

“To Be Owned”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Matthew 22:15-22

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” It wasn’t really an honest question. It was a trap, simple but clever, laid down to put Jesus into an impossible situation that would either damage his popularity or risk his freedom. The people who put it in play feared him, and with good cause.

Jesus threatened their monopoly on religious power. He challenged the authority of his opponents, calling them out as frauds and hypocrites, unworthy of trust and respect. Every time they tried to make Jesus look foolish, he escaped with ease, making these intelligent and well-educated men look stupid by comparison.

Their pride wounded, their livelihoods at peril, these men harbored intense resentment against Jesus. Their attempts to compromise his status, to stall his momentum, with little tricks wasn’t working, so they’d already started a conspiracy to kill him. But there was one serious obstacle to their plot, the crowds.

People loved Jesus; not everybody, but enough to pose a serious problem. His teachings made sense, offered hope and meaning, changed lives – in stark contrast to the legalisms that stifled rather than set people free. He introduced freshness into a stale faith, focusing on God’s future instead of being shackled to the past. Jesus healed the sick and performed other miracles that amazed people and brought a sense of awe and wonder into ordinary lives ready to be lifted up.

People flocked to Jesus and followed him around, and Jesus made himself accessible. Jesus met people where they were, wandering from place to place, intent on reaching as many

people as possible, regardless of race, class, or faction. Along the way, he broke down walls of suspicion and enmity that divided people and wasted their energy and only made them weaker. Jesus was a radical. God only knew what he would do next and what the outcome might be.

This is why his opponents kept trying, despite their many failures, to trap Jesus in a no-win situation that would harm or even halt his mission. To be fair, they truly believed that they were right and he was wrong. Apart from their own self-interest, they were sincerely concerned that Jesus was leading people astray. And you do have to admire their persistence.

This time, though, it would be different. Jesus was in Jerusalem. The Pharisees and Herodians had home court advantage. The headquarters of the Roman governor Pilate was a short walk away, and that man was nervous. Passover was near. The city was stuffed with Jewish pilgrims in a state of ecstasy celebrating their liberation from Egypt, while Roman soldiers patrolled their streets, a contrast nobody could overlook. So this time it wouldn't be a quibble over the finer points of the Law of Moses. No, this time the issue would be political, controversial, and dangerous. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

If Jesus said yes, pay the tax, then the crowds who viewed him as a Messiah would feel betrayed. A Messiah's job was to liberate the people from foreign subjugation, a la Moses. These taxes were, in large part, collected to sustain an occupying foreign force. Everybody hated paying this tax. If Jesus said yes, pay the tax, his popular support would collapse, giving his opponents the opportunity they needed to seize him safely without consequences.

On the other hand, if Jesus said no, don't pay the tax, people would have liked him even more, but once word got to the Romans, there would be trouble. They needed that tax money, and from their perspective, it was a fair price to pay for the peace and prosperity and all the other benefits brought by Roman civilization. Anyone who said, "Don't bother with your 1040 Form,"

would have been seen as a revolutionary with the potential to stir up a violent and costly rebellion. The Romans would not tolerate talk like that, especially during Passover, especially from a popular religious leader.

You've got to give the Pharisees and Herodians credit. This was their best attempt yet. How could Jesus wriggle out of this one? He started with a strange request. "Show me the coin used for the tax." It was a denarius. Everybody used them. Everybody knew what they looked like, so Jesus' question about it bordered on the silly. "Whose head is this, and whose title?" It was the Emperor's, of course. Finally, he answered, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

This was a brilliant response. Somebody could interpret the first part, if they were so inclined, as Jesus saying, "Yes, pay the tax," which protects him from the charge of sedition. Much in the same way that our moms wrote our names on the tags of our clothes when we went to summer camp, so that our clothes wouldn't get mixed up with others kids' clothes, Jesus declared, "Well, it's got his face and name on it, so it must be his coin."

But if you interpret the first part of what Jesus said through the lens of the second part about giving "to God the things that are God's," then it negates the meaning of the first part, because for the faithful, everything belongs to God, including those coins. God created the silver. God created the men who mined it and the skill to make coins out of it. Therefore, the coins do not actually belong to the Emperor, or to anybody else, for that matter. They all belonged to God. In this way, Jesus avoided the wrath of Rome, pleased the crowds, and left his opponents utterly baffled. I love it.

But what does it mean for us? Here's the takeaway. First, Jesus will not be trapped or tricked by anybody, including us. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much we pretend

that we've done it, Jesus cannot be confined or deceived. Now you might be thinking, "I've never tried to trap or trick Jesus." Well, you may not have meant to, but everybody tries from time to time, because Jesus can be disturbing and disruptive, and that can make life complicated. Life's already feels complicated enough. We'd rather it be easier, even if an easy life means a shallow life.

So we try to ignore or manipulate or control Jesus, often unaware that we're doing it. We lock him in a closet by neglecting to pray. We wrap him up tight in a flag or in a political position that suits our preferences and interests. There are a million ways we try, always failing to succeed, and nobody is immune to this tendency, because everybody's a sinner.

How do we bust out of this impulse to capture Jesus? We start with cultivating humility. "Without Jesus, I am nothing. He alone gives me life." That's not a bad mantra to whisper under your breath as you drive around or take a shower. "Without Jesus, I am nothing. He alone gives me life." How we talk to ourselves will shape our perspective on reality. When we tell ourselves, "I'm unworthy of love, or unpopular, or a failure," then we feel unloved and disliked and unsuccessful, even when people love us or like us, even when the facts show that we do succeed. Tell yourself often enough, "Without Jesus, I am nothing. He alone gives me life," and you'll start to believe it and become humbler.

Once we're humbler, we can pray better. If you don't know who you really are, it's hard to have a healthy relationship with anybody. Humility reveals our true identity as creatures created in the image of God. When we can see that image more clearly, we can be humble without self-deprecation and shame. We can relate to God, share our innermost thoughts and feelings and needs and hopes, and listen to Him. And that last one is very important. Prayer needs to be a conversation, where we both share and listen, with emphasis on the latter.

When we pray humbly and listen with care, we become more aware of the tricks we play on ourselves, and once aware of the ways we try to trap Jesus, we see how arrogant and foolish that is. We confess to God, repent, receive forgiveness, and hope for a renewed life, resisting the temptation to confine or manipulate Jesus. We accept that following Jesus isn't part of our lives. It is life. It's not part of lives. It is life.

This leads us to the second takeaway from this marvelous story. Everything belongs to God, absolutely everything. The air in your lungs, the muscles that suck it in and push it out, and your nose, through which it goes – all of it belongs to God. Your job, your house, your car, your money, your friends, your family, your garden – anything you can see and everything you can't – all of it belongs to God.

God has given us these many blessings for a limited time, but we don't actually possess any of them, because God owns us. It's a hard concept to grasp, because we've been taught to deny it, but "Without Jesus, I am nothing. He alone gives me life." We act as mere stewards, servants entrusted with the responsibility for handling what God has given us in ways that accord with His Will and advance His purposes – nothing less, nothing more.

If we can own up to the fact that God owns us, we can escape the traps of this world just as Jesus did and be truly free. Nobody, not even our selves, will be able to trick us into the fantasy that our life is our own to do with as we please. To the extent we own up to God owning us, we'll worry a lot less about the fickleness of popularity or the opponents who try to tear us down. We won't struggle as much with that nagging sense of futility or the isolation of feeling as if we don't belong. We will serve gratefully, faithfully, as stewards of grace, knowing that we belong to God as a cherished possession, a beloved child, never neglected or thrown out, but treasured by a love that knows no bounds. Amen.