

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE

Our reading is from Matthew 22:15-22. These verses reveal to us circumstance where the religious leaders were looking to trap Jesus by presenting him a question that they believed would cause him to have to answer the question in a way that would either get himself into trouble with the Romans or the people.

As I prepared this teaching, I feel like I can understand the trap the religious leaders were plotting, because I believe the tone often set in our country tries to put all of us in a similar situation. I am certain, even the title I have chosen, may cause some to begin to take a position, because it raises the thought that I am going to talk about the Pledge of Allegiance used here in the United States; and, among many, perhaps a majority of people, the Pledge has assumed a position as sacred as the Lord's Prayer. Failure to stand, failure to put your hand over your heart; or, even being caught appearing to not know the words, may be justification for some to express anger, ridicule or even violence in the guise of patriotism.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE SETTING deals with this type situation. Let's see:

JESUS HAS MADE A SPLASH. HE IS HEALING, HE IS TEACHING AND HE IS CRITICISING THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT. PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO LISTEN TO HIM AND THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAVE TWO GENERAL FEARS: 1. THE ROMANS MAY GET UPSET AND CRACK DOWN ON THEM; AND, I SUSPECT MORE IMPORTANT TO THEM 2. THE PEOPLE MAY START FOLLOWING JESUS AND THEY WILL LOSE THE POWER, PRESTIGE AND PRIVILEGE THEIR POSITIONS AS THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAS PROVIDED THEM.

THESE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAVE NO REAL LOVE OF ROMANS AND WOULD PREFER TO NOT BE LIVING UNDER ROMAN CONTROL, BUT THEY ARE ALLOWED BY THE ROMANS TO ACT IN THEIR POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY IN THEIR RELIGION SO LONG AS THEY DO NOT ENGAGE IN ANY ACTS OF REBELLION TO ROMAN RULE. SO, UNDER THIS SETTING,

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAVE ACTUALLY GROWN COMFORTABLE ALTHOUGH THEY PROBABLY WOULD NOT HAVE ADMITTED IT.

YET, IN THIS SITUATION THEY WANT TO PUT JESUS IN HIS PLACE AND ELIMINATE HIS GROWING INFLUENCE, SO THEY ARE WILLING TO USE THE QUESTION OF LOYALTY TO ROMAN REQUIREMENTS TO PUT JESUS IN A POSITION WHERE HE COULD GET PUNISHED BY THE ROMANS OR ANGER THE PEOPLE BY FAILING TO REJECT A ROMAN RULE.

LET'S READ THE PASSAGE

Gospel Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

It is interesting, the religious leaders are working with the Herodians. The Herodians were primarily politically **motivated**, while the Pharisees were supposedly **religiously motivated**. Normally these groups did not work together; however, both had motivation to stop Jesus.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE

I have set a tone that may appear that I am questioning the faith of the religious leaders. I think it is important that we not set such a tone. Although I believe scripture demonstrates they were misguided and

perhaps some had been corrupted by their power and prestige, **I think many, if not most, had a true zeal for their faith as they understood; but**, over the years they had become accustomed to a way of life and an understanding of their faith that had clouded their ability to be open to the true Messiah.

Unfortunately, misplaced zeal in the name of faith is often dangerous. Further, the temptation to twist together a political agenda and a zeal in the name of a religious faith can lead to very bad behavior leading to justification of actions which may actually be contrary to the very faith proclaimed but justified by the means because it will be done in the name of faith.

We are witnessing such danger as we are bombarded with the tragedies of the conflict going on in the Middle East. Many people, on various sides, are acting out of zeal for a faith they profess while also pointing to political rights or violations and other people are demanding everyone choose a side and, if you don't choose the right side you are condemned. Even if you refuse to take a side or try to express understanding of both sides you are condemned.

This is not unique in human history. Repeatedly, religious zeal has been the background for horrible behavior, including wars.

Unfortunately, we are subjected daily to the challenge of demonstrating to whom or to what do we pledge allegiance. Our choices are not always as apparently major as whether to engage in war, but it is in fact always a war over to whom we pledge allegiance.

