

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS // Luke 20:19-26

Message from the series, The Gospel of Luke

In the week before the crucifixion, Jesus will have a set of final exchanges with the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. The Pharisees have long hated Jesus and sought a way to get rid of him. They finally adopt the philosophy of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Though they despise Rome, they recognize they could use Caesar’s empire to do the dirty work of executing Jesus—something they didn’t have the authority to do anyway. All they have to do is to get Jesus to say or do something that will anger Rome, so they must set a trap. They attempt this initially with a seemingly simple question about paying taxes. Ultimately, though, the question points to the issue of authority and submission.

Main Idea: Christian discipleship requires our faithful submission to authority.

1. A setting of spies (v. 19-20)

The Pharisees wanted Jesus out of the way because they realize that he could not just be written off. As C.S. Lewis puts it, he’s either a liar, a lunatic, or he is Lord. There is no room for considering him to be just a harmless moral teacher. The Jews “feared the people”—Jesus had attracted a large following, so they can’t get him out of the way quietly. So, they seemingly retreat, but will orchestrate a cunning plan to either bring the force of Rome down on Jesus or to alienate him from the people by asking about taxes. Taxation was a significant issue among the Jews at the time, so the answer was bound to cause a stir—either by defying the dictates of Rome or by angering the people who hated paying taxes to their oppressors.

2. The hypocrisy mixed with flattery (v. 21-23)

As the set up for this unfolding plan, the Pharisees attempt to distract Jesus with flattery, calling him “teacher” (rabbi), a sign of respect, and claiming that he teaches rightly about the way of God. This is hypocrisy on their part—they don’t believe their own flattering words, but instead despise Jesus. Then, they plunge the knife: their sharp question about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. The Pharisees are playing politics, but Jesus isn’t going to play their game. He recognizes their “craftiness.”

3. A submission to authority (v. 24-26)

In asking the Pharisees to show him a denarius, Jesus is making a point about their own values—they already have the coin of Caesar in their own pockets. The coin bears the likeness of Caesar—render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. But what bears the image of God? Every human being. Jesus is calling us to render to God the things that are God’s—and that’s everything, including ourselves. The issue here is not about submitting to government, but about submitting to God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did the Pharisees feel so threatened by Jesus and his ministry that they were willing to go to such lengths to destroy him?
2. How does Jesus’ answer circumvent the Pharisee’s intentions? What can we learn from Jesus’ ability to redirect the focus to God?
3. What does it look like to “render to God the things that are God’s”? How does this work out in every day Christian life?