



Luke 20:21-26

“In God We Trust?”
(13th in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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(Second Sunday in Lent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 20:21-26 "IN GOD WE TRUST?"

20:21-26 CONTROVERSY DIALOG: TAXES TO CAESAR?

//Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17

a) vv.21-22 Question To Jesus From Opponents. 2nd Attempt To Discredit Jesus, 20:20. 18:32
 What Is Jesus' Attitude To The State? Occupying Power

21 They asked him, "Teacher,
 a we know that you *speak and teach rightly*, Like Satan They Flatter, Description Is True, 3:1-22
 b and *show no partiality*, Leaner Description Than Mk./Lk.
 c but truly teach the way of God. Flattery/ Compliment, Is Submission Treason?
 2:2, AD6 Rebels: Judas *The Galilean* , Jos. *Ant.* 18.1.6, Origin Of Zealots, Acts 5:27

22 Is it lawful *for us* to give *tribute* to Caesar, or not?" 63 BC, History Of Revolts, Loaded Political/Religious Question
 Cast As An *Either/Or* Question: False Forced Choice

b) vv.23-24a Jesus' Counter-Question. People Who Argue With Jesus Always Lose, Then Choose
 No Situation In Which Jesus Does Not Have Superior Wisdom

23 But he *perceived their craftiness*, and said to them, Gift Of Wisdom: Discernment Of Holy Spirit
 24 "Show me a coin.
 Whose likeness and inscription has it?" Gen. 1-2, They Carry Idol Symbols (Denarius) In Temple Area!
 "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of the *Divine Augustus, Augustus*"

b') v.24b Answer To Counter-Question.

They said, "Caesar's."

a') vv.25-26 Jesus Answers First Question And Extends It To Our Prime Loyalty.

25 He said to them, 13:1-2, For Luke To Depict Galilean Doing His Duty Is A Big Deal
 "Then render (give back) to Caesar Open Ended Reply (Principle), Discharge Civic Claims, Primary Loyalty In Place
 the things that are Caesar's, Provides Protection/Law, Jesus Not Rebel/Hostile To State, Bigger Agenda
and to God Affirms God's Sovereignty, What About When They Are In Tension?
 the things that are God's. 10:27, Real Issue Is Self-Surrender! Tender Your Life: You Bear God's Image!
 Two Principles, No Hard Rules, No Comparison Between The Two, G.T. 100

26 And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him by what he said; 8:25, 9:43, 11:14 (Amazed), 20:20
 but marveling at his answer they were silent. 14:4, What Happens When True Wisdom Comes Forth!
 Silenced Opponents Are Not Vanquished Opponents!

A Brief Treatment of Luke 20:21-26

This paragraph is part of the triple tradition (Mt. 22:15-22, Mk. 12:13-17). It is told as part of a series of controversies Jesus has with Jerusalem leaders (Sanhedrin: chief priests, scribes elders) who actively plot through spies to label him a danger to order and threat to Rome. They lose the tax argument but succeed in their plot.

The unit is a 4:2 concentric pattern (a-b//b'-a') in the form of a) vv.21-22 question of leaders, b) vv.23-24a Jesus' counter-question, b') v.24b leaders' answer to the counter-question, a') vv.25-26 Jesus' answer to the initial question. The either/or dilemma is turned to a both/an correlation by Jesus through a clever question of his own. The genre is a controversy dialog, and- as expected- Jesus emerges as the victor. The tragedy is that his overly-clever opponents are both amazed and silenced but not converted. Their darkness is deep and deepening.

The *head* tax began in 6AD after the census of Quirinius when the Jewish king was deposed and the rule of Galilee passed to Roman governors. The tax led to an uprising under Judas *the Galilean* that was brutally crushed with leaders crucified. Jesus would have been about ten at the time, and it would have made an impression, especially if any rebels were local. The coin for the tax was a denarius, a day's wage, and served as imperial propaganda that Tiberius was both *son of God* and *chief priest* of the Imperial cult. It offended the Jews.

The leaders attempt flattery in v.21, and while true, it has no effect on Jesus. The question, "Does our law permit us to pay this tax to Caesar?" is moot since they are already paying it, and by producing a coin they demonstrate they already carry idolatrous symbols into the temple. Round one to Jesus! His counter-question, "Whose *likeness* and inscription has it?" echoes Gen. 1:27. The insight is stunning. Since the coin already belongs to Caesar, return it when asked. And since you bear the divine image, give yourselves to God and to the Teacher God sent. The crowds serve as a shield. The interrogators marvel in silence but continue to plot. How blind!

IN GOD WE TRUST?

“... and to God the things that are God.”

