

Title: "The Politics of Jesus"

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Turn with me today to that famous passage in Matthew chapter 22,

- where Jesus is asked about paying taxes to Caesar.
- It is found in Matthew 22:15-22.

As we are being "re-introduced" to Jesus this Fall,

- I believe it helps us get to know Jesus better when we are aware of the wider context of the time and place in which he was born and lived out his life on earth.

This little passage from Matthew 22 opens a window for us on the whole geo-political and religious world of first Century Palestine.

- And gives us a glimpse of how Jesus lived within that context.

So if Jesus lived on earth as modern 21st Century American,

- would he have been a Democrat or Republican?
- would he have been a Roman Catholic or a Protestant?
- would he have fit in better here at a church like ours, or would he have found a synagogue and been more comfortable with his Jewish brethren?
- would he have an iPhone or Samsung Galaxy? A Macbook or a PC?

You know, we all kind of want to know if Jesus is like US, or like THEM?

- Would he be on "our team" and agree with our way of looking at the world,
- or on the "other team" and agree with their way of looking at the world.

Well, my friends, that is exactly what people in 1st Century Palestine were trying to figure out about Jesus.

- Where did he fit in among the various political and religious factions of his day?
- Whose side was he on?

And in Jesus' day, as a Jewish man living in Palestine, here's what the issues were and how the teams were laid out:

His people, the Jews, had been living under foreign domination and occupation for 700 years.

- First it had been the Assyrians who had crushed them in 700BC.
- Then the Babylonians in 600BC.
- Then the Medes and Persians in 500BC.
- Then the Greeks around 400BC.
- Then the Romans took over in 63BC.

And all of these dominating world powers had been not only brutal and despotic,

- but according to biblical Jewish values, they had been pagan and immoral and even blasphemous.

It was just abhorrent to the Jews that they were constantly being ruled by ungodly, unjust, immoral, licentious and pagan governments.

- And they were tired of it!
- And they had a hard time coping with the fact that God had allowed this to happen to them again and again over 700 years.

And the question everyone was wrestling with, was "how should we then live?"

- How do we live as faithful followers of God in such a world and under such oppressive, immoral governments?

And as always, different people had markedly different answers to that question.

1. First there were the Zealots. Their answer was "rise up and revolt!"
 - They felt that faithful Jews should be courageous and like David with Goliath, they should go out and fight the pagan enemy.
 - They wanted to slit some Roman throats and kick the pagan enemy out of God's holy land.
 - Every age has its revolutionaries, right? Their answer to the question of how should we then live is REVOLT.

2. On the other end of the spectrum in Jesus' day were the Herodians and the Sadducees.

The Herodians were a political party which supported King Herod, the "puppet King" who had been groomed and installed by the Roman government to rule the Jews in Israel.

The Sadducees were a religious group, made up of the High Priest and his supporters in Jerusalem.

-What united these two groups was the common philosophy "Go along to get along."

These people were all in powerful positions and they wanted to keep those positions and keep the status quo.

-They thought that rebellion against Rome was a suicide mission,

-and it made far more sense for the good of all Jews, to keep the peace, to play the game, to cooperate with Rome.

Don't wake up the snarling beast. Just keep everything nice and "go along to get along."

Just like every age has its revolutionaries, so every age has its status quo-ers, right?

3. And then there are the escapists. In Jesus' day they were called the Essenes.

They were a group who went off into the desert wilderness of the Negev, and formed a community "apart from the world."

-Their motto was "leave it all behind."

-Escape the pagan world. Flee while you still can.

And in every age, there are always those who believe the only way to live in this broken world is to separate yourself from it as much as possible.

-The Pennsylvania Dutch, the Branch Davidians, Jim Jones taking his group to start a community in Guyana.

In Jesus day, they were the Essenes.

4. And then there were the Pharisees. They were deeply religious Jews, ardently pro-Israel and anti-Rome.

- But they were not revolutionaries.
- They believed the way to live in the pagan world, was to repent of sin, trust in God, and look for His deliverance.

They felt that all of these foreign dominating powers were God's judgment on Israel for their lack of repentance and faith.

They felt that if the Jews would come back to God in repentance and faith,
-and live faithfully obedient to God's laws, God would send His Messiah to deliver them from Rome.

I know the Pharisees get a bad "rap" most of the time,
-and it seems in the Gospels that they are the most antagonistic to Jesus, and he is antagonistic towards them.
-But the thing we need to be aware of, is that they are the group that is most closely related to US!
-Or maybe I should say that we are more like them, than any of the other groups I've outlined.

But when it came to Jesus, the real question everyone wanted to answer was "Are you with US, or with THEM?"
-Where do you fit in? What team are you on?

Because you see, Jesus was going around Palestine preaching and teaching and attracting a following,
-and people wanted to know who he was, and who was backing him, and what he was trying to do?

Is he a revolutionary like the Zealots?

-Sometimes he sounds like it in what he says.

Or is he a Herodian?

-Because he also seems to be telling people to "love their enemies,

-and turn the other cheek if Roman soldiers hits you."

