

OBLIGATIONS TO GOD AND GOVERNMENT

MATTHEW 22:15-22

Nearly thirty years ago, a youth leader at a church in Michigan presented her group of teenagers with bracelets that she hoped would help them remember a series of Bible lessons she was teaching. Printed on those bracelets was an acronym of the main idea of her series—W.W.J.D., ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ As most of you know, that acronym became a global phenomenon. In fact, the products on which those letters were printed became one of the most well-known (and profitable) fashion statements of the 1990’s.

The question, ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ is a good question. It is an important question. After all, the word *Christian* means “little Christ.” We are not only called to represent Jesus in this world, we are called to be *like* Jesus—to do what Jesus would do.

But how do you know what Jesus would do? We must admit that there is a certain amount of speculation and subjectivity in the question since Jesus hasn’t lived on this earth for two thousand years. So, with regard to a lot of things, our answer to that question is more accurately, “This is what *I think* Jesus would do.” And that can be tricky, because we tend to interpret that question through the lens of our own opinions, assumptions, intuitions, desires, biases, and convictions. “What would Jesus do? Well, He would do what *I think* is good and right and best.”

But do you see how that can lead to presumption? In the past year I have heard a number of people reference WWJD with regard to the contemporary issues we are facing.

“Jesus would definitely wear a mask!” says one person. “You’ve got to be kidding?” says another. “He most certainly would not!”

“Jesus would obey the governor,” says one. “Not our governor!” says another.

“Jesus would have voted for Trump!” says one. “Jesus would have voted for Biden,” says another. “Jesus would not have voted for either,” says yet another.”

“Jesus is undeniably an anti-vaxxer,” says one. “He would have been first in line at the vaccination site,” says another.

And how about this one? I have heard people defending the 2nd amendment based on their perceptions of what Jesus would do.

Again, how can you know what Jesus would do? How can you make an accurate, objective, unbiased assessment in our culture with our issues in this day and age?

The answer is found only when you can accurately answer this question: WDJD—What *did* Jesus do? What did He actually do when He faced particular circumstances, or encountered specific people, or was confronted by temptation? How did Jesus actually respond to the contemporary issues of His day in which there were passionate differences of opinion? Those issues, of course, were different from ours. But are there things we can learn from His responses that we can apply to the issues we face?

I believe there are. And I believe the story we are going to look at this morning provides a great example of how we can and ought to do that.

We are in Matthew 22. It is Tuesday or Wednesday of Holy Week and Jesus, along with thousands of other Jewish pilgrims from all over the world, is in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover Festival. He had done a number of things during the first few days of the festival that outraged the temple authorities and religious leaders of Judaism. And their frustration and anger kept building because Jesus kept showing up and doing things and saying things that made their blood boil. He kept hanging around the temple and stirring things up with the stories he told and the comments He made and the miracles He performed and the worship

He welcomed.

Furthermore, they had discovered, to their dismay, that they were no match for Jesus' wisdom and wit. When they complained to Him that He was enabling people to blaspheme God because they were praising Him at the top of their lungs, He told them that if they kept quiet the stones would cry out. When they asked Him by what authority He cleansed the temple, He responded with a quid pro quo, which they refused. When they tried to trap Him, He refused to take the bait. To top things off, He started telling parables that condemned their behavior and put them in a bad light.

And all these things compelled these leaders to begin meeting in secret in order to plot how they might apprehend Him and make Him go away. In Luke's account of our story this morning, he tells us that, *¹⁹ The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on Him at that very hour, for they perceived that He had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. ²⁰ So they watched Him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch Him in something He said, so as to deliver Him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor" (20:19-20).*

Matthew, in typical fashion, has an abbreviated version of this story. He simply says, ¹⁵ *Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle [Jesus] in his words.* Clearly, they viewed Jesus as a formidable foe. Since they had already tried a number of times, without success, to publicly humiliate Him by getting Him to say or do something that would destroy His credibility, they convened privately. They figured that if they put their heads together, they might be able to come up with a better plan. Then they put their plan in motion.

Verse 16. *¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.*

First, you should know that the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians were not typically friends or allies but were on the opposite ends of the political spectrum. This would be like sending Kevin McCarthy and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on an assignment together.

The Pharisees and their disciples were as pro-Jewish and anti-Roman as you could get. Not only did they resent Rome's interference in their civic affairs, but they had a deep conviction that paying tax to Rome was a violation of God's law. The Herodians, on the other hand, were a small group of Jews loyal to the family of Herod and were deeply committed to alliances with Rome. They had made their peace with the occupying invaders and saw taxes as an appropriate way to fulfill their responsibilities as good citizens (Blomberg, PAC). They were also known to "blow the whistle" on tax evaders, like the Pharisees, which made the Pharisees furious.

