

ONCE AGAIN JESUS' CRITICS ARE SILENCED (v. 26)

²⁶They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

How does this episode prove Jesus to be, exactly the person his critics described him to be, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth (v. 21)?”

© 2023 Paul Kemp and Christ Church, all rights reserved. Feel free to make copies for distribution in personal and/or small group Bible Study.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan.

SUNDAY, JULY 30, 2023



LUKE

A PROMISE KEPT

GOD AND CAESAR | LUKE 20:20-26

Few topics are more incendiary than religion and politics. People are passionate about both, and their views on the one are inevitably entangled with their views on the other. Of course, all of this is exacerbated by carefully crafted social media analogues and a polarized media.

For many the most anxious moment of the year is when you are seated around the table with extended family for thanksgiving. You've seen their posts. They have seen yours. There is an interesting conversation to be had, but the risks are far too great. You're careful to steer the conversation toward kids, sports, the weather... but not everyone is as cautious. You've pushed the last bite of stuffing on to your fork and are anticipating a generous slice of pumpkin pie topped with fresh whipped cream. Then it happens. Someone jumps in with both feet. Passions are ignited. Animated conversation gives way to heated argument. A few barbs are exchanged. Feelings are hurt. Now there's an awkward silence. Everyone is staring into space, thinking of creative ways to excuse themselves from the table, round up the kids and head for the exit.

As impassioned as our discussions of religion and politics might be, they pale in comparison to first century Jewish sentiment. The Jewish leaders have this in mind, when they bait Jesus to weigh in on an age old controversy—the proper boundaries between God and Caesar.

Jesus' response astonishes and silences his critics, and it might cause us to reevaluate some of our most impassioned arguments as well.

THE JEWISH LEADERS SEND SPIES TO QUESTION JESUS (vv. 20-22)

²⁰ Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere.

They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.

²¹ So the spies questioned him: “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

²² Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

1. There is a marked change in strategy for the chief priests and experts in the Law. In the first part of the chapter they confront Jesus directly and are embarrassed by Jesus’ rejoinder. Now they work through intermediaries.
 - b. How does Luke describe the agents the Jewish leaders send to Jesus?
 - c. What motivates them?
4. How do the spies describe Jesus?
5. In spite of their pretense, the spies could not have more accurately describe the person and character of Jesus.

Why is it important for us to remember that Jesus ‘speaks and teaches what is right, does not show partiality, but teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth?’

6. If Jesus endorses Roman taxation, he will alienate the Jewish populace who imagined the Messiah that would finally break the yoke of Rome. If Jesus denounces tribute he will be guilty of sedition which, in the eyes of Rome, is punishable by summary execution. In fact when the Jewish leaders finally accuse Jesus before Pilate, they falsely claim “He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar (Luke 23:2).”

Why might this dilemma be particularly difficult to navigate?

7. The word Luke uses for “taxes” is slightly pejorative. It refers to the tribute exacted on a captured people by their captors. Israel’s annual tribute to Caesar served as a painful reminder that they were a subjugated people living under the rule of Rome.

Given everything this tax represented, why might this form of taxation be particularly offensive to the Jewish people?

JESUS TURNS THEIR QUESTION BACK ON THEM (vv. 23-25)

²³ He saw through their duplicity and said to them, ²⁴ “Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

²⁵ He said to them, “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

1. The Roman denarius, in itself, would have been offensive to the Jewish sensibilities. One side of the coin bore the image of Tiberius with the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The opposite side bore the image of Tiberius’ mother, Livia, somewhat fashioned in the likeness of a Roman goddess, bearing the inscription “most high priest.”
 - a. What does the denarius tell us about how Rome viewed herself?
 - b. What does the fact that Jesus’ inquirers could readily produce a Roman denarius tell us about their relationship to Rome, and where they might have fallen on the question they pose to Jesus?
2. While Jesus does not develop a full scale theology of government, Paul does. He tells us,

ROMANS 13:1-2, 5-7 “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”

⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

According to Paul, what does it look like to give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s?

3. What does it look like to give back to God, what is God’s?
4. Jesus’ response avoids the extremes of anti-Roman nationalism on the one hand, and a full throated endorsement of Rome on the other. How should following Jesus impact our relationship and attitude toward government?