

The Cast | People Engaged in the Story of Jesus Christ

The Taxpayers

Matthew 22.15-34

March 25, 2018

Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. ¹⁷ "Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ "Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. ²⁰ And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." ²² And hearing this, they were amazed, and leaving Him, they went away.

²³ *On that day some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Jesus and questioned Him, ²⁴ asking, "Teacher, Moses said, 'IF A MAN DIES HAVING NO CHILDREN, HIS BROTHER AS NEXT OF KIN SHALL MARRY HIS WIFE, AND RAISE UP CHILDREN FOR HIS BROTHER.' ²⁵ "Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother; ²⁶ so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ "Last of all, the woman died. ²⁸ "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had married her." ²⁹ But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: ³² 'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB '? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."*

³³ *When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. ³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together.*

We've been looking at the fascinating characters in the Four Gospels... Some of them, we've looked at more than once in different contexts... Some cast-members change throughout the story... like the disciples of Jesus.

Other characters... only change their costumes or their masks from one scene to another... Such is the case with TODAY'S characters: they've appeared before... Here Jesus Christ calls them "play-actors" (end v. 18); the word in our translation is "hypocrites." It's a word used for actors.

We're calling them The Taxpayers... because that's the issue they seem to be raising (on the surface) but that's not REALLY what's on their mind... In fact, they raise A LOT of issues with

Jesus... In some sense today's sermon is about all the things we've been taught NOT to discuss in polite company: money, politics, sex, religion, death...it's ALL HERE! Happy Palm Sunday!... and TAXES in time for April 15th.

This text is about CONTOVERSY and how Jesus Christ handles it. The ones we're calling "taxpayers" are from different/competing religious and political parties and somehow they reach across the aisle (as we'd say)... Isn't it nice when competing factions can agree on something ...when Republicans and Democrats can agree on SOMETHING? That's what's happening here... but the results of their cooperation aren't so great (Ps 2.1-2 - *Why are the nations in an uproar And the peoples devising a vain thing. The kings of the earth take their stand And the rulers take counsel together Against the LORD and against His Anointed*)

Today, we find God, in Jesus Christ, confounding the wise... Jesus is trapped...He's cornered... checkmate! But He escapes unavoidable defeat ...He does it so easily...it's sort of ridiculous...and He turns the tables on His opponents... leading some to astonished worship and others to hardened defiance.

Let's look at: 1) Strange Bedfellows Question Jesus 2) Image Is Everything 3) Our Questions for Jesus

The pundits (as we called them a few weeks ago), the clergymen and religious scholars have been very concerned about this radical Rabbi from the country and now He's come into Jerusalem (this is after the Triumphal Entry we celebrate on Palm Sunday) and the only thing keeping them from seizing Jesus Christ is the people... He's very popular with the people.

So the plan is to expose this simple, uneducated fanatic for what He is... So, monitoring His every move, they send some spies to engage Him in "conversation". Luke says, "spies who pretended to be righteous". They approach Him with flattery. (Remember: a compliment is for the sake of the receiver and flattery is for the sake of the giver...THIS was flattery).

"And the Pharisees sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?'"

Notice a few facts here. 1) This commission is made up of Pharisees and Herodians... AND in v. 23 we meet another party called Sadducees and in v. 34 we return to the Pharisees. These are different parties within the ancient Judaism of the First Century. The Herodians were pro-Rome. The Pharisees and Sadducees were against Rome...but cautious in their opposition because Rome was...super powerful!

The Pharisees were very conservative but also kind of "of the people" – like low-church or fundamentalists. And the Sadducees were also conservative but high-minded and more

philosophical...they did NOT believe in angels, in oral-tradition and (as noted in v.23) did not believe in a resurrection.

These parties would normally compete with one another; they had serious differences and yet... here they are cooperating. They're joining forces to confront a common threat.

And this sort of epitomizes a truth that the Gospel, the basic message of Christianity, always rubs us the wrong way...no matter what our culture or race or political leanings... There's no group that's more suited to believe the Gospel...than anyone else.

If you're conservative...and you believe that people should work to achieve self-sufficiency so they don't have to depend on others...well, the Gospel will BUG you because it's not fair... Think of the parable of the workers in the field who are hired at different times, some at sunrise and some at sunset but ALL get the same pay (Matt 20) ... The Gospel is NOT fair.

If you're liberal/progressive, it may really BUG you that sin has to be paid for and atonement has to be made... The justice of God has to be satisfied; a debt has to be paid – that's why Jesus Christ has to die under the penalty of justice...That might bug you.

If you're sexually liberated, the bedroom-ethics of Christianity might offend you. If you're a family-values person then the boardroom-ethics and Jesus Christ's emphasis on social-justice and systemic evil might bother you... At the end of the previous chapter, Jesus said it: "he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust" (Mat 21.44)...

He's saying, "Everyone has to be offended who comes into My Kingdom... No one gets a pass... I'm an equal-opportunity Offender...everyone either breaks and is humbled as they come in...or refuses to come in and is shattered..."

#2) Notice how this delegation of hypocrites flatters Jesus Christ... and YET...unwittingly...they speak the truth: 'Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?'"