A word to image-bearers.

LUKE 20:25b

John Wesley’s sermon was simple and straightforward. To his first point, “Gain all you can,” a rich, old miser shouted, “Amen.” To the second point, “Save all the you can,” the same man gave a rousing, “Hallelujah.” After the third point, “And after you have done the first two, give all you can,” the rusty old coot whispered in a stage voice, “What a shame to spoil a good sermon.”

Some of you remember Arthur Godfrey who quipped, “I’m proud to pay taxes in the U.S., but I could be just as proud for half the money.” Or Will Rogers, “The income tax has made more liars out of the American people than golf has.” A former I.R.S. director was blunt, “There is one difference between the tax collector and the taxidermist; the taxidermist leaves the hide.”¹ Money itself is a sensitive topic, and when mixed with taxes and politics, it’s explosive.

In the simplified version of American history I was taught in grammar school, the watchword of the American Revolution was “No taxation without representation.” I pictured patriotic rebels shouting slogans as crates of English tea were pitched overboard into Boston Harbor. There was a Parliament in England, and since most of the colonists were English, they expected a voice in America. But it was not to be, which is one of the reasons we became a free and independent country through war.

That the slogan of *no taxation without representation* carried moral weight as an appeal to conscience reminds us what a modern notion it was. The idea that the taxed should have a voice through their delegates is a modern invention; it was not

¹ Edited from the (apocryphal!) story of Gerard Fuller, *Stories for All Seasons* (Mystic, CT: XXIII Publications, 1999), 41-42.

the world Jesus and his followers inhabited. Athens of old may have been a democracy, but it had been a long time since anyone but king and emperor made the demand to pay up or face a sword. There was no consent of the governed, no enlightened social contract, no democratic participation as we know it.

Jewish puppet kings like Herod in Galilee and Roman prefects like Pilate ruling Judea and Samaria were responsible for delivering revenues to Rome. It's estimated a Jewish family of Jesus' day paid forty-nine percent of annual income in Jewish and Roman taxes, which reduced small farmers and tradesmen to bare subsistence.² It was a crushing burden; resentments ran high. Running an Empire and keeping local kings, cronies, and armies well furnished was an expensive enterprise. Peace through conquest, taxation through coercion, and control through violence were the rules, and woe be to anyone who acted, or even spoke, against them.³ Much was whispered among the hopeful, "One day a Messiah will come. Have you heard of Jesus of Nazareth? I hear he works miracles and speaks of a new kingdom. Maybe he can relieve our pain once and for all? When will he declare his larger agenda?"

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) vv.21-26 Is Jesus Seditious Or Not?

It was in 6A.D.- when Jesus was about ten- that a *census tax* was imposed as Judea came under the direct rule of Rome after the local Jewish king was deposed.⁴ It was a *head tax* on men, women, and slaves age twelve to sixty-five, and was to be paid with the Roman denarius, a small silver coin which was a day's wage for a laborer.

On the most common of these small coins was the image of Emperor Tiberius with the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, August son of the Divine Caesar," and on the opposite side "High Priest," *Pontifex Maximus* in Latin- a title the Pope holds to this

² On coinage and taxes, see John J. Rosseau, Rami Arav, *Jesus And His World* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1995), 55-61, 278.

³ On the system of imperial domination, see John Dominic Crossan, *God & Empire* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

⁴ On the history of this period, see Ben Witherington, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), Chapter 3, "The Herodians and Their Prophetic Adversaries: John and Jesus, 4B.C. - A.D. 27, 80-106.

day.⁵ The Emperor was head of state and head of the imperial cult of peace-through-strength, a man to whom divine titles were given and worship offered. Every coin was a miniature billboard and a call to loyalty to the one from whom all blessings flow down from above and out from Rome. It was pure political and religious propaganda with multiple copies in every purse. To use his money was to live in his symbolic world of top-down power. Who is the world’s Lord? Why Caesar alone! “No,” said the infant church, “Jesus is the world’s rightful ruler. Jesus is Lord!”

God’s holy land- the gift promised to Abraham and taken by Joshua, was under Roman rule and had been for over ninety years.⁶ There was no living memory of what it was like to be a free people, only stories of a glory now gone. It was an abomination to be ruled by pagans with all their gods and immoral ways, and the claim on the coin was nothing but in-your-face idolatry. Tiberias was no *Son of God*.

