



Trapped?

TEXT
Matthew 22:15–22

July 15, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Brandon Frick

One of my absolute favorite shows when I was a kid was *MacGyver*. You can probably tell by the gray in my hair that I'm not talking about the recent reboot, but let me make this crystal clear: I don't care how many reboots they do, MacGyver will forever and always be Richard Dean Anderson and that magnificent mullet of his saving the world every week from bad guys with nothing but a Swiss Army knife and a half roll of duct tape. He didn't even need the whole roll! Villains always tried to catch him, but somehow he always got away. A Soviet platoon closing in on him in the Alps? He just makes a hot air balloon out of glue, nylon scraps and some conveniently-placed gas cannisters. Trapped in the hold of a ship? Not when there's an industrial generator and a power washer he can turn into a water-powered rocket pack.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, MacGyver is not just a name, but a verb that describes “making use of whatever items are at hand.” An example sentence would be “Using an ice pick and an old garden hose, she MacGyvered

a makeshift irrigation system.” Or, “though his enemies devised a diabolical scheme to trap him, Jesus MacGyvers his way out of a tough spot in our reading today.”

Seriously, in an attempt to undermine him publicly, his opponents set a multilayered trap for Jesus with their question. Now for us in 21st century America, the question “Is it lawful to pay your taxes, or not?” seems pretty straightforward. If IRS penalties, courtrooms and orange jumpsuits aren’t your thing, you pay your taxes — simple answer to a simple question. But in Jesus’ world of first-century, Roman-occupied Palestine, well … it’s complicated. And now he’s in public (in the temple nonetheless!), and they are trying to trap him four different ways.

First, the Pharisees and Herodians team up against him. You’d think that they were buddies, but these two groups do not send Hanukkah cards to each other. The Herodians were a group of religious elites who maintained their authority by cozying up to the Roman government — while the Pharisees refused any kind of alliance with Rome, lest the law of the empire compromise their obedi-

ence to religious law.¹ So, their question is not just “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”; it’s “Who are you with: them or us?”

By joining forces, these rival factions have ensured Jesus will anger at least part of the crowd with his answer. If Jesus says it’s lawful to pay the tax, the Pharisees will dog him for cozying up to the occupying government. If he says no, the Herodians will attack him for being disloyal to Rome. It’s crazy! Both groups try to force him to pick a side — knowing that one of them will lose in front of a crowd they might otherwise like to convert to their cause. But they don’t care about losing the crowd here, as long as Jesus does too.

Their second trap is the use of the term “lawful.” Now they’re certainly trying to force him to weigh in on Roman law, but what they’re really asking is if paying taxes to the emperor violates God’s law. Now, folks, there were 613 commandments in Jewish law and the over 100 tax regulations in Roman law.² So, asking if the two are aligned ensures things are going to go sideways here.

The third trap is set with the coin that must be used to pay the taxes: the Roman denarius,

which had a picture of Emperor Tiberius with this inscription: “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.”³ So to pay this tax, Jews would have to circulate a coin that proclaimed Augustus divine and Tiberius, the son of the divine.

Now you don’t have to go too deep into the Ten Commandments to find God’s expressed prohibition against worshiping other gods or revering graven images. Those are right at the beginning. Even possessing a coin with that sacrilegious inscription would have been a no-no, much less using it to enrich a wanna-be-son-of-god. So, with scripture as his guide, it would be hard for Jesus to say that it is lawful to pay the tax. His hands appear tied on the matter. But if you’re not looking for trouble, then you better not tell people to stop paying their taxes. He’s stuck between a rock and a hard place here.

There’s just one final problem, and this is the fourth trap. His own disciples might call him Rabbi, but Jesus is not recognized as such by the religious establishment. So, he is prohibited from weighing in on scriptural matters publicly. *Any* answer to this question will bring down the whole religious establishment on his head.⁴

So there you have it: a snare, set inside of a web, set inside of an ambush, set inside of a ruse — four traps set within this short question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” — designed to turn the crowds against him the moment he opens his mouth. But the text

tells us that Jesus was “aware of their malice.”

Now before you chalk that up to one of those perks of being God Incarnate, let’s remember they begin this whole episode by saying: “Teacher … Rabbi … we know that you are sincere. You teach the way of God. And you never show partiality to anyone.” I think Jesus knows this universally-accepted truth: If that’s ever the *first* thing someone says to you, just go ahead and put on your boots, because it’s about to get deep.

My guess is a lot of us can empathize with Jesus as he recognizes he’s being trapped in a “lose-lose” situation. He knows they’re trying to drive a wedge between him and the crowds by setting up a false dilemma. Those of us living in the 21st century know this racket all too well. I mean it’s not the Herodians and the Pharisees, but can’t you still hear the pundits over whether a Supreme Court Justice can recognize a moral authority higher than the Constitution … or not?

How many think pieces did you see online asking “Does Romans 13 demand that Christians always obey the government in power … or not?” — and tying in your response with your prospects for eternal salvation. And you know that at Thanksgiving dinner, that cousin that just loves to stir the pot is going to follow up the blessing, right before you take your fist bite of stuffing, with something like this: “So, are we ever going to do the Christina thing with our immigration system …or not?”

And then at least one player is going to kneel during the national anthem, and Uncle Jerry’s tirade is going to make you wish you had invited the Pharisees and Herodians over instead.