Like Caiaphas a few weeks ago who said, "Isn't it better for one Man to die than the whole nation?" and God put that truth into his mouth...SO NOW, these actors/liars...are really telling the truth: Jesus is indeed the only Teacher of Truth...totally unbiased and impartial... and ONLY His opinion counts!

#3) Their issue is taxes... but it's really a way to ensnare Jesus...and yet it totally backfires as Jesus sees right through their question and offers an answer that's off the grid altogether!

If Jesus says, “Yes, pay the Romans!” that’ll be terribly offensive to the common-folk because Rome has been very rough on them... BUT, if Jesus says, “No! Don’t pay the Romans – this isn’t THEIR country and they have no claim to our money!” Well, that’ll make Jesus a political dissident/rebel... The Herodians will run to Pilate or Herod and have Jesus arrested for treason! He’s trapped!

“Jesus, are You left-wing or right-wing: Yes or No?”

But He sees that it’s NOT a “yes or no question” AND that it’s really NOT the question at all!

“Show Me the money!” says Jesus... “Show Me the coin you use to pay this tax...” (BTW – the tax was one denarius per year for every adult male). And He asks a simple question: “Whose image is on it and what is the inscription?”

Well it’s a stamp...an image (Greek: eikon) of Caesar with the words, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus” – so it was an idol! On the back of the coin the words, “Pontifex Maximus” i.e. High Priest.

“So,” says Jesus, “this is an idol you’re carrying around and an image of a false god... So, give it back to the one whose stamp/image is on the coin...Render to Caesar what has his stamp on it – and render to God what has HIS stamp on it... i.e. YOU!”

“You were made, an icon of God...in the image of God. Therefore, God OWNS you (and He owns Caesar too!) but why don’t you return to God what belongs to God – i.e. YOU and everything about you?!”

“And hearing this they were amazed and leaving Him they went away” ... “We THOUGHT we HAD Him...but somehow even after all our plotting and our carefully laid trap...He got US!”

And then the Sadducees take a crack at it but it goes the same way. They tell a story of a woman married seven times and ask, “So, Mr. Resurrection, to whom will she be married in the after-life?”

And Jesus takes it off the grid once again: “marriage is at least partly about procreation. You are all dying so you have to reproduce but there is no dying in the resurrection so you won’t need to reproduce! You’ll be immortal like the angels.”

And then Jesus says, “But ABOUT resurrection: haven’t you read the Scripture that says, ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...’? Do you think God is speaking of dead people here... No! The patriarchs are ALIVE and are with God – He’s the God of the LIVING!... Of course there’s an afterlife!”

“Don’t you see – you belong to Him who has stamped His image into YOU: the Living God? Why are you diddling around with these silly questions when that God is standing before you... Don’t you see that I will die in a few days...I the Perfect, Flawless Image of God...will be turned over to Caesar...to Rome... you’ll give what belongs to God to Caesar!”

“Don’t you see that My blood will be on your hands and that blood will cleanse and save you...will be the atonement for YOUR sins and the sins of everyone who believes in the Covenant-keeping God? Don’t you see that I AM the Image of God (2 Cor 4.4) ...standing right in front of you... I am the God of the living... and death will not hold Me?”

“Don’t you see that your frantic clinging to the status quo is killing you...Your confirmation bias is choking the life out of you...so fixated on proving Me wrong that you can’t see that I AM THE RESURRECTION?”

The chapter contains more questions and ends with the ominous words: “No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.” (46) In the next chapter the Kingdom strikes back... Jesus Christ goes on the offensive in order to give them NEED because (as we saw last week) faith is germinated in the soil of NEED.

You may have questions for God... You might like to have Jesus Christ right here in the flesh so you could ask Him why the world is the way it is...why something happened to you...some issue or topic that’s bugged you for a long time...What would you ask?

Please remember this passage, this occasion in the Temple...when they came at Him with lots of questions and controversies and (quote), “Jesus perceived their malice and said, ‘Why are you testing Me you hypocrites?’”

For me the take away is: when I see Jesus Christ as the True and Perfect Image of God...He is all that I should be but the image of God IN ME...is broken and contorted and turned in on itself (Augustine: “Incurvatus in se” – curved In on ourselves). When I see that and when I know that Jesus Christ sees into me...knows all about me... it’s NOT that I’m oblivious to my issues, my past hurts and my questions... but I realize that I don’t see my own heart...motives.

And I have to see as these ancient religious guys didn’t really see themselves...didn’t perceive their own malice...and just wanted God to just leave them alone... I have to see THAT I TOO can’t really see myself and what are the real issues facing me today.

I’m have to see that Jesus Christ, the Unspoiled Image of God...has a question for ME...infinitely more important than any question I may have for Him. He calls to me...to US...in this passage: Come and trust me...trust Me to live, die and rise for you.

I will return you to the Father...I will render you unto God...will you trust Me?... Will you start every morning with Me and trust Me through the day?

Some heard His words and were astonished and worshiped...others went and conspired how they could get rid of Him... Some will be shattered...others will be humbled, broken, believing and then gloriously remade into the image of Jesus...

It's the question He has for me...and for YOU... today: will you come and will you trust Me?