

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees and the Herodians was clever...clever enough to shut them down. But why? What does it actually mean? And what could it possibly have to do with us?

Over the centuries, there have been multiple interpretations of Jesus' answer to this question. Some have used it to say, in keeping with the likes of Romans 13, that government is divinely ordained, and Christians are to obey the temporal government.

Some say since you have benefitted from the things the state provides, you should pay your part.

Some have pointed out that since a coin was produced, it was a sign of implicit cooperation with Caesar. They were already doing business with the empire and needed to hold up their end of the contract.

Others have used this teaching to back the separation of church and state. Or as a way to separate our own lives into the private, spiritual sphere and the public world outside.

Some have used it as a basis for resistance to taxes that are spent for things that they believe run counter to Jesus' teachings – for example nuclear weapons or the military in general.

First, to really figure out what this means, we need to know more about this tax. This tax, or tribute, is a census tax, or poll tax. A census would be taken and each person counted would be assessed a flat tax, just for living in the Roman Empire.

Income or financial status didn't matter. Every person paid the same tax. It was a completely regressive tax, meaning the lower your financial status the bigger percentage of your financial worth it was and the worse it hurt you.

It was the very definition of an oppressive tax. So, on that basis, virtually all Roman peasants, regardless of their religious background, suffered under it.

It was almost universally hated and had been the target of rebellion against Rome more than once, most notably by the Zealots.

So, in one sense, the question is a trap. If Jesus answers yes, you should pay the tax, he risks alienating many of his followers and potentially even being at risk of violence by the Zealots.

If he says no, he risks arrest by the Roman authorities. And although the time will come for that, this isn't it.

So, it is a trap that Jesus' answer avoids.

But Mark's editorial comments about the Pharisees and Herodians aside, this is actually also an important theological question of Jesus' time.

The Pharisees were trying to figure out how to live as God's people in a land occupied by a pagan Empire. And that's where Jesus' answer ends up being brilliant.

It's that theological question that also makes his answer helpful for us. Credit for this perspective goes in part to Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament professor.

The Old Testament law discouraged taking a census of people. In Exodus, the command was that if for some reason a census was necessary, a tribute, or ransom, should be taken from each person counted to avoid disaster.

The idea was that this would be a tribute to God as a way to ward off God's anger at the counting of the people. When David took a census and did not follow this instruction, a massive plague killed 70,000 people.

OK, so that's one of those Old Testament stories we could have a whole conversation about. But the point is, God's people were not to be counted.

Why? It's not really explained in scripture. Dr. Levine said one theory was that since Abraham's descendants were to be as numerous as the stars in the sky, they were by definition uncountable. So, to even try to count them was in a sense doubting God's abundance.

But taking a census...counting people...also reduces people to a number...a commodity. In Rome, it identified not only those from whom the tax should be extracted, but also those able to be drafted for military service.

In our own time, there are some good things that come of the census. But one of the bad things is that people get reduced to political pawns as legislative boundary lines are redrawn with each recounting.

So why is Jesus' answer brilliant?

Because Caesar, with his image stamped on the coin, believes that it belongs to him. Moreover, he believes that the whole empire...all the land and all its people belong to him. So every person counted belongs to him and owes him tribute.

But the Jews knew different. The Jews knew that humans were created in God's image. They belong to God because the very image of God is stamped on them. The Jews also knew their Psalms including the first verse of Ps. 24:

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it

When Jesus says give to God what is God's he knows that everything belongs to God.

And that's where the passage gains traction for us. Everything does belong to God. No emperor or president or civil leader or for that matter religious leader owns anything that doesn't first belong to God.

Government is in a sense ordained by God as a way to order society. We do reap benefits from government and paying taxes is the right thing to do.

But the government and its leaders are not themselves divine. That means we might be called to challenge the government.

We might even be able to make a case for resisting taxes when that government becomes oppressive, particularly towards the most vulnerable – the sick, the immigrant, the prisoner, the poor. You know, the same people God has always spoken on behalf of.

The other thing to remember is that Empires of the world never last. Rome fell in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. Ultimately invaders from the east were able, first to sack Rome and then finally remove Romulus Augustulus. He would be the last Roman Emperor.

But even before that, the Roman Empire was greatly weakened by its policies. Peasants and craftsmen were already taxed to the hilt. And you can't get blood from a turnip. Constant wars led to government spending that wasn't sustainable.

And between oppressive taxation and over-spending, the gap between rich and poor widened exponentially. Slave labor had been the primary labor pool, and when the military could no longer expand the Empire, the pool of slave labor dried up.

The empire was rocked by political infighting and civil war. In a span of 75 years, there were 20 emperors. And the way to the throne was usually by murdering your predecessor.

The Roman Empire fell, at least in part because of all the things earthly empires do that are the exact opposite of the kingdom of God.

So, our question ends up being the same one the Pharisees asked Jesus – at its root, the question asks how do we live as God's people in a world that is so often seduced by the power of Empire?

And the answer begins with recognizing it all already belongs to God. It begins with recognizing that the kingdom of God is already here, although it still lives intertwined with the kingdoms of the world.

Living as God's people means knowing the teachings of Jesus so well, they're written on our hearts. It means belonging to a community that continually learns...and practices...a life set apart from the worship of power and wealth.

It means living as a citizen of both worlds, but letting our citizenship in the kingdom of God shape our citizenship in our communities and nation instead of the other way around.

And perhaps most importantly, living as God's people means seeing the image of God, not in the coins and power structures of our government, but in the face of our neighbors...including those we detest, and including and maybe especially the faces of the most vulnerable.