So, don’t make the mistake of thinking the world of the Bible is so different than our own. Like Jesus, we are surrounded by people daily who want to trap us in the belief that in all things, especially the complicated ones, there are only two choices; that we *have* to pick a side and a like-minded tribe; and that we also *have* to argue for our choice and against theirs without ceasing. That’s the trap that threatens us every moment of every day; and it was the same one set for Jesus.

Now there are times to stand up and be counted, to push all in for the kingdom of God. But if we can only talk about these things by defiling that first sacred bite of Thanksgiving stuffing; by living life in exclamation marks and ALL CAPS; by scheming to destroy those who offer a third way, a better way, then we are so completely trapped as a people that it makes what Jesus’ opponents attempted look like child’s play.

But here’s the good news the gospel brings us today: Jesus MacGyvers his way out of this trap. He doesn’t accept the false choices of “do you or don’t you?” “us or them” set before him. And in his response, we see how we too can spring the trap.

It’s hard to see in translation, but Jesus ever so slightly reframes the question. His opponents ask him about *giving the tax to the emperor*, but

Jesus answers by talking about giving back what is owed to the emperor and God.

So, if they really want to know what they owe the emperor, they also have to figure out what they owe God. It's a demanding task, but Jesus walks them through that part. It goes something like this. The coins belong to the emperor because they bear his mark. Likewise, there are things that belong to God because they bear God's mark. And what are the things that belong to God?

Well, the psalmist says it best: "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it." So, the emperor may have claimed the coins, but the king of kings has claimed all things, and it is God's claim that must be honored first — before they can figure out what they may need to give to the emperor.

He gives an answer for which they were not prepared, and they walk away — the text tells us "amazed," and I'm sure they were because they are for the first time in this story focused on God and how God is at work in the world.

"What do we owe God? Or better yet, what do we not owe God, the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of all things?" I'd imagine at least some of those present were asking something like that as they left Jesus that day. Others probably walked away realizing that by escaping the trap *they* had set, Jesus showed them a hard truth: that *they themselves were trapped* — trapped by their own schemes;

trapped by their lack of imagination and focus on what God was doing in the world; trapped by their belief that the most important thing in life to establish was who was with them and who was against them, and that they could do that by forcing an either/or where there just didn't have to be one.

Flash forward 2,000 years, and we have to ask how many of us are trapped like this? Some of us stumble into these false choices. But if we're honest, well, others of us happily take the opportunity to figure who's with *us* and who's with *them*, and then hole up with our tribe and oppose theirs. That just seems a lot easier than meditating on, let alone paying back, what we owe to God.

Friends, if Jesus is any indication, and I tend to think that he is, this is not what God wants for us.

Now, when these jokers walked up to pose this phony, surface-level religious-political "question," Jesus could have shut them down before they got going. Or he could have pulled a move my wife recently learned at an employer training. They call it a "non-apology apology sandwich." So, when someone really is getting bad service and they complain, the employees are supposed to say something like, "It sounds like you're really upset. Let me get someone who can help you, because I can hear that you're very upset." So, they say, it's an apology without apologizing. So, Jesus could have given them a non-answer answer: "It sounds like you're

really curious. Let me get someone who can help you because it sounds like you're super-duper curious."

But he doesn't do any of that. Instead, he answers, and reveals the path towards flourishing for the crowds of the first and twenty-first centuries; first, by not falling into the political and religious trap his enemies have set; and then, by moving the focus off the emperor and onto God. Jesus gives us a third way, a better way than the false choices of "us and them," of "are you or aren't you?" we most often encounter, and if the church today can live out the wisdom and grace that comes from him, we can serve as a much-needed voice in the political and cultural discussions that surround us.

Friends, I know the thought of entering that fray sounds utterly unappealing to a lot of us. And part of that, if we are honest with ourselves, is that we've largely accepted a false choice of our own — between religion and politics. So, despite countless texts like the one we read today, we pretend that Jesus never "got political"; that his promise of a coming kingdom was in no way a critique of the unjust government of his day; that his greatest commandment to love God and neighbor had no relation to our politics, no relation to how we structure our life with one another.

Folks, once your Savior is crucified as a political dissident, politics and religion are forever nailed together. There's no McGyvering our way out of

this one. There's only living into the hope of resurrection, to share with the world the shortest, most theologically- and politically-charged statement we can make: Jesus is Lord. Not the emperor. Not the Herodians or Pharisees. Not any of us. Only Jesus is Lord.

There's no getting around our responsibility to our neighbors, and why would we? As we see in our text today, without Christ, we are left with the false choice of Pharisee or Herodian. We are focused solely on the controversy of paying taxes to the emperor, never stopping to think about the transforming effect of giving back to God what belongs to God. In a world like that, you can forget about flourishing; we'd be lucky just not to rip one another to shreds.

So, why would we settle for that hostile, godless trap when the God-filled freedom of a transformed world is our calling and promise? Christ's ministry, and that of every disciple, is to quote the prophets and the writers of the gospel, "to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free." For the life of me, I cannot imagine any news better, any vision brighter, any release more joyous for our world than this: There is a better way.

So, for our neighbors — our families, friends and the stranger we don't yet know — let's not give in to the false choices set before us. Let's keep our minds

on giving back to God, and, in our words and deeds, follow the better way Christ sets before us.

¹Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, 250

²Perkins, 183 & David T. Owen-Ball, "Rabbinic Rhetoric and the Tribute Passage," 6

³Owen-Ball, 5

⁴Owen-Ball, 6

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.