

Week of October 19th – Matthew 22.15-33

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

Devotional Readings

Sunday	Exodus 33:12-23
Monday	Psalms 99
Tuesday	1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Wednesday	Matthew 22:15-33
Thursday	Daniel 4:1-37
Friday	1 Samuel 10:1-11
Saturday	1 Samuel 16:1-13

Article: *Paying Taxes to Caesar and the Question of the Resurrection - Matthew 22.15-33*

by N.T. Wright from *Matthew for everyone, Part 2* (England: London : SPCK, 2002.), 84-92.

It was election time. The politicians were out campaigning. The journalists were everywhere, interviewing people, taking photographs, setting up debates. Radio and television seemed full of it all.

But this time round everyone seemed jumpy. Politicians used to be only too eager to be on television; now they realized that the broadcasters could be out to get them. Things came to a head when one leading politician realized that what looked like an ordinary studio audience had actually been filled with people waiting to ask trick questions, to make him look stupid, to attack and vilify him rather than trying to find out what was really going on. The broadcasters, of course, protested that these were just ordinary people voicing their concerns... and before long everyone was talking about the program rather than the politics. This was, of course, what the broadcasters (with an eye to their advertising revenue) had been hoping for.

Trick questions that put people on the spot have been around as long as there have been public issues and leaders offering new programs. This one, which the Pharisees put to Jesus, had an obvious double edge. The issue of paying tax to the Roman emperor was one of the hottest topics in the Middle East in Jesus' day. Imagine how you'd like it if you woke up one morning and discovered that people from the other end of the world had marched in to your country and demanded that you pay them tax as the reward for having your land stolen! That sort of thing still causes riots and revolutions, and it had done just that when Jesus was growing up in Galilee.

One of the most famous Jewish leaders when Jesus was a boy, a man called Judas (a good revolutionary name in the Jewish world), had led a revolt precisely on this issue. The Romans had crushed it mercilessly, leaving crosses around the countryside with dead and dying revolutionaries on them, as a warning that paying the tax was compulsory, not optional. The Pharisees' question came, as we would say, with a health warning. Tell people they shouldn't pay, and you might end up on a Cross.

At the same time, of course, anyone leading a kingdom-of-God movement would be expected to oppose the tax, or face the ridicule and resentment of the people. Surely the whole point of God becoming king was that Caesar wouldn't be? If Jesus wasn't intending to get rid of the tax and all that it meant, what had they followed him from Galilee for? Why had they all shouted Hosanna a few days earlier? If Jesus had been a politician on a television program, you can imagine the audience's delight, and the producer's glee, when someone asked this question. This one will really give him a hard time. Before Jesus answers, he asks them for a coin. Or rather, asking them for a coin is really the beginning of his answer, the start of a strategic outflanking move. When they produce the coin, the dinar that was used to pay the tax, they are showing that they themselves are handling the hated currency.

Among the reasons it was hated was what was on the coin. Jews weren't allowed to put images of people, human faces, on their coins; but Caesar, of course, had his image stamped on his. And around the edge of the coin, proclaiming to all the world who he was, Caesar had words that would send a shudder through any loyal or devout Jew. 'Son of God... high priest' — was that who Caesar thought he was? How could any Jew be happy to handle stuff like that?

We watch the scene as Jesus takes the coin from them, like someone being handed a dead rat. He looks at it with utter distaste. 'Whose is this... image? And who is it who gives himself an inscription like that?' He's already shown what he thinks of Caesar, but he hasn't said anything that could get him into trouble. He has turned the question around, and is ready to throw it back at them.

'It's Caesar's: they reply, stating the obvious, but admitting that they themselves carry Caesar's coinage.

'Well then: says Jesus, 'you'd better pay Caesar back in his own coin, hadn't you?' Astonishment. What did he mean? 'Paying Caesar back in his own coin' sounded like revolution; but standing there with the coin in his hand it sounded as though he was saying you should pay the tax...

'...and you'd better pay God back in his own coin, too!' More astonishment. Did he mean that the kingdom of God was more important than the kingdom of Caesar, after all? Or what?

Let's be clear. Jesus wasn't trying to give an answer, for all time, on the relationship between God and political authority. That wasn't the point. He was countering the Pharisees' challenge to him with a sharp challenge in return. Was it, after all, they who were compromised? Had they really given full allegiance to their God? Were they themselves playing games, keeping Caesar happy while speaking of God?

We can only fully understand what Jesus was doing when we see his answer in the light of the whole story. Jesus knew — he had already told the disciples — that he was himself going to be crucified, to share the fate of the tax-rebels

of his boyhood. He wasn't trying to wriggle out of personal or political danger. He was continuing to walk straight towards it. But he was doing so on his own terms. His vocation was not to be the sort of revolutionary they had known. The kingdom of God would defeat the kingdom of Caesar, not by conventional means, but by the victory of God's love and power over the even greater empire of death itself. And that's what the next story is all about.