So, here we have representatives of two otherwise contentious political enemies making an alliance so they can combat a common, more threatening enemy—Jesus. They conspire to trap Him. As we will see in a moment, they want to get Him to state His position on an explosive subject, and, in so doing, alienate one side or the other. They also hoped to get Him in trouble with the Roman authorities.

But before they pop the question, they try to butter Jesus up with some nice, juicy flattery. They call Him "Teacher", a title of respect, and tell Him that they know He is "true," a term that means He can be relied upon to say what is right, and He will not bend His statement to fit it in with what other people would like to hear (Morris, PNTC). Then they acknowledge that He teaches the way of God in truth, which is a very interesting concession from His opponents.

Typically, flattery is like soft-soap—it is about 90% lye. But in this case the statements

these strange bedfellows made about Jesus were all true. And if bystanders heard them, they would be inclined to conclude that these men had a great deal of admiration and respect for Jesus, which is precisely what they wanted them to think.

But we find out from what follows that these statements about Jesus were insincere at best. **Verse 17.**¹⁷ *Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*

Asking Jesus this question was like lobbing Jesus a political hand grenade. “Hey Jesus, we think you’re awesome! Now here, catch this!”

Let me explain what they were doing in asking this question. My version (ESV) translates the Greek verb (hexestin) “Is it lawful?” As I said earlier, some Jews (like the Pharisees) believed the law of Moses forbade paying taxes to Gentiles (Deut. 17:15). So those who translate this verb, “Is it lawful …?” interpret this question in light of that conviction.

But the verb does not have in itself any inherent reference to the law. It does inherently have reference to a sense of “being obligated.” So, the question more likely is, “Is it proper to pay tax?” rather than “Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar?” Even more simply, “Should we pay tax to Caesar?”

There were several kinds of taxes in the Roman Empire, but this particular tax is a *poll* tax, money that went from an individual’s pocket into the emperor’s coffers with no benefit to the individual or their region. Nobody likes to pay tax, and no one thought Caesar needed more money to use for his own discretion, but what made this poll tax especially odious to Jews in the first century is that Caesar set the tax rate higher in Palestine than other places in his Empire because he despised the Jews (Nolland).

The Pharisees reasoned that if Caesar used this tax to promote paganism, or to perpetuate his lavish lifestyle, or to host drunken parties, or to exploit or persecute Jews, that they were tacitly condoning these things by paying this poll tax. So, they refused to pay it, and condemned those, like the Herodians, who did.

But on this occasion, the Pharisees and the Herodians conspired together against Jesus and put Him on the spot, forcing Him to publicly state His position and potentially jeopardize His standing with those who held the opposite view. They put Jesus in a no-win situation. If He said “Yes” the Herodians would agree, but He would alienate and anger many Jews who saw support for the Romans as abominable. If He said “No,” He would satisfy the Pharisees but be in trouble with the Herodians and the Roman authorities. In other words, this was a choice between publicly endorsing (and possibly inciting) rebellion against Rome or damaging His public support and credibility by appearing to be pro-Roman.

So, W.W.J.D.?

Verse 18. ¹⁸ *But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?*

Jesus was not fooled by their flattery. He saw through their ruse and called them what they really were—hypocrites.

Verse 19. ¹⁹ *Show me the coin for the tax.* And they brought Him a denarius. A denarius was the standard currency in Palestine at that time, even though it was Roman. It was the amount a laborer would be paid for a day’s work. It was also the coin that was used to pay the poll tax. But because the coin had the image of the emperor stamped on it—which the Pharisees’ interpreted to be a form of idolatry—Pharisees typically did not carry these coins on their person, and they certainly would not have brought one onto the temple grounds. Which explains why they had to bring one to Jesus.

Verses 20-21. ²⁰ *And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”*
²¹ *They said, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that*

are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Wow! Do you see what Jesus did here? He caught the political hand grenade, diffused it, and wrapped it up in a nice bow. Such brilliance! Such wisdom! Such simplicity!

Notice, Jesus does not answer Yes or No. He does not articulate His position or stance on the subject. He does not endorse or condemn either side, and He does not enter into the political fray. He simply makes a rational statement in the form of an admonition. Using a coin as an object lesson, He says, *"...Render Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*

Please note that the word translated "render" means to *pay back* that which is owed or rightfully due. Jesus is asserting that there are some things due to Caesar and what is rightfully due should be paid by all citizens or subjects. The fact that the Jews in Palestine were using Roman coins for their currency is proof enough and ought to be a reminder that it is because of Roman rule that Jews enjoyed some degree of protection and peace and stability. Reasonable taxation is legitimate and necessary if there is to be a truly functional government. And so, says Jesus, pay what is due and don't make a big out of it.