When the head tax was first imposed, rebellion broke out up north; it was led by one Judas *the Galilean* and ruthlessly crushed by Rome, the rebels crucified as examples. Perhaps there were young men from Nazareth who suffered this fate and were remembered by some as freedom fighters and by others as foolish young men caught up in the inflammatory rhetoric of Judas *the Galilean*. So twenty-four years later when another *Galilean* was traveling the villages and proclaiming a new kingdom, not of Caesar but of God, and was asked about this specific Roman tax, “Is it lawful to pay the *census* to Caesar, or not?” it was an historically and politically loaded question, Jesus was handed a lit stick of dynamite. If he said *No*, he was liable to Roman arrest, and if he said *Yes* he was seen as cooperating with the oppressors and would lose support among all who loved the land and cherished dreams for freedom. Either/or? Which would he choose? Jesus is in a bind, and this is precisely what his opponents wanted. Catch him in an inflammatory teaching and turn him over to Pilate because they knew the governor’s track record for brutality.

Our scene is Jerusalem the week of Passover, the great festival that celebrates the political liberation of the Jews from Egypt. In a series of encounters, Jesus turned the tables and blasted the priests, the elders, and scribes as those who do not obey God or welcome his prophets, and who- unless they change, will drag the whole

⁵ Latin *Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus Pontifex Maximus*.

⁶ Since General Pompey’s arrival in 63B.C.

nation down to destruction.⁷ All this from an upstart from backwoods Galilee.

I'm sorry, friends, but this is no sweet Jesus, no soft Savior, no easy listening, smooth velvet blessing on the good life otherwise defined. Jesus is the enemy of how the world is currently organized, both politically and religiously. It wasn't the worst of church and state that did him in but the best the world had seen at that time.

Jesus is against the oppression and pain of the whole system. He has come to embody, announce, inaugurate, preview, display, teach, suffer for, and finally in his resurrection unveil a whole new administration- the kingdom of God engulfing all that is. Jesus is the end of the world, and at its end his rule will be undisputed.⁸ He is the most dangerous and disruptive man who ever lived; it's why they killed him. And when we seek to domesticate him or to recruit him to serve any agenda but his own- be it political or personal, we find ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with Jerusalem elites who wanted him dead because he was *messin' with their deal*.

Jesus often makes me mad because he will play by the rules; he apparently has his own set of rules. Imagine that! He is not an advocate of this or that party or this or that form of government. Those are human issues to be worked out in history, some of which are surely better and more just than others. I would much rather live here than under a despot. But Jesus' issue is not a new and improved version of any human government. It is the end of human rule by sinners over one another and its ultimate replacement by God's kingship in a new world, and of that new world- its love and powers- Jesus is the sneak preview, and his church is the continuing outpost of the new reality. He does not come to make our world a bit better but to alert us it is now possible- in the world as is- to live already under the Father's rule through Jesus in the power of the Spirit. We point to a future reality with present consequences for the whole of life. There's no Republican Jesus, no Democratic Jesus, no Libertarian Jesus, only an Independent Jesus with his own agenda. All political agendas could be improved with attention to him- left and right and center, democratic and autocratic- but none can be equated with him or his. Jesus is not into improvement; he's into replacement, and everywhere his church is introduced as an alternative way of going about being human in a broken world, life is better because it's aligned with the truth of God, even if only in a provisional way.

⁷ 19:28-48.

⁸ "...and his kingdom shall have no end" ends Article II of the Nicene Creed.

One way to trap people is flattery. Build ‘em up, then take ‘em down! Their compliments were bait. They presume Jesus is vulnerable to ego inflation; they are wrong. They say some things others believed, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and shown no partiality, but truly teach the way of God.” Jesus never spoke a false word, was never swayed by anything but the truth of God. So why did they not follow him? Answer: it was too much change. To give up their world for his was just too much. Jesus is a fork in the road, and we will either walk with him in the light of truth or at some point lapse back into the comfort of the shadows and the grey areas and the easy compromises of popular faith and American therapeutic religion which is *all about us*. He will not be wrapped in our dreams or draped with our flag or be a religious mascot for any cause other than his own. Jesus is simply the most radical challenge the world’s ever faced or will face. He is history’s most important figure for a reason, and the reason is that he didn’t stay dead. The fact that he was validated by resurrection put God’s personal stamp of approval on the whole of his life; his every word and deed is God saying, “This is my story in your world.”

