome, the Herodians favor the tax and may well be lining their own pockets before the revenue gets shipped out of the province. The Pharisees, however, like other Jewish people of their day, resent the tax as well as the idolatrous image of Caesar that was struck into the face of the coins required to pay it.

If Jesus supports the tax, the Pharisees can accuse him of disloyalty to God. If he opposes the tax, the Herodians can charge him with sedition or, at the very least, ensure that his name appears on the first-century equivalent of an FBI watchlist.

Always one to speak in images—typically in the form of parables, but this time taking advantage of a visual aid—Jesus asks about the coin. Then he refuses their framing and offers a different picture, suggesting that God's values are not the same as the world's values. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

His statement ends the debate, while leaving an unspoken question hanging in the air. Will we worship the one whose image is stamped on a coin (or on a building, or banner, or campaign poster)? Or will we worship the one who is the very image of God-with-us?