

In my reading I often come across a tidbit of information that opens vistas of a better understanding. This happened a few weeks ago when reading "The New Testament in its World" by N.T. Wright & Michael Bird.

The authors presented an email from a Professor Dana Schuler to a student where the student had asked the question about how history helps us understand Mark 12:14-17. [I have excerpted parts of this email below.]

They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.
Mark 12:14-17 (NIV)

The tax referred to here was a special tax levied on the subject peoples, not on Roman citizens.

Here is where it is good to read some before and after a text to get the setting and not take the words out of context. When we do we find that this is a trap constructed by the Pharisees and Herodians to get Jesus to take a side. Either side He takes will put Him in trouble with one group or the other. To them there is no way to answer but take one side or the other, and then they have him. How does this trap work?

Josephus wrote that some zealous Galileans had a motto, "No king but God", and since paying taxes to Caesar meant recognizing him as king, paying taxes was in fact a type of blasphemy and a betrayal of God.

Now when they ask Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar, he's "between a rock and a hard spot". If He says, "Yes, pay them", He will look like He's compromised the law and sold out. But if he says "No, don't pay them", then the Herodians can have him arrested on charges of sedition by teaching people not to pay Caesar's taxes. Exactly the situation that they

wanted Him to be in – with no way out, He would have to please one group and offend the other or vice versa. {Kind of reminds you of "you can't please two masters" doesn't it?}

But Jesus doesn't try to bluff his way to an answer. Instead, requesting a coin (denarius), He asks, "*Whose image and inscription are on it?*"

Now this denarius may have been a sliver Tiberian tribute penny which had on one side an "image" of Tiberius's bust with an inscription that read, "Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus", claiming that Augustus was a god. On the other side it said "High priest", and a depiction of Tiberius's mother Livia posing as the goddess Roma.

The rub is that if Caesar is "divine", and if this is his image, then it is a violation of the second commandment (*You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below*) Deuteronomy 5.8.

In other words, Jesus is saying, you guys are using pagan money; which disrespects our religion by having an image of a so-called god on it. So give back the pagan money to the pagan king.

But some think that perhaps there is even more to it. Perhaps Jesus is saying that Caesar should receive the taxes because he should get **EVERYTHING** he deserves.

This idea harks back to how the father of Judas Maccabaeus urged his fellow Judeans to "Pay back the Gentiles in full"; in which he meant violent retribution! So, far from accepting the view that Jews or Christians should pay taxes, Jesus is being subversive, affirming a push back of pagan power held over Israel.

While this could be read into this, it doesn't seem like it is in the character of Jesus. He often spoke of doing good to those who persecute you and to love your neighbor. So I doubt that His intention was to urge others to "get back" at the Romans.

Some still like this view because they like the eye-for-an eye approach.

What do you think?

What would you do?

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