What a pain it was to be one of the twelve and live so close to the light for three years. Nowhere to hide. Judas had his greed and taste for evil exposed; James and John had their ambitions brought to light; Peter had his cowardice revealed; Thomas had his doubt uncovered; the scribes and priests had their murderous plot discovered; the Saducees had their false theology and silly view of the new world held up to ridicule. And we think we can follow him without the same kind of personal exposure and embarrassment? Following Jesus as a disciple is not about image management, not about looking good and feeling good and being cool; it’s about being turned inside out so you can be detoxified of the world’s poisonous agenda for your life! I’ve been trying as an adult to keep up with Jesus for forty years now, and I tell you, it gets worse. My eyes hurt from the light, and I am often discouraged and embarrassed by how I think and behave. At some level I am a fraud, but I am a *believing fraud* who believes he is my only hope! And if I find a better deal, I’ll let you know, but I see Jesus as the only game in town if your agenda is life now and life later. Nobody else has his credentials, resurrection being the most impressive!⁹ He is the only one ever who bears God’s ultimate stamp of approval!

Jesus means exposure to the illumination of God; in his company we walk in the light. Winston Churchill wrote, “Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but

⁹ For a summary of evidence, see Kenneth Richard Samples, *7 Truths That Changed The World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), Chapter 1, “Easter Hope,” 15-30.

most pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.”¹⁰ The Jerusalem leaders could not stay in his presence; they preferred darkness. They marveled in silence and retreated to plot again; what they did not do was follow him.

After years of listening to the self-deceptions of which humans are capable, psychologist Rollo May summed up his insights: “The reason we do not see the truth is not that we have not read enough books or do not have enough academic degrees, but that *we do not have enough courage.*”¹¹ I love the Jim Carey movie *Liar, Liar*. Watch it; then read one of the gospels with a new set of lenses. Jesus was at least that shocking. He startled people with his wit and truth, verse 26: “... they *marveled.*” And for this they killed him. “Tell us what you think, Jesus. It is lawful according to God’s laws to pay the census tax to Caesar, or not?” They had him in their trap; there was no way out. If *No*, the Romans get him; if *Yes*, the crowds desert him.

No one wins a debate with Jesus, and the reason- at least for those who believe what the church teaches- is not hard to understand. His raw intelligence may not have been higher than any of his disciples. What made him master of any situation was his moral purity (his lack of sin) and his constant access to divine revelation. Jesus lives from within the intimate circle of the Triune God.

Our computers now have access to *the cloud*. Information does not have to be stored in the machine if it can reach out on the web and instantly retrieve it, and Jesus- through the Holy Spirit- had immediate access to the creative mind of his Father. His was a clear signal, no static of sin or shame on the line.¹² They gave him two options in a trap; his Father gave him a third to turn the tables and trap them. Verse 23, “But he *perceived their craftiness* and said, ‘Show me a coin. Whose likeness and inscription as it?’” Losing arguments with Jesus is a form of grace. In losing he will show you a whole new world and force a choice: Your world or mine?

There in the temple Jesus asks, “Show me the money for the tax.” A scribe or

¹⁰ Stephen Gauhroger, Nick Mercer, *A-Z: Sparkling Illustrations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 131.

¹¹ Albert M. Wells, ed., *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 211.

¹² See John 5:19-30, particularly v.19 (on sight) and v.30 (on hearing). See Gary Best, *Naturally Supernatural* (Cape Town, SA: Vineyard International Press) for a book length treatment of how Jesus, and the church after him, operated in the Spirit’s gifts.

priest reaches in his purse for a denarius. Jesus was not carrying an idolatrous coin which announced the imperial propaganda that Caesar was god, but they were! Indictment number one! Temple leaders are carrying little idols in their pockets!

He then asked the obvious, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”

“Caesar’s.”

“So, if you boys enjoy his roads and world markets, his relative peace and order, pay his bills. Give back what’s already his. His silver, his image, his self-serving inscription, his propaganda machine. Give it back. It’s not your’s anyway. Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s....” Indictment number two! If you enjoy the benefits and don’t mind carrying his coins around in the house of God, quit complaining about his taxes. Bunch of frauds! He had them. They marveled, were silent, but not one changed. Silenced but unconverted.

It’s easy to miss the subtlety of Jesus’ question, “Whose *likeness* and inscription is this?” That’s Genesis language for men and women made in the *likeness* and image of God.¹³ The real issue is not the image of Caesar pressed into little silver coins but the image of God stamped in every human face. These coins bear the mark of their maker, but so do you! So “Render to God the things that are God’s.” The primary issue is not political but theological. At this point Jesus is not interested in particular cases where Caesar has crossed the line; that is left to community discernment. What’s clear is that giving your life to God, and therefore to the Son who represents the Father, has priority now and later. Are you giving God’s image- yourself- back to God, and to the one who best represents him- Jesus the Son. Jesus is not giving us a complete political theory complete with policy recommendations. He is alerting us that whatever the current political system, it has a cost, but the real test is loyalty to God who made you, not to whoever’s picture is currently on the currency you carry. Caesar has valid claims, but they are limited.

