

This group that takes Jesus on here is a strange collection of people indeed. The Pharisees were the most devout religious leaders of the Jewish people. They spent their lives reading and studying the Torah, the law that dictated how the people of Israel were to live in obedience to God. The Herodians, like their namesake Herod, cooperated with the Roman occupiers and caused all kinds of grief for the Jews. It is easy to see why these two groups had no use for each other whatsoever.

So it must have come as a surprise to Jesus to see them coming to him together and saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, for you do not regard the position of human beings." Now, when I was a Diocesan Bishop, I learned early on to be on my guard when people came to see me and began by saying. "Bishop Bane, you know how much we value you and support your ministry....." I bet that Jesus felt the same way when he heard this opening. Then, after the kind words came the zinger, "Now tell us, Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

By "lawful" they meant "according to the Torah." If Jesus said that a good Jew should support the Roman state, then he would have allied himself with the power that was occupying Israel and killing Jews. That would have alienated the Pharisees and given implicit approval to a state that regarded its ruler as a god. It would have been idolatry. But to say that Jews should not pay taxes to Rome would have been treason and he could have been immediately thrown into prison. The question was a perfect trap for Jesus as he was in trouble with either choice. They could just as well have asked him, "Jesus, have you stopped beating your disciples?"

One of the interesting things about Jesus' encounter with these guys is that he never answers their question. He threw the question back at them as he asked them where you draw the line between the things that belong to Caesar and the things that belong to God. Think about what we have often said when the offering is brought forward Sunday morning, "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." So, if God demands all of life, what is left to render unto Caesar? Caesar, the authorities in our lives, does seem to have a pretty strong claim on us, but in fact, nothing belongs to him. The real question is not how much we should give to God or to Caesar, but how much should we keep for ourselves, a fitting question at stewardship time. We really cannot divide our lives between God and Caesar because, as people of faith, our first and foremost priority is the service of our Lord.

Behind the question Jesus was asked is perhaps a more fundamental issue. Did you notice the way these guys asked Jesus the question? They gave him only the option of picking Answer A or Answer B. They were not interested in any thoughts he might have had on the subject because their minds were already made up. They simply wanted to put him on the spot. As I watch many of us go about our Christian lives, I think that there is a tendency to ask God these same yes or no, up or down, this or that, kind of question.

Jesus, we pray, should I do "A" or "B?" Of course, we know what his rather annoying response will be. If we listen carefully, we will hear the quiet voice within us ask, "What do you think you should do?" Well, that is no help, we insist, and keep looking for a definitive answer to our very clear question. Our problem is that Jesus will not do what is not in our best interests. What Jesus wants us to do is to grow in our personal relationship with God to the point where what we want for ourselves is what God wants for us. He would encourage us to find the time to study and to reflect upon his teachings, his parables, his life, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection, and *then* we will have the proper context out of which to make our decisions as his disciples. I'm not sure that is really what we want. I suspect that we are in too much of a hurry for that and would prefer a quick answer right now, thank you very much, Jesus.

I also believe that this is a problem at every level of church life. We often want some higher authority to tell us what to believe, or what to do, when as Christians it is our personal responsibility to figure that out for ourselves with the help of other people of faith. I recall a couple of occasions when some of the clergy in Southern Virginia would insist that I tell them what I expected them to do. Were they required to attend the Clergy Conferences, Racism Training, Celebrations of New Ministry, or Ordinations? They said that previous bishops had always been very clear about what they were to do and they wanted me to do the same. I told them no because that was not my place as they were not children. I told them that any such gathering they did not participate in was certainly diminished by their absence, but they needed to evaluate their own lives, their own priorities as Christians, and decide for themselves what was most important. That was not at all what a lot of them wanted to hear. We want someone to tell us what to do. Of course, when they do so we complain that they are trying to run our lives, but that gets into another conversation entirely.

Jesus, should I pay taxes to Caesar? Should I go to church every week? Should I tithe? Should I support war? Should I ever allow abortion? Should I permit divorce? Should I approve of the homosexual lifestyle? Do I have to forgive that clearly wrong hypocrite over there? Is it OK to cheat just this once because everyone else does and nobody gets hurt? And Jesus will do what his nature requires him to do. He will answer our questions out of his love for us and will not treat us as if we were babies. He will respond as he did to the people of his day, “what do you think?” Not what we want to hear, but that is how much he trusts and depends on us to spend time and energy to figure out what his Gospels would lead us to do and say. We clearly have the freedom to choose not to do so, and that is probably the most popular choice.

I suspect that what drives us in all of this is not that we are bad, uncaring, unfaithful people, but that we are trying to simplify our lives a bit. When we ask those “A” and “B” questions we are trying to eliminate some possibilities, create some boundaries, and make the issues we deal with and the decisions we must make a little smaller. We are trying to make life just a little more manageable. The problem is that the Gospel makes life larger and wider and fuller and deeper and more expansive, it pushes us to more. Every time people tried to limit Jesus or trap him in a corner and get him to define limits, he refused and turned the question back on them. There was not an occasion when he said, “Hey, you know what? You have given enough of yourself. You have loved enough. You have forgiven enough. You have suffered enough. You have arrived!” Now, this is not to say that anything goes or that God does nor set some limits and expectations about our behavior. There are things that are just plain wrong, and Jesus did not change the Ten Commandments to the Ten Suggestions. What he has done is to take those laws and to place them in the container of the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor. But unlike the Pharisees, he will not refer us to a particular rule or law to decide every issue. In other words, since those Commandments are eternal and absolute, but our sinful nature prevents us from following them perfectly, Jesus calls us to a higher expectation. He calls us to lives of repentance, humility, forgiveness, and love, relying on him as the Lord and Savior of our lives.

When I was a senior in seminary we had a class called “Evil and the God of Love” taught by the much feared Dr. Milton Crum. On the first day of class we asked him for a copy of the syllabus. He asked, “Oh, do you want a syllabus?” Feeling a little confused, and even irritated, we said, “Of course we wanted a syllabus. How else would we know when the exams are and when the papers are due?” He asked, “Do you want to write papers and take exams?” Well, by now we were really frustrated and we told him so. With a smile on his face, Dr. Crum said, “Look folks, you are seniors in seminary and you have decided that you want to learn about God and evil. Doesn’t it make more sense that you tell me what you think you need in order to get what you want out of this class? Won’t it mean more to you if you have a say in your own learning?” Once we got over the shock of this unexpected freedom it became one of the best

classes we took. The learning for all of us was a new awareness of how much we want to be told what to do and think and believe when it comes to our faith lives. At first we were annoyed that someone in authority trusted us enough to decide for ourselves what we needed to grow in our faith.

The point is that as Christians we are personally responsible for working out our own answers to the difficult issues of life in this world. In every other area of our lives we study and grow and mature, but if we are honest, many of us would admit that we graduated from Christian education about the time we were confirmed. We think we'll get to that one of these days, but not right now. In this complicated and constantly changing world most of us feel some stress to do and accomplish more with what seems like a shrinking amount of time available. When we live with that kind of pressure it is easy to slide into the mode of wanting short yes or no, black or white answers to extremely complicated and difficult questions. And frankly, I have become convinced that truly growing in our relationship with God is not a solitary journey. To decide to follow Jesus is an individual commitment. To deepen that relationship absolutely requires that we are part of a community of faith with other people dedicated to that same ideal. We need each other. We need to hear one another and to share our lives with one another. That is why I so deeply believe that small groups of Christians gathered together with Jesus at the center are the only way that our relationships with God can truly impact, inform, and change our lives.

Amen