

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – October 22, 2017

[Matthew 22:15-22](#) & [1st Thessalonians 1:1-10](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “Jesus and the ‘Gotcha’ Question” – October 22, 2017)

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is constantly outsmarting his opponents. This week's text occurs in all three synoptic gospels, and it is a superb example of the cunningness of the Pharisees and Herodians, according to Mark and Matthew, or the more generic "spies" sent by the "chief priests and scribes ... with the elders," according to Luke. Basically, these opponents have caught Jesus in a seemingly impossible question. In many respects, it is the equivalent of asking, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" There is no "right" answer. There seems to be no good way to respond and still maintain honor. But, Jesus manages to turn the tables to implicate them.

Matthew's gospel is not at all shy about the intention of the Pharisees in this text. According to verse 15, they intend to entrap Jesus by their question. This story is the first of many in this chapter that will provide the reader with a rather negative portrait of Jesus' opponents. Later in this same chapter he will confront the Sadducees in verses 23-33, a Pharisaic lawyer in verses 34-40 and another attack by Pharisees in verses 41-46. It is also interesting that these opponents address Jesus as "teacher" (vv. 16, 24, 36). The disciples never address Jesus as "teacher" in Matthew's gospel. It is a term used by outsiders and especially the Jewish leaders.

The Pharisees and Herodians proceed with a little flattery: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one: for you do not regard people with partiality" (v. 16). The statement is incredibly ironic because they are about to ask him implicitly to show deference to someone and to display partiality. The Greek adds a comical element that is not present in our English translation of displaying partiality. More literally, the opponents say to Jesus, "You do not care for anyone, and you do not regard the face of anyone." Of course, it is the face of the emperor that will be of particular interest as the passage proceeds. Jesus will ask whose image appears upon the coin, and his opponents are forced to regard the face of Caesar.

The statement is also ironic in the truthfulness of their flattery. They will call him "sincere," when they are not acting in a sincere manner. They are not at all concerned with what Jesus really thinks, but desire to trap him in his answer. Yet, ironically, Jesus will behave in sincerity and truth, and their craftiness will only demonstrate the truthfulness of their insincere compliment.

The question posed to Jesus paints him into a terrible corner: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The tax in question seems to refer to a Roman tax upon the harvest and personal property that was regulated through the census or registration (see Luke 2:1-5). According to Josephus, the religious leaders helped to collect the tax, even though many Jews objected to paying the Roman tax on theological grounds (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.403-5). Resentment of Roman taxation had sparked pockets of revolt throughout Judea and Galilee in recent years. The question of taxation by and for a foreign power represented a rather heated topic, and one which could easily cause the crowds, who resent the tax, to turn against Jesus on the one hand or cause the Roman officials to take note of his revolutionary ideas on the other hand. If the religious officials are indeed the ones helping to collect this tax, then Jesus' opponents have implicitly already sided with the authority of Rome to tax the Jewish people. By asking this question publicly, though, they believe that they can effectively nudge him to one side or the other and, thereby, force him to lose the favor of some.

Jesus is not fooled by their slyness. Matthew records that he sees right through their evil intentions and addresses them for who they truly are, "hypocrites" (v. 18). They illustrate their own hypocrisy by even possessing "the coin used for the tax." Notably, neither Jesus nor his disciples have this coin. The coin itself is the denarius, a silver coin stamped with the image of the emperor and used especially for this tax. For daily use, Jews had copper coins that bore no image of the emperor. Yet, these religious leaders had no problem producing this coin with its "graven image," especially if they were helping Rome collect the tax.

If this is the coin that bore Tiberius' image, then the inscription read "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." Though emperors were not typically venerated as divine during their lifetime (although some desired such divine status during their lifetime), the veneration of past emperors lent religious favor to the politics of Rome. Indeed, there was no separation of religion and state in the empire. The image of Caesar upon the coin was a portrait of divine favor. Jesus' question would only highlight this reality: "Whose head is this, and whose title?" (v. 20).

