

Difficult Decisions (18 Oct 2026)

Matthew 22:21

Jesus said to them, 'Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God.'

A school boy wanted \$50 badly to buy his mum something special for her birthday and prayed to God for a whole week, but nothing happened. So, he decided to write God a letter requesting the \$50. When the Post Office got the letter addressed to God they forwarded it on to Canberra. The Prime Minister was very impressed, touched and amused so he instructed his secretary to send the boy \$10.00. He thought \$10.00 would be a lot for a little boy. The boy was thrilled to get the money. He sat down and wrote a thank you note immediately, which read:

Dear God,

Thank you very much for sending the money. However, I noticed that for some reason you had to send it through Canberra and, as usual, they kept most of it.

The Jews under Roman rule had the same experience. They despised paying taxes to their foreign rulers. There was an ongoing debate among the Jews whether it was right to pay those taxes that simply filled the treasury of the pagan Roman emperor. To pay those taxes they had to use the Roman coins which had the emperor's image on it as well his titles. One of those titles was pontifex maximus which meant he was the supreme high priest of the Roman religion. To handle this money and to pay taxes was to acknowledge the emperor's religion and his position as pontifex maximus - this really got up every Jewish nose.

But today's reading from Matthew is not only about getting Jesus' opinion about paying taxes to the Romans, but also about trapping Jesus into saying something stupid.

Not long before this incident we hear of Jesus riding triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. His popularity was soaring. He was welcomed with shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord".

Following this Jesus cleared out of the temple all those who were profiting from those who came to worship. Then Jesus healed those who were crippled and the blind. Children shouted in the Temple courtyard, "Praise to David's Son". The religious leaders wanted Jesus to stop the children making all this noise. Instead Jesus says what the babies and children are saying is "perfect praise". Jesus' enemies become more determined.

That's the background of today's reading. It's important because now we see that Jesus is really in trouble to the point that two opposing groups join to trap Jesus into condemning himself. On the one hand, there were the Pharisees who hated the Roman rulers and any acknowledgement of the emperor as pontifex maximus, and on the other, the Herodians, who supported the Romans and their puppet ruler, King Herod.

After laying on some thick flattery, the question is asked, "Jesus, in your opinion, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" The trap is set. Whichever way Jesus answered could lead to trouble.

The Pharisees hoped Jesus would say "yes" and show himself as a Roman sympathizer and an outright traitor of his people and the religion of God's people.

The Herodians hoped Jesus would say "no" to paying taxes to Caesar and so show himself to be a traitor to Rome. These two groups were confident that finally Jesus was cornered and would condemn himself with his own words.

The answer Jesus gave was as bewildering and amazing. "Pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God". The

translation of "pay" is not a terribly good one. Maybe the word "render" is better but not well understood.

Literally Jesus means "give what you are obliged to give", or "pay what is owing". In other words, there are some things that are rightly owed to Caesar. A silver coin with Caesar's image on it was examined. This belonged to Caesar. Pay what is due to Caesar.

At the same time there are those significant parts of this world and our lives that have God's image on it and so belong to God. Likewise, we are to give to God what is God's - that is an obligation that falls on all those made in his image.

Maybe this summary of what Jesus said might be helpful. "The coin bears Caesar's image; humanity bears God's image, so give the coin to Caesar and pay your taxes, and give yourself wholly to God. Serving God covers all of life. It also includes serving Caesar in a way that brings honour to God".

We are told Jesus' questioners were amazed by this answer. Jesus had given an answer that no one could argue against. End of discussion. They just walked away.

This whole matter of where our loyalty to the state and obedience to God starts and ends can be a difficult matter at times.

Jesus gives us some broad principles here but doesn't give us details how things should work out when loyalty to the government and loyalty to God seem to clash, or when we have a choice that has to be made but there is no clear direction which way to go. In fact, what might be a clear direction for you, might not be so clear for someone else. Your understanding of the situation and your application of the Scriptures could be quite different and so someone else's conclusions might be very different.

For example, during the Vietnam War when Christians argued both for and against Australia's involvement. Some argued obedience to the God-given

authority of the government should be our priority; others argued obedience to God and a call for compassion on the people of Vietnam. Both sides spoke passionately about God's will and referred to the Scriptures and theology. They debated the justification for Australia's involvement in this war. What good purpose was being served? Was the ongoing suffering and death that was being forced on people in that war-ravaged country worth it? It was easy to get into a heated discussion. Demonstrations were held in the streets. Even pastors were divided as some joined the protestors.

Ideally, we would like clear cut guidelines that would relieve us of the headache of working through the issues and making a decision and then knowing that we have made the right decision. But it would seem that Jesus doesn't want us to blindly follow a set of rules; he wants us to discover again in each new situation what it means to be made in the image of God and to reflect on how that will affect how we will choose the right way.

Remember how Jesus asked the Pharisees and the Herodians whose image was on the Roman coin. When they said it was Caesar's with all his titles, Jesus then pointed out their responsibility saying, "Pay Caesar what it is owed to him".

Perhaps we can ask ourselves:

In whose image have I been created;

Whose image do I bear?

Whose name was poured on me when I was baptised?

The coin belonged to Caesar because his image was on it. But you, you belong to God, because you have been created in the divine image, and God's name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has been forever engraved on you in the water of baptism. You belong to God – all of you, every part of you, your every action, your every decision. Christ's cross was marked on you at your baptism. You belong to Christ. God's image is deep within you. You belong to God.

What choices and problems and troubles will we face this week?

What struggles will we have and in what ways will it be the hardest for us to be the love of Christ and shine his light and reflect that we belong to Christ in the choices and decisions we face during this week?

At work, or at home or at school, will we try to divide our life? – this is the part with Christ and this is the part without Christ or segregate Christ only to Sunday mornings?

Will we forget at some time this week that we bear the image of God and make some bad choices?

It's when we forget that we bear the mark of Christ that the world and the things and people of this world lay claim on us, distract us, and rule us to the point that we no longer see the choices that God wants us to make, we no longer see God's will for us, we only see our own corrupt desires and selfishness and make our choices accordingly.

No doubt there will come times when we will ask ourselves,

"What does God want me to do?"

"What is the right thing for me to do as a person who bears the mark of Christ?"

"What is the gospel-centred approach to this controversial matter?"

"What does Jesus want me to do?"

We ask ourselves these questions and agonise over them because there is only one way to find the answer. God gives us his answer and direction through prayer and study of the Scriptures and conversation with our fellow believers.

As we get tangled up in these issues and agonise over them, we need to stop and remember that we belong to God, that we bear the mark of Christ because of our baptism that makes all the difference in the way we face these challenges.

I am sure that many of us will make many mistakes as we search for the right answers and the right choices. It's not easy because sometimes the choices we are faced with are contrary to what others think, they may even be our best

friends. This can be extremely difficult and discouraging and confusing when others don't appreciate that you have come to your decision because you are marked with image of God.

In today's gospel Jesus doesn't give us rules but the permission to struggle with the question of what is appropriate for us to do in the world that God created. Jesus gives us an assignment to seek out the will of God as best we can, and go forward, entrusting the choices we make into the hands of our loving and forgiving God.

© Pastor Vince Gerhardy
22nd October 2017