

Sunday March 19

Lesson 3: What Do We Owe the Emperor?

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “The Life of Faith.” In the first unit, “The Journey to the Cross,” we are reflecting on the season of Lent and examining the lessons in Jesus’ final time with the disciples. We will continue to focus on the gospel of Matthew and Jesus’ words to the various crowds and teachers of the law. Today we look at his response to a group asking about allegiance and God. The purpose of today’s lesson will be to reflect on whether we give our complete allegiance to God.

The scripture today is one where Jesus continues his ministry in Jerusalem, navigating the various groups jockeying for power. The gospels of Mark and Matthew contain this coalition of Pharisees and Herodians asking a question about paying the Roman tax.¹ Both groups have formed an “unholy alliance” for the purpose of tricking Jesus. The Herodians are not well-known in extra biblical resources, yet we can deduce from their name of how they were a secular political party who supported the right of Herod the Great’s successors to rule Palestine.² The Pharisees, on the other hand, were quietists who resented the Roman occupation but accepted it as long as Rome did not interfere with the practice of religion.³ For both parties to come together, there had to be a common goal which would allow them to keep power and control.

The goal of the two groups focuses on discrediting Jesus in several ways. If he argues against paying the tax, they will be able to accuse him to Pilate of anti-Roman activity.⁴ On the other hand, if he supports the tax, he would be bound to lose some of his support in the general population as taxes were both an economic burden and a symbolic representation of their loss of freedom.⁵ The two groups fuse religion and politics in order to place Jesus in a quandary, especially as his teaching focuses on “the kingdom of God,” a threat to the political order of the day.

Jesus does not take their bait. Instead, he invites them to show the denarius, one of Caesar’s coins. Caesar’s face is on the coin. Jesus traps them as in their hypocrisy as they show they have a coin with Caesar’s face, violating the “graven image” in Exodus 20:4 as the inscription on the coin states: “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus,” that is, high priest of the pagan Roman religion.⁶ For Jesus, the point of allegiance to God is not

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 253.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 254.

about just money, it is one's life being given to God first and foremost. Caesar may receive their money and yet what is more important is living in accordance with the Father's will.

Did the unholy alliance succeed? Jesus was in fact not chosen by the crowd to be released later during his trial. Yet the early church, for whom Matthew was written, was full of Jews and Gentiles who were more focused on following Jesus than succumbing to politics.

Application

This passage has become one of the most debated sayings of Jesus. Christians concerned about political issues and church-state relations eagerly approach this passage hope to find a principle to guide them through a maze of contemporary controversies.⁷ Yet we must exercise caution lest we fall into the same trap Jesus warns about in his remarks.

Perhaps one of the most formative and hard lessons of young adulthood was the realization of the phrase: "There are only two things guaranteed in this life: death and taxes." The death part I thought I had probed enough even focusing my senior thesis for my Master of Divinity on death and dying and the beautiful promise of resurrection in Jesus. Yet little did I know how shortly the lesson on taxes was coming after turning in my thesis statement and that knowledge was a little less engaging or rewarding.

My first appointment was exciting as I was finally earning my own salary, happy to bring home money. I even implemented my usual frugal nature storing up all the money in the bank, watching it grow and dreaming of how I might spend it eventually. I knew self-employment taxes were a thing and assumed it would be a pittance. Imagine my surprise when my then-accountant gave me both what I owed and then the quarterly payments for the upcoming year. I kissed several dreams good-bye and got focused on reality.

I can now laugh about the experience realizing the phrase and understanding the guarantees in life are not the most fun to ponder or experience. Yet this formative experience was also helpful for me in my spiritual journey as it made me ponder where we place true value, and to whom do we place true allegiance to with our lives. While death and taxes are guaranteed, we are given more of a choice with what we will do with the rest of our life and with the rest of our money and possessions once the government receives its share.

The question is of Jesus as Lord of our lives is one we are asked to reflect on every day, whether it is conscious or subconsciously. Just think about your daily routine. There are bills to pay, perhaps children to feed or parents to care for, work to go to, and food to put on the table. And then there is the time to find relaxation or "me-time" where we can give ourselves a breather and simply be human. Every day we are given choices about where we will place our time and our energy.

With Jesus as Lord of my life, while I may not think of it every moment, I do try to think about the vows I made when I joined the United Methodist Church and professed Jesus as Lord when I was confirmed as a young man. On this day, I made the vow to serve Jesus and the church with my prayers, my presence, my gifts, my service, and my witness. While there are definite seasons where I have not been as attentive to every single line, since my epiphany with death and taxes at the start of young adulthood, I have striven to actively reflect on if I have said yes to Jesus when given the opportunity.