If Jesus' ability to dodge their trap had not yet become apparent to his questioners, his next statement would have squarely cornered them: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." The verb translated "give" more literally means to give back. Perhaps, the idea is to give back this coin that obviously does not belong to them. Yet, the same verb was used in the parable of the vineyard in 21:33-46. In this parable that indicts the wicked tenants for killing the son, Jesus warns that the vineyard owner will lease the vineyard to tenants who will give him (or give back) the produce at the harvest time. Here the verb is used then in the sense of giving back to God what is rightfully God's.

Thus, Jesus leaves his opponents with an even greater dilemma than the trap in which they attempted to catch him. From God's standpoint, what does not belong to God? "For the world and all that is in it is mine" (Psalm 50:12; see also Psalm 24:1). Yet, from Rome's standpoint, this coin with Caesar's image was Rome's. The Jewish people, like all other people living in the empire, owed their allegiance to Rome for the benefits that the empire provided -- such as security and an excellent road system. It is now the questioners who are posed a question: What rightfully belongs to Caesar?

The Pharisees and Herodians can say nothing. They leave in utter amazement that they have been outsmarted. Their extraordinarily clever question had been twisted in a way that they did not foresee. For a Jewish Christian audience who would have been reading this story after the Jewish War and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, this story would have reinforced the portrait of Jesus as superior to the cleverest Jewish teachers of his day.

Commentary on 1st Thess. 1:1-10 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Steeple People" – 10/17/1999)

Paul's earliest extant writing, the letter to the church in Thessalonica dates probably from the early 50s. Luke, in Acts 17, offers corroborating evidence to the details of the letter that Paul, Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy were associated with the founding of the church in this great city which was the Roman capital of the province of Macedonia. Thessalonica was home to a Jewish synagogue as well as to the popular religions honoring Dionysus and Orpheus. The latter two religions were mystery fertility cults and were known for their sexual and ecstatic indulgences. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the Emperor Cult was also in vogue. Hence, the church in Thessalonica would have found a fertile ground for converts but also for problems and even opposition.

The salutations in both Thessalonian correspondences are unique in that they are so simple. Alone among the undisputed Pauline letters, in the Thessalonian epistles, Paul does not claim any special status. In all the other letters, Paul needs to identify himself as leader, offering credentials of his apostleship. Not so in the letters to the Thessalonians. Paul, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy are of equal status. That Paul does not raise himself up over his coworkers probably indicates that early in his career, any opposition that was present was not directed against Paul per se, but was more broadly against the early Christian movement. It is not the rivals of Paul who are threatening the Thessalonian community. Rather, the neophyte Christians are finding it hard to maintain their identity among the plethora of religious options found in the city.

It is no wonder, then, that Paul stresses, at the outset, that the Thessalonian Christians are remembered for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3). Paul is praising the Thessalonians for the very attributes that are being threatened! These expressions of their conviction are what distinguishes the Thessalonian Christians from the followers of the other religions. Paul reminds them that their faith involves "work"; it entails "labor." In short, it is not easy to maintain the integrity of the faith.

Christianity is not a passive, sensual, feel-good religion as the mystery religions were (as far as scholars can tell). Adherence to Jesus Christ involved steadfastness -- one has to stick with it. "Steadfastness" is a word not often used in the Pauline writings. Of the six times Paul employs the word, three are found in the Thessalonian correspondences. Furthermore, it is only to the church of Thessalonica that Paul urges the believers of a particular community to remain steadfast. In Romans, it is God who is steadfast, or Paul who shows steadfastness (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:10). Christian faith challenges the believer to a high calling of personal and communal discipline. Christians face opposition and suffering (2:2). This would not have been an expectation of the other religious options found throughout the empire.

In order to encourage fidelity in the face of possible wavering, Paul reminds believers to remember that they were "chosen" by God (1:4). "Chosen" is a weighty word. Believers do not choose Christianity like they might choose to join another religious community. One might choose to join a mystery cult because of the orgiastic celebrations. One might choose to participate in the Emperor Cult for status consideration. No doubt, the cultic experiences of the followers of Dionysus and Orpheus were more immediate and sensually satisfying, and the Emperor Cult would have been more impressive. But this is not the case for Christians. The followers of Jesus are "chosen" to be set apart. Paul reminds his readers that Christian faithfulness is less about personal choice and more about divine call. It is more about following God than following the crowd.

