

A Mis-interpretation

One of the most common things we do when we turn to our scriptures for guidance is to try to apply them to the situations we face in our world...and this is appropriate for they are indeed meant to be our guides; a source for how we are to live in this world but as citizens of a different kingdom with allegiance to a different sovereign. But in doing so we must take into account some basic truths about the differences of the world into which the prophets and Jesus himself spoke those words that have been handed down to us. Otherwise we make some serious errors in the conclusions we make about what those words may mean. One of those differences in context which is often overlooked happens in the gospel passage we will consider today. In the time of Jesus...in the time of the Roman Empire...the concept of separation of the powers of church and state would not have even existed, so the use of this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees and others in the passage for the purpose of justifying that separation of powers in our context is not a good understanding of what is being said by Jesus. It may be a very useful understanding in our world...; it is indeed a good thing to have in place as has been proven to be true throughout history...but no one living in that period of time would have even comprehended what that proposition meant. The reason this would not have had meaning to them was that the Emperor claimed divinity...as well as earthly sovereignty as was the custom and belief of all earthy rulers from the Pharaohs of Egypt, the rulers of Babylonia, etc. throughout all of the preceding dynasties. The head of the state was divine, was god; so there was no separation. Even as late in western history as after the establishment of England and France as nations, there is an issue of the divine right of kings to rule even though they no longer claimed personal divinity...even while acting as gods, they do claim a special relationship with the divine. But our concern when we read scripture for our guidance again deals with the terms exegesis and isogesis which I have mentioned before. When we turn to our passages do we seek the meaning within the context of what the scripture is telling us led by the Spirit or do we seek to impose upon the scripture a meaning which fits what we desire to hear or believe. Last week, shortly after promising allegiance to YHWH and only YHWH, the Israelites did not maintain that allegiance for even six weeks...after forty days they were seeking a material object to which they could pledge allegiance. An object, in that instance a gold calf that they could pick up and move, could place where they wanted, and could determine what actions on their part would be pleasing to it. Before actually having Aaron mold an image from their gold, the Israelites have already broken the covenant they have just made with YHWH for their allegiance is not given to YHWH. When we come to the seeking guidance from the gospel passage for today, we need to look past our context to the underlying message that Jesus words have about to us about allegiance. Because when answering the question the Pharisees ask of Jesus, it is similar to one our world asks of us, to whom or what do we give our allegiance. Our gospel passage continues the narration of the attempts of the religious leaders to justify their planned actions against Jesus. We have considered some of their attempts at entrapment through their questioning Jesus' authority which he in true rabbinic fashion answered by offering a question of his own in response. Then he tells a series of parables in which they recognized themselves. These initial challenges to Jesus were by the chief priests and elders, then the Pharisees joined with a different challenge, and in the midst of these the Sadducees added their challenge about the concept of the resurrection in which they did not

believe. All three groups of the established religious tradition had joined in this effort to entrap Jesus in a dispute; each thinking they had devised a way that would lead to his voicing something which could lead to a charge against him by authorities. Today's passage is the last challenge that occurs in the courtyard. It has an additional group added to this mix of plotters. "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.'" Lots of praise and flattering going on here as a warm up to the question, but remember the Herodians in the group are representatives, not of the religious establishment but of the government...so they are preparing the groundwork so that no matter what answer Jesus gives to this question they have devised...there will be someone present to be offended and take action...for surely what Jesus will say will offend someone in authority? The question they pose is this, "Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" This question is meant to be a "gotcha question". To the Pharisees, the answer was either "yes" or "no". The Pharisees were legalists to whom the answer Jesus should have given was "no." It was not lawful for Jews to pay the temple tax with coins that had images of living things on them; the coins were idolatrous and no Jew should have them; so when at his request they produced such a coin on the temple grounds, they had broken their own understanding of their own law. The Herodians, as representatives of the government would have required a "yes", not paying the tax would be subversive, rebellious. So before this group, Jesus, seemingly could not supply a correct answer. They have teamed up, setting aside their differences to attack a common enemy. Jesus answer very cleverly avoids their trap by asking them to supply him with a coin...and the coin they give him is a Roman coin...a denarius...which has the image of the emperor on it with proclamation of his divinity. When Jesus asks them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" they respond, "The emperor's." This is where we get the famous verse "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus has avoided their trap. They are amazed at his skill at avoiding it and they leave him. By highlighting the physicality of that denarius—the coin stamped out by human hands for human purposes, and the image of Caesar imprinted upon it—Jesus has avoided that trap they have set for him...but his use of the words whose image is one it resonates intentionally with other scripture. And Jesus, know his scripture very well. In asking about the image imprinted on the coin in this manner in connect with the concept of belonging, it also brings to mind another verse where scripture speaks of an image being imprinted. It's hard to ignore the connection to those words which occur from the beginning of Genesis about what God said the first time God stamped out from the earth the form into which breath would be breathed: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." We are the products of God's handiwork, and God placed within us some aspect of divinity. When we look at this verse understanding that Jesus was not purposing the separation of church and state, the separation of the secular and the religious...then what guidance do we find in this passage for us? The instruction is about loyalty or allegiance; about the ordering of priorities in the way we conduct our lives, interactions and things we support. I can imagine Jesus looking at me and asking, dear child, whose image do you bear? One thing, at least, seems clear: Jesus is not solving the dilemma by carving out separate domains of human loyalty. For Christ, and for each one of us there seems to be only one answer

possible...one absolute commitment which subsumes and relativizes all other commitments...Whatever we decide to render to the rest of the world, we must never forget to render unto God the things that are God's. And since we belong to God that means our allegiance to the teachings we have been given. We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our allegiance...We must remember that we belong to God and thus our allegiance belongs to God. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.