

Both Sides of the Coin

Overview	Wrestling with God and government
Title	Both Sides of the Coin
Metaphor/Image	Ancient coin
Treatment	When the Herodians and the Pharisees try to trap Jesus, he demonstrates his political skill by answering their question about paying taxes in such a way that requires them to answer for themselves what is due to God and Caesar. As with different factions in Jesus' time, Christ calls us to reflect on our relationship with God and government now. Jesus gives us as Christians permission for a range of perspectives.
Human Need	People have a need to reconcile their politics and their religion.
Experience	To invite people to wrestle with the ambiguity of following Christ while living under a political system
Word	
Primary Scripture	Matthew 22:15-22
Lectionary Week	22 nd Sunday after Pentecost, Year A; Exodus 33:12-23, Psalm 99, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Related Scripture	Exodus 20:3-6 (Ten Commandment #2- no gods before me), I Chronicles 16:28-29 (pay tribute to Yahweh), Matthew 10:16 (wise as serpents, harmless as doves), Romans 13:1-7 (Paul's teaching on governmental authority)
Topics	
Primary Topics	Politics, Christian living, obedience, law, teachings, life of Jesus
Related Topics	Sovereignty, leadership, government

Movie Clip Suggestions

1. *The Patriot* (2000)

Plot: Pacifist ex-soldier Benjamin Martin (Mel Gibson) must join the revolutionary American fight against the British to protect his family and his enlisted son.

Clip: Benjamin argues against war in a town meeting, saying that as a parent, he does not have the luxury of principles. A good clip for showing someone who wrestles with the difficult decisions of living under a political system.

Time: (VHS) 12:08-15:20, (DVD) Chapter 2, 1:09-4:21, length 3:12

2. *The Mission* (1986)

Plot: A Spanish Jesuit (Jeremy Irons) and a converted slave hunter (Robert DeNiro) build a mission in South America to convert the indigenous people, then must defend it against Portuguese aggressors.

Clip: When the cardinal comes and tells the indigenous people to leave the mission and return to the jungle, they refuse. At the end, the native king says he should have never trusted the priests. Good illustration of the struggle in choosing between God and political systems.

Time: (VHS) 1:21:33-1:24:54, length 3:21

Music Suggestions

1. "Tax Man"—The Beatles. Fun opener.
2. "God Bless America"—an appropriate week for a reflection on this song, not as a generic patriotic response but as a prayer.
3. "I'm Yours, Lord"—contemporary praise
4. "(Lord You Are) More Precious Than Silver"—classic praise
5. "Once to Every Man and Nation"—hymn

Lumiclip Description

This clip captures the 1st century feeling of listening to Jesus respond to the question of government as found in Matthew 22. It may be used with the storyteller's voice as a complete clip, or without the storyteller as a background for a live telling of the story. Dramatic. Running time 1:18 Vol. 6 Clips 4 and 5

Integration

Call to Worship

If possible, start with telling the story from Matthew.

"Jesus invites us, as he invited the Pharisees, to wrestle with the relationship of God and government. Let's worship the God who is the one

God over all governments, including our own."

Biblical Storytelling

This story can be told as a conflict story (the Pharisees trying to catch Jesus in a snare) in which there are lots of internal dynamics happening. At the beginning, emphasize Matthew as the storyteller, telling the listener that the Pharisees' effort is to trap him. In telling the Pharisees' question, communicate that effort- make it unctuous and fawning in tone. Jesus response, then, can be presented as his on the one hand being amused at their effort, and on the other hand, strongly confrontational, forcing them to make their own decisions. This story is similar in style to the story of the question by the chief Priests, "By what authority do you do these things?"

Closing Words

"Reflect this week on your position about God and government. We all have to make decisions as Christians. May God grant you wisdom and peace. Amen."