When I served as an associate at First United Methodist Church Dothan, I was so privileged to serve with two elders who emphasized the culmination of confirmation being an

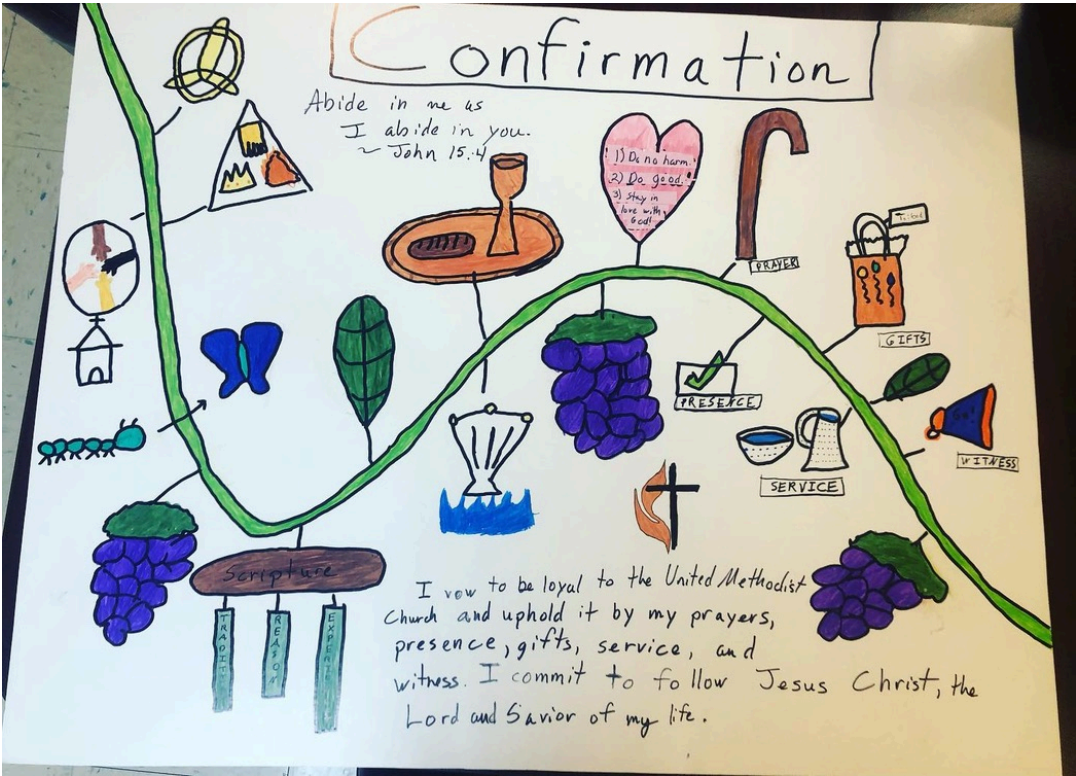
⁷ Ibid., 253.

interview process with confirmands to ask questions of their journey. The final two questions included words of Christ's Lordship and their response: "Will you vow to serve the church with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness" and "Will you profess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" Of course, the prayer was the confirmands would respond in the affirmative.

I took these interviews and used both of these questions to help with my own confirmation class on my charge. Yet I gave a caveat. The students would of course answer the questions and yet for the interview, the students could give a visual presentation with a poster telling of their faith journey. To help them out, I made my own. As I made it, I once again reflected on the declaration "Jesus Christ is the Lord of my life." My confirmands exceeded expectations and both the ones who interviewed and made the posters truly understood the questions and the decisions they were making, reflecting both strong churches and faithful families. Below you will find a picture of the poster I created which you might use in your youth or adult confirmation classes.

The question "Is Jesus Lord of my life?" should be one we seek daily. Need a start? Start with your prayers. When it comes to presence, ask how you are showing up in your church. When it comes to witnessing, think about how you might tell who you follow by your words and actions in your community. Jesus invites us to give our allegiance to him and to find the ways we might serve and honor him wherever we find ourselves.

How do you hear the phrase "Give to God what is God's and Caesar what is Caesar's?" What are the ways you remember Jesus as the Lord of your life? How do you honor or reflect on your membership vows to give God and the church your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness? Who are people you see who have made Jesus the Lord of their lives and you can emulate them? Why do you think Jesus wants us to make him Lord of our lives?



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