THE TRAP USED AGAINST JESUS WAS TO GET HIM TO TAKE A POSITION FOR OR AGAINST PAYING TAXES

If Jesus supported paying taxes, they hoped it would hurt his popularity with the people who did not like paying taxes; however, if he rejected paying taxes, they hoped it would lead to his getting in trouble with the Romans.

Their problem was, they thought the choice was one or the other, requiring a clear bright line.

This attitude continues in our time. We tend to blend our faith with our politics with a goal of achieving the government, or laws, which we think is the way things should be and we often demand others take the same position or we declare they do not have the right faith.

Jesus drew a different line with a different focus.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's but give to God what is God's.

However, what does Jesus mean?

What is God's?

Religion can answer that in many ways. One the religions use is the tithe. Organized religion will proclaim you owe God 10% of your earnings. However, Jesus is making it clear, the issue is not about money and certainly not a limited amount. Clearly, all forms of money are made by some human means and has some mark on it identifying a government or ruler.

Further, Jesus had previously addressed the subject of money and divided loyalties. "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24).

Some would proclaim you owe God the Sabbath. You need to be in church on Sunday (or whatever day your particular faith traditions asserts is the sabbath). However, elsewhere Jesus had made clear this was not the test. (See Mark 2)

What Jesus is addressing is ANY compromise that divides or distracts our focus from our allegiance to God.

Jesus' focus is not on a form of earthly government or the way that government or man-made religions operate.

His focus is on us and where our focus should be.

IT IS VITAL TO NOTE JESUS' FOCUS ON THE IMAGE ON THE COIN INDICATING WHO IT BELONGED TO

THIS RAISES THE QUESTION: WHAT IS THE INDICATION FOR WHAT IS GOD'S

TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION WE NEED TO GO BACK TO "IN THE BEGINNING"

"So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female" (Gen. 1:27).

Jesus is basically saying whatever government you are under, whatever issue you are facing, your allegiance must still belong to God because we were made in His image. Therefore, our actions are not to be controlled or determined by government's rules and regulations, including whether you pay taxes to a specific government; or, any rules or regulations of a man-made religion including the amount of tithe you may give, what you do on Sunday, or any other designated topic that people may point to as a test for who has true faith.

Too many religions get focused on the rules and regulations set out in the Old Testament but forget those were put in place during our separation in our relationship with God. They, in a sense, were guidance while we had not yet been restored to the intimate relationship God had intended at creation. However, with Jesus' atonement we have received restoration and the indwelling Holy Spirit which marks us and is proof of identity as belonging to God. Like the image of Caesar stamped on the coin indicated the coin belonged to Caesar, the Holy Spirit is our stamp indicated we belong to God.

As earthly kings, kingdoms and governments have coins, buildings, monuments and other physical items to demonstrate their ownership God has chosen us.

Therefore, as for me, I pledge allegiance to God. I strive to not divide my allegiance even while obeying the earthly authority which I am charged

to obey, including paying my taxes, unless it asks me to do something contrary to God.

SOME KEY THOUGHTS

Jesus is focused upon us. We are what belongs to God.

The Bible proclaims WE were made in God's image.

God is jealous for us and is focused on us avoiding anything which takes us away from our relationship with him.

Many things, including people, our jobs, money, our homes, etc can own us and become a distraction from our relationship with God.

The question isn't about any specific action or lack of action or things – God wants our hearts.

With that knowledge, everything else we do, or don't do, is important to examine by these questions:

Does this action or inaction demonstrate my heart belongs to God?

Am I being an image bearer of God?

As God's image-bearers we are not to act like we are better than others. We are blessed to be part of God's family by God's grace, it is not something we earned, so we submit to others with humility and love. (see 1 Corinthians 13)

You have a purpose – to be an image bearer of God! We can do this as we serve any earthly function and as we make any decision.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

thank you for calling us to be your image bearers;

forgive us for the times we put things ahead of you.

Help us to know fully what it means to bear your image

And to live a life that shows to whom we belong.

We want to be the image bearers you created us to be.

As we leave here today,

Show us where we have fallen short and help us to do better.

Guide us to act according to your will and to give you the glory.

We lift up this prayer in the precious name of our Lord Jesus, who created a way for us, and empowered us, Amen **COMMUNION**