But Jesus also reminded His hearers that in addition to their obligations to the state they had obligations to God, and those, too, must be rendered. We are simultaneously citizens of an earthly state and citizens of heaven, and we must not neglect our obligations to either.

Simple! Brilliant! Even the hypocrites who tried to trap Jesus by asking the question were impressed. **Verse 22.** *²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left Him and went away.*

They had come to Jesus hoping to publicly humiliate and discredit Him. They had met in secret and come up with a question that they saw no way He could answer without getting in trouble with one side or the other. But Jesus had answered it in such a way that neither side could refute it. It was an astonishing answer, and therefore they were amazed. There was nothing for them to do but to leave Him and go away (Morris, PNTC).

So, what can we learn from Jesus' response that is applicable to us?

First, *Jesus is not anti-government*. We read in Romans 13 that He puts government in place—He establishes and institutes governing authorities. We are told to be subject to these authorities and to honor them. Peter tells believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire to honor the emperor (1 Pet. 2:17), and to be subject to him for the Lord's sake (2:13). That doesn't mean we have to like them or agree with them. It *does* mean that we obey them, unless their mandates contradict what God says in His Word. And paying taxes even to a pagan government does not contradict what God says in His word.

Second, Jesus does not get bent out of shape over civil duties. This issue of whether or not to pay the poll tax was a very divisive subject and one on which people expressed their opinions and convictions freely and passionately. "I'm not going to pay that stupid tax and they can't make me!" Sound familiar? Forgive me for using another explosive metaphor, but it was as though they handed Jesus a bomb with a lit fuse, and He calmly licked His fingers and put it out.

It's like He was saying, "Really? Ask me a hard question. This is easy. Just do what you're supposed to do and don't make a big deal out of it."

You say, "But what about the Pharisees' conviction that the way the emperor spent these tax monies was inappropriate? And what about some of ways our government spends our tax money? I don't think we should have to pay tax either, cause that makes us complicit in abortion and other things that are wrong."

Guess what? Jesus knew how Caesar spent His tax revenue, and He was not approving or endorsing it. But Caesar has to answer for that. And those in our government who allocate how our tax monies are spent have to answer to God for that, too. Not us. We are merely responsible to pay what is due.

Third, Jesus refuses to enter the political fray. He knew what was happening when those two polar opposite groups of people came to Him to ask this explosive question about taxes. He was aware of the emotional volatility of this subject and how divisive it was. He knew that if you were vocal about what side you were on you would alienate lots of people on the other side.

Sound familiar?

So, what would Jesus do today? I want to be careful not to make a hard and fast principle about how involved or not we should be in politics from this brief statement that our Lord made in Matthew 22. We are going to look at a story next week where Jesus took sides in a contentious theological issue in that day. So, I'm not suggesting that taking a clear stance on a matter or entering a debate about it is inappropriate.

But I would suggest that Jesus carefully chose His battles, and so should we. This tax issue was not a battle worth fighting, and so Jesus did not waste His precious time on it. And I would say that there is a lesson there for us regarding some of the political battles that are being fought in our culture.

For the sake of our credibility, some of those battles are not worth fighting. Why? Because they are not that important. We ought to save our energy and strength for battles that are eternally consequential. Why risk losing our voice on eternally consequential matters by tweeting or posting comments on social media about inconsequential things?

W.W.J.D.? I guarantee you He would not write an inflammatory tweet. I guarantee you that Jesus would not post contentious comments on Facebook regarding masks or vaccinations or political candidates.

Friends, let's learn from our Lord about wisdom, and prudence, and restraint. Let's learn from our Lord about how to choose our battles, and let's bite our tongues when we are tempted to enter an unnecessary fray.

Obligations to God and Government

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Main Idea: Since we are simultaneously citizens of both an earthly state and heaven, we have obligations to both that must not be neglected.

The Pharisees malicious plot (15-17)

 Their conspiratorial scheme (15)

 Their phony flattery by political enemies (16)

 Disciples of the Pharisees

 Herodians

 Their cunning question (17)

Jesus' brilliant "escape" (18-21)

 His awareness of their malice (18a)

 His accusation of hypocrisy (18b)

 His request for a "tax coin" (19)

 Jewish perceptions of the denarius

 Why they had to locate one

 His reference to the image on the coin (20)

 His admonition to pay what is due (21)

 We owe some things to "Caesar"

 We owe everything to God

Their response to Jesus (22)

Principles that can be extracted

 Jesus was not anti-government

 Jesus did not get bent out of shape over civic duties

 Jesus refused to enter the political fray