That is the danger of Jesus. He has this annoying habit of exposing us and then directing us to the one loyalty that relativizes all others, our inescapable relationship with the God he reveals. When Caesar asks for his coinage back, we pay him and continue about our work of building an alternative community in the church. When Caesar asks for more than his due, when he demands worship and unquestioned loyalty, we resist and risk his wrath, even to the point of martyrdom. We let the state

¹³ Genesis 1:26-27.

be what it is and carry out its functions; we do not worship it.¹⁴

The church cannot cease preaching Jesus Christ and holding him up as the only rightful Lord of the whole world. We cannot cease preaching his judgment on the injustices and cruelties of this world. The church cannot cease reminding all Caesars, great and small, that their power is derived and that they will answer to God for the use of it. The church supports the idea and structures of government, but not any particular party because we have our own agenda and our own politics. The church teaches its members to live lives of virtue and service, to vote after careful reflection where that privilege is afforded, and where needed to raise their voices against injustice. Christians may serve in government where it does not violate their conscience. But the church itself is an alternative society set in the midst of this world to give people a glimpse of the kingdom. We will not allow our Lord to be wrapped up in anyone’s flag or made mascot for any national agenda.

The purpose of the church is not to save this or that nation; the purpose of the church is to bear bold witness to Jesus Christ, to the God he reveals and the kingdom that is coming. What beneficial political and social effects we have are secondary to our primary mission. We call all people to bow the knee in faith, to be baptized into Christ’s church, to learn his ways, and thus to make loyalty to God the organizing center of life: not family, not nation, not money, not career, not pleasure, not heritage, not race, not privilege, but only the Living and Triune God.

And so, when our culture turns increasingly to gambling in place of taxes to

¹⁴ See the *The Articles of Religion* “**Article XXIII—Of the Rulers of the United States of America:** The President, the Congress, the general assemblies, the governors, and the councils of state, as the delegates of the people, are the rulers of the United States of America, according to the division of power made to them by the Constitution of the United States and by the constitutions of their respective states. And the said states are a sovereign and independent nation, and ought not to be subject to any foreign jurisdiction.” And *The Confession of Faith* “**Article XVI- Civil Government:** We believe civil government derives its just powers from the sovereign God. As Christians we recognize the governments under whose protection we reside and believe such governments should be based on, and be responsible for, the recognition of human rights under God. We believe war and bloodshed are contrary to the gospel and spirit of Christ. We believe it is the duty of Christian citizens to give moral strength and purpose to their respective governments through sober, righteous and godly living” (*Book of Discipline 2012*, 69, 74-75).

fund our common life because feeding off vice is easier than political courage, we announce that our lives are not devoted to Lady Luck but to the Living God who teaches us to earn our bread by the honest sweat of our brow that we may fund the work of the church and give to the poor and not play on the false hope of some pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.¹⁵

Casinos, lottery outlets, and the recent poker craze are not sophisticated adult playgrounds; they are temples to alternative gods and goddesses, to Chance and Luck, to Fate and Fortune, who had proper names in the ancient pantheons. *Fortuna* was her name in Latin, *Tyche* in Greek. When you worship her and pay your offerings, you come under a malevolent, demonic influence. “Seven-come-eleven” is a prayer; blowing on dice is a sacramental ritual; “just this once” is a covenant with a power that is not God. It is a form of idolatry that will steal your money and your soul.

So pay your tithes and taxes with honesty and prayer. Manage the rest with an eye to God and a heart of generosity. Don’t spend money on what corrodes your character. Dare to ask the hard question, What am I withholding from the God whose image I bear? Then listen; God will speak, and then you will have an even harder decision. Will I stay with the light of the truth and let it change me, or will I- like the men Jesus faced- *leave him and walk away* because his truth is too much to bear?

To think of it, there’s no report Jesus returned the coin. It’s an argument from silence, but could the keeping of the coin be a fulfillment of his own words to *render to God the things that are God’s*? It’s all his anyway, and so are we.

Pay your taxes with an eye to God. Thank him for our amazing freedoms; be an informed citizen; work for a justice and compassion where you can. But remember one thing in all your attempts to do good and live good and do right. Keep surrendering yourself to the God of Jesus for his ongoing transformation, what the early Methodists called *sanctification*. You need it; so do I. Once is not enough. It must be done over and over and over and every single day. You bear his image, and he wants his image back; he sent Jesus to retrieve it. He paid a high cost for you. Follow him and learn the ways of his new world.

Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC, February 24, 2013

¹⁵ For the church’s teaching on gambling, see *The Book of Discipline 2012*, Para. 163G, 131-132.
