

Matthew 22: A Loaded Question

Has anyone ever posed a question to you that there didn't seem to be a way to answer it without making a big—big—mistake; without saying something which although it was true, it would embroil you in a situation which you had no desire to be involved in. Sometimes it seems like families generate that type of question and issue. When there is disagreement within the group and one side wants to gain an advantage by posing a question which no matter the answer—that answer is going to be offensive to another. Many times these questions are phrased so as not to allow any qualifiers, any statements that might modify the answer. The one posing the questions sometimes follows it by saying: Yes or no. Only either total agreement or rejection is expected or accepted. As I listen and read about the issues being shouted across divisions within our society, it seems to me that that type of question has come to dominate our exchanges with one another. Most of the time this passage is read in conjunction with the issue of stewardship or financial resources as this is the tradition time when churches prepare budgets and talk about finances. At this time what could be better than to refresh this scene when Jesus tells the Pharisees to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to give to God what is God's? After all, we all know that everything belongs to God so the reasoning goes that keeping that in mind you should fill out your pledge card and drop it into the offering plate. But we don't have any pledge cards to pass out; our monetary exchanges don't carry the image of the current leader of the nation although we do definitely pay taxes to support that government. To borrow a slogan from a non-profit—our "fair share" to contribute to that endeavor is determined outside of our control while what we "share" of our possessions for the Lord's work is a matter of private commitment. So what is this passage about money about besides an effort to increase donations? Quite frankly, although it can be used successfully as a way to speak about stewardship when only those verses are read—that is not the context of the passage within the gospel account. That is the danger of taking a text and using it for a purpose instead of letting it speak for itself within the narrative. After all that as introduction, where am I going with this reading of Matthew 22: 16-22? I think that first of all we need to keep in mind just where and when this conversation is reported to have taken place. The timing of this passage is again the final week in Jerusalem before Jesus is arrested, tried and executed according to Roman law. The posers of the question are the Pharisees who have gotten together after Jesus has chased the moneychangers out of the Temple and have plotted with the idea to entrap him—to catch him saying something that will offend either his followers or the Roman occupiers—so that they may be rid of him and his teachings which challenge their authority. In other words, the question is a trap. The ones who approach Jesus with this question are disciples of the Pharisees joined with the Herodians which in itself is a clue that something strange is going on. The Herodians and the Pharisees are usually at odds—disagreeing about many things and challenging each other's power and authority. Their alliance tells us that they have joined because Jesus is a threat to each one's claim of power and authority. Our narrator tells us that those approaching Jesus have a goal in mind—to entrap Jesus. The Greek word used here is one connected with hunting by means of laying a snare—to entice into a trap. There is a particularly sinister tone to this word choice as it implies violence—they are not attempting to get Jesus to make a mistake, to catch him in misspeaking

and thus reduce his popularity. They are designing their trap so that Jesus may be arrested, tried, convicted and eradicated and thus removed as a threat to the status quo they represent. When they approach Jesus however, it is not phrased in terms of challenge, but instead with feigned sincerity in seeking an answer and false flattery. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" This question does not invite discussion about the merits. It assumes the answer is yes or no. The tax in question is not just any tax, but the Imperial tax, the one Rome required annually from the Jews to cover the cost of the Roman army which occupied their homeland. It was a way that the oppressing force required those they oppressed to pay for their own oppression. That made this a very sore point with many of those who viewed Jesus as Messiah who had come to free them from this oppression. The Herodians are those put in power by Rome, they support the paying of this tax as it supports them and their positions of power. The nature of the trap in this loaded question is that if Jesus advocates the paying of the tax, his supporters in the crowd will turn on him, but if he condemns the tax then he puts himself in jeopardy with Roman officials as endorsing unlawful and rebellious behavior. At first glance, it doesn't seem if there is a way to avoid springing the trap laid for him. Jesus, not only evades their snare, but entangles them in their own complicity. "'Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius." A denarius was the Roman silver coin used and represented the amount of the tax. Eager to advance their plot, Jesus' opponents bring him a denarius forgetting that by procuring that coin they betray their own complicity in the Roman system for no Hebrew coin would have a graven image on it. For any in the crowd who weren't paying attention, Jesus makes the point by continuing: "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." So those who posed the question demonstrate their knowledge of the face and proclamation on the coin—that blasphemous confession of the divinity these coins carry and the image are in violation of the Torah. Jesus' response: Give therefore to the emperor those things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. The trap has been sprung, but they are the ones snared as all of those present confess that everything belongs to the holy One of Israel. Jesus has revealed the truth about his would be accusers and calls them to give a higher fidelity than they had imagined. Although not a suggested passage for today, this question of image and likeness and allegiance has an echo in a much earlier text: Genesis 1: 26 where "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.'" That is the first mention of image in Scripture. The next occurrences are when God makes the covenant at Mt. Sinai when these people, forbidden to make likenesses of any living thing to worship promptly violate with the golden calf. So the existence of coins bearing the image of a person, a person claiming to be divine was blasphemous. Throughout humanity's history, the truth of John Calvin's assertion that the human mind is an idol making factory has been proven again and again. This passage exposes those who would try to entrap Jesus, but it also leaves us with a loaded question of our own. Because although our coins carry the motto "In God We Trust", do we live our lives that way? Although no current political leaders faces are found on our coins, at what altars do we worship? Back to the thought that first occurred to me when reflecting on this passage: that about loaded questions and their purpose. The intent of the Pharisees in asking the question was to entrap Jesus, to expose him and his teachings in a light that would

be unfavorable to the crowds or to the governing powers. Today it seems that almost every question posed is a loaded question; one set forth to define a boundary between us and others. If the answer given does not agree with the posers' own views, then there develops a chasm with no bridge. These questions illustrate those things which we consider so important no deviation or other opinion is allowed. It seems that we have many things in our lives which we may not call idols, but are definitely sacred cows as my mother would have named them. Things about which we cannot seem to allow dissension, root causes of issues we cannot find the will to discuss so we focus on symbols. It seems that we are active participants in widening the chasms which define us as different from them. Perhaps we all need to think about how this tendency to divide fits into the kingdom of God which Jesus of which Jesus spoke...that inclusive community where all are loved and invited to sit at the table. Perhaps we need to move closer to one another by changing the questions we ask from being loaded into ones that seek understanding. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.