-Is that "go along to get along?" Sort of, but not really.

Or is he an Essene?

-He keeps talking about the "kingdom of God."

-Is his "endgame" to take his band of disciples off to start a new community in the wilderness?

Or maybe he's a Pharisee?

-I mean, he also talks a great deal about fulfilling God's laws, and having a righteousness that even exceeds the Pharisees.

You see, no one could quite figure out where Jesus fit.

-But because he was making quite a name for himself, they all wanted to know if he fit in with them!

-When you read the gospels and see how often members of these various groups came to "test" Jesus by asking him questions,

-what's often underneath the testing is the question, "Are you on my side of the great political questions of the day? Or not? Whose side are you on?"

And so it was on this particular occasion when a group of Pharisees and a group of Herodians

-went together to test Jesus.

-And they ask quite simply, "Teacher, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Now, from all I have said so far, you can see that this was not actually just a simple question about taxes.

-It was actually a highly charged question about one's whole approach the question of Roman domination of Israel.

And the Herodians are on one side of the issue, and would say, "Of course one should pay taxes to Rome."

And the Pharisees would be on the other side of the issue, and would say, "Do everything you can to avoid paying taxes to Rome because it's a betrayal of our nation,

-and its money that supports all sorts of ungodly, immoral, pagan activities of the Romans, including the pay of the Roman soldiers who occupy us."

Now early on in Jesus' ministry, these kinds of questions were asked to try and see which side of the fence Jesus was on.

-At this late point in Jesus ministry, both the Herodians and the Pharisees know that Jesus is really not on either of their teams.

And as Matthew tells us, they are now actually trying to “trap” Jesus, and not just “test” him to see where he stands.

- And the trap is, that if Jesus sides with the Herodians on this issue of paying taxes,
 - the Pharisees can then go around and denounce Jesus as a disloyal to his nation.
- But if he sides with the Pharisees on this issue of paying taxes, the Herodians can go back to the Roman governor and have Jesus denounced as a treasonous Zealot.

Both groups at this point would like to get rid of Jesus, so they are actually, and astoundingly, working together to set this trap.

What I want us to see today, is how Jesus’ life and ministry were embedded in this geo-political and cultural context.

- Just like your life and my life are embedded in the 21st Century geo-political and cultural context in which we live.

And there were religious factions and political parties,

- and everybody had agendas,
- and there were power struggles,
- and everyone wants to know, “Whose side are you on?”

And in the midst of all that, on this particular occasion, Jesus says, “So toss me a coin.”

- And he holds it up for them so they can all see it.
 - “Whose image is on the coin?” Jesus asks.
 - “Caesar’s image,” they say, because it’s obvious.
- So Jesus tosses the coin back to them and says,
 - “So give Caesar what belongs to him.
 - And give God what belongs to Him.”

And what Jesus means is that everyone one of them, Herodians and Pharisees alike, were all created in the image of God.

- The coin has Caesar’s image stamped upon it.
- Humans have God’s image stamped upon them.
- So give back to God what bears His image.

It's an astounding answer.

-And they were all so amazed, Matthew says, that they all left him and simply walked away.

-Neither group could argue with what he said.

-Both groups were convicted and challenged by what he said.

He wasn't on either one of their "sides," but he was calling all of them to a new way of thinking,

-and a new way of living in this broken world, no matter who was in political power.

Jesus would sum up his approach by saying, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you."

That's the Jesus we want to be re-introduced to ourselves,

-and to follow out into our world to re-introduce others to as well.

Jesus was not a zealot or Essene or Herodian or Pharisee.

And He is not a Republican or Democrat.

-He is not pro-immigrant or anti-immigrant.

-He is not Protestant or Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

Jesus doesn't operate in those terms.

-It's not that he is aloof from them, or disdains them, or doesn't understand them.

He knew full well what the political differences were in his day.

-He knew full well the various human approaches to trying to live in a broken world.

-He understood why the escapists wanted to escape, and the zealots wanted to rebel, and the powers that be wanted to protect the status quo, and the religious folk wanted to have God come and deliver them.

He didn't disdain them all.

He simply wanted to invite them all into a whole new kind of Kingdom: the Kingdom of God.

"Give back to God what is God's," he said.

"Seek first His Kingdom, His justice, His kind of right living."

It was an invitation to all of us to come and follow him!
-To give our lives back to God by entrusting themselves to
the One God had sent them to show them a new way of life.

In the weeks to come, we are going to look at this “new
Kingdom” Jesus came preaching,
-and that we are supposed to concentrate on seeking.
And we will be looking at this new way of life that citizens of
the Kingdom are invited to begin living out together.

It’s a kind of living that doesn’t directly challenge the governing
authorities of the day,
-but is subtly subversive to all governing authorities.

Because citizens of God’s Kingdom have a primary allegiance
to another King and another kingdom,
-that over-rules all the kingdoms of this world.

So we will pay our taxes and give to Caesar what is Caesars.
-But we make it our priority to give to God what is God’s:
-our heart, soul, body, mind, and strength.

Let’s pray.