We know from several sources that the Sadducees — the let's-keep-things-as-they-are party within the Judaism of Jesus' day — were good at telling silly stories to make the idea of resurrection look stupid and unbelievable. The story they told here is a typical folktale, with the seven brothers like the seven dwarfs in the Snow White story or the heroes in The Magnificent Seven. Its purpose is simply to set out a highly unlikely situation to force the issue.

What is really important here is why the Sadducees were so keen to rubbish the idea of resurrection in the first place. The answer is that they knew it was a revolutionary doctrine; and they, as the people in power, were keen to stop it if they could. Actually, they couldn't stop it. Most people of Jesus' day believed what the Pharisees said, that God would raise them to new life when he finally brought in the New Age that everyone was longing for. But this story reminds us of the lengths to which people will go to defend a position which has social and theological elements woven tightly together.

There are several things going on all together, both in the story the Sadducees tell and in the reply Jesus gives.

First, they quote what is to us a rather strange biblical law (Deuteronomy 25.5): that if a married man dies childless, his brother must marry the widow, and the children of the new marriage will count as the heirs of the dead man. This law was vital for the people of God BC, to whom God had made promises about the continuance of their 'seed' or 'family' ('Seed' in verse 24 means 'family' or 'descendants') So far as possible the people were to prevent family lines and tribal identity dying out in Israel. This was one way of doing so.

But Jesus has come, it seems, to bring about God's renewal of his people. They will now be a worldwide family, marked not by ethnic origin or tribal identity but by the new creation of the gospel. The old laws designed to keep the family going will be irrelevant. That's the first reason for rejecting their story.

Second, when God raises people to new life they will have passed into a new world order in which death itself has been left behind. (Otherwise, resurrection would simply collapse into reincarnation, an endless cycle of death and rebirth.) But this will mean a whole new kind of life, which at present we can only guess at. Our present bodies are decaying all the time; it's very hard to think what a non-decaying body would be like. (Paul faces the same question in I Corinthians 15.) Similarly, there will be no need to propagate the species, and hence no need for sexual activity. Again, most humans find it very hard to think of a non-sexual world, but that's what Jesus probably means when he says that resurrected people will be 'like angels' (If you grumble that this makes God a killjoy, remember what C. S. Lewis said: asking if there will be sexual activity in the future world is like the child who, on being told that sex was the greatest pleasure known to humans, assumed that people ate chocolates at the same time.)

In particular, third, what the Sadducees were missing was any real engagement with the meaning of the Bible, and any real awareness of just how great and powerful the creator God is. They claimed to base themselves on the books of Moses (the first five books of the Bible), but they had missed the real thrust of the whole thing. Israel's God was and is the creator of the world, who is content to describe himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob even though they died long ago. He is holding them in life still, and one day they will be raised, along with all God's people, past, present and future, to enjoy the new world that God will make.

The great thing about this belief, as the Pharisees and Sadducees both knew, is that people who believe it become more ready to work for God in the present time, more eager to see God's promises of justice, peace and new life begin to take effect in today's world. The revolution which Jesus had hinted at in the discussion about paying tax to Caesar was the revolution of God's kingdom in which all the kingdoms of the world, which rely on the power of death to keep them in place, will be swept away before the deathless life and power of God's New Age.

About the author: N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities.

Small Group Questions

Accountability

Divine Living - Are you building an interactive relationship with God? In your private prayer and devotional time, what are you learning or experiencing? How are you Knowing Christ in worship? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

Open / Scripture

1. What bothers you the most during the presidential election cycle?

Observation

1. How did the Pharisees phrase their question to Jesus?
2. What did Jesus know about their intent?
3. How did he answer their question, and why do you think he answered it that way?
4. What did the Sadducees ask Jesus and how did Jesus answer it?
5. What does the Resurrection from the Dead and paying taxes to Caesar have to do with one another? What tensions were causing the Pharisees and the Sadducees to ask these questions?

6. How do the Pharisees and the Sadducees see the Kingdom of God and how is that different than the Kingdom message that Jesus was proclaiming?

Apply

1. What are the political questions that are pressed upon us today and how are these questions trying to influence our thinking about what the Kingdom of God looks like?
2. Is Jesus' Kingdom something that could be defined as Democrat or a Republican?
3. What issues from either party have commonality with Jesus' Kingdom? What issues do these parties have in contrast to Jesus' Kingdom?
4. How might we need to recalibrate our thinking to the Kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming?
5. Which messages have more influence on your life, and how might Jesus be asking you to change your perspective?