Prayer

Lead the congregation in a guided meditation on current political matters. Invite people to pray for people in the church on both sides of the issue of abortion, gun control, war, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, etc. After having addressed these issues, invite people to ask God for wisdom and peace as they search for their own response to these conflicts.

Drama

DRAMATIC: Two factions loudly protest and hold picket signs for opposing sides of controversial issues, such as: the war in Iraq, freedom of speech, etc. They hold their ground on opposite sides of the stage. As a person enters the chaotic scene, he/she walks down the middle between the two sides. Each side tries to wrestle the person over to their position. The person breaks free, continues to walk down the middle, and then drops to his/her knees in prayer. Blackout.

COMEDIC: Mother Teresa (or another saintly person) tries to persuade a group of people into donating their money for a charitable cause. Then a presidential candidate busts on the scene and asks for money for his election campaign. The two get into a tussle, jockeying for position, so the crowd can hear their point the best.

Display

Coins and other representations of government (e.g., flags)

Scripture Commentary

This story is a classic story of the chosen ones of God escaping from a trap. The Uncle Remus stories of B'rer Rabbit are in the spirit of this conflict story. Jesus escapes the trap by a teaching that addresses a highly controversial issue in a way that both sides of the same coin can be used in support of the listeners' positions.

The setting of the story is this: the Pharisees and the Herodians, who were political enemies, made a temporary alliance in order to embarrass Jesus. The Pharisees opposed paying taxes to Caesar and hoped for a restoration of Israel as an independent state. The Herodians supported Herod the Great and his family, who had served as puppet kings for the Romans, and favored collaboration with the Romans and, therefore, supported paying Roman taxes.

These two groups in turn represented the different sides of the most politically explosive issue of Jesus' day: how to respond to the Roman occupation of Palestine. The Zealot movement was an alliance of several guerilla groups of zealous Jews who believed, in the tradition of the Maccabees, that any collaboration with the Gentiles was a violation of loyalty to God. Thus, one of the factions of the Zealot movement, the Sacarii, carried out assassinations of Jewish collaborators by stabbing them with a curved dagger, a *sicarus*. The Zealots believed that everything was due to God. The ruling authorities, the chief priests and the elders, supported paying the taxes in order to maintain peace.

Jesus recognizes instantly what they are trying to do. If he advocates paying the taxes, he will alienate most of the people who hated the Roman occupation and paying Roman taxes. If he advocates not paying the taxes, he will be liable to arrest by the authorities for advocating rebellion against the Romans. The coin Jesus requested—"Show me the money for the tax—was a denarius which bore a portrait of the emperor Tiberius and the inscription, "Ti[berius] Caesar Divi Aug[usti] F[ilius] Augustus," which meant "Tiberius Caesar God and High Priest, son of Augustus." Thus, the coin itself bore the blasphemous claims of Tiberius to be God.

Jesus' response can be taken in support of either position about paying the taxes. "Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's" is most naturally taken as meaning, pay the tax. But "to God that which is God's" leaves open the question that only the listeners can answer for themselves, what is due to God? Those who were zealous for the law claimed that everything was due to God, especially coins that announced that the Emperor Tiberius was God. Many of Jesus' listeners would infer that they should not pay the tax.

Thus, Jesus' statement can be taken in support of both positions depending on your belief about what is due to God. That is why they were amazed at his response and left him alone. Jesus required them to decide for themselves what was due to God. And that is what the story demands of us today: what do we think? What is due to God and what is due to the political authorities? Do we have dual loyalties to the government and to God? What if those two loyalties come into conflict? Which one takes precedence? This applies to military service, to paying taxes, and to the support of the policies of the current political powers.

This story also invites us to enjoy Jesus' skill in avoiding the traps his opponents set for him. However, this is a short-lived joy. Jesus' death was caused by getting trapped in the politics of his day.

Keywords

Politics, Christian living, obedience, law, teachings, life of Jesus, sovereignty, leadership, government, coin, money, taxes, *The Patriot*, *The Mission*