Paul urges his readers to recall their own primary experience of the "message of the gospel." Paul stresses that the gospel came "not in word only," but in power and "in the Holy Spirit," for two reasons. First, Paul is stating that a Christian's spiritual experience need not take a back seat to any other cultic expression of spiritual ecstasy. Second, Paul is making a not so subtle dig at the other religions: They are word only and have no divine power or substance. They do not come from God, the Father of Jesus Christ. Therefore anything other than the gospel is a chimera.

So Paul challenges the Thessalonians to remember their call. But Paul does not leave his readers with memory alone. He offers himself and Silvanus and Timothy as role models. The believers are to "imitate" their founders. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy have shown steadfastness in their travails (2:2), and so the Thessalonians should remain firm in their conviction.

Paul adds flattery to his presentation. The Thessalonians, Paul writes, have been a model themselves for start-up Christian communities throughout the region. People are talking about the community in Thessalonica and spreading the news about their hospitality and their transformation from idol worship to serving the "living and true God." Paul holds the Thessalonians accountable for their leadership within the movement. Hence, they must stay the course and be faithful no matter what!

Paul ends these opening verses with a note of future expectation. Jesus is coming again, and Paul intimates that the Parousia is not far off. Hence, it is not only memory or responsibility that holds the community firm in its conviction. Paul adds the concept of hope to his presentation. Hope in the future helps shape the identity of a faithful community. Paul saves a more full discussion of the end time for later in the epistle (4:13-5:11).

However, even in the brief reference here, Paul indicates an apparent understanding of the nearness of the end time. This reference furthermore supports the early dating of the letter. A decade later, Paul seems to understand that Christ's coming might be more a distant event. Here, Christ's coming is close. Therefore, Paul offers another reason for faithfulness and steadfastness; he does not want the Thessalonian Christians to suffer the wrath to come (5:9).

So, in these opening verses, Paul uses the power of memory, of flattery, of gentle cajoling, of expectation and of hope to urge his readers to "hang in there" and not backslide.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

Reflection Questions on Matthew 22:15-22:

1. While it is easy to be impressed with Jesus' skillful answer and stealthy evasion of the Pharisees manipulative question, do you ever wish that Jesus hadn't dodged the question? Is Jesus implicitly assenting that it is lawful to pay such taxes? Or is he just redirecting the question and implicating his questioners? Do you think that Jesus would have answered the question more plainly if it had been asked in a private setting by his disciples rather than in public by his opponents? What do you think he would have said?
2. While it is easy to get wrapped up in the political maneuverings driving this scene, what does this Jesus story have to teach us regarding our own civic obligations? Consider, for example, how it might inform a discussion about whether or not Brethren – who historically have been conscientiously resistant to military service and support – should pay so called “war taxes” – that large portion of our tax bill that supports the largest military arsenal in history? Do Jesus' words in this text have anything to say to such a contemporary question?
3. What are “the things that are God's” that Jesus says should be given back to God in v. 21? Is there really anything that is not God's?

Reflection Questions on 1st Thessalonians 1:1-10:

1. Paul says in v. 4 that “we know...that [God] has chosen you.” Is this something that is unique to the church at Thessalonica? Or are Paul's words here applicable to all followers of Jesus? If the latter, what does it mean for us to be “chosen” today?
2. As noted in the commentary above, Paul is generally understood by biblical scholars to be expecting the literal imminent return of Christ very soon. This is especially true early in his apostolic ministry, during which time this letter was written. So how should we hear Paul's words today, reading this text nearly 2000 years later, when most do not expect Christ's return imminently, if at all? How should we understand v. 10 today, when Paul encourages believers to “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming?” Does this encouragement fall flat if today we are not expecting an imminent “second coming?”
3. Since these letters of Paul were originally written to real, living communities of faith, perhaps it would make for a good exercise to imagine what Paul might write to our own community of faith today. Consider for example, what Paul lifted up concerning the Thessalonians in vv. 7-9? What kind of report would our own faith community warrant?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?