

Oh, Jesus is really showing us why he’s the Master Teacher in the Gospel today. This is one of those very tricky teachings that should take us *all* by surprise - *if* we’re not falling for the same trap that was set for Jesus. This is a teachable moment for everyone involved, not just the people to whom Jesus addresses directly. There are actually two things going on in the Gospel today for us to learn. There’s a lesson and there’s a trap. Both are important for us to recognize - not just for the sake of understanding the scripture passage, but for helping us negotiate our everyday lives. First the lesson.

The lesson starts out in a familiar way: representatives of the local authorities are trying to trick Jesus into failing in front of everybody. This is not the first time a trap has been set to discredit Jesus. It won’t be the last. Jesus is wise to this, of course. He can see through the thinly veiled malice of the proposal. He knows how to read people, and he’s fully aware of his detractors.

Matthew sets the scene by telling us ahead of time what the Pharisees and their disciples, and the Herodians are up to. We’ve already been primed to understand the Pharisees and Herodians as oppositional forces to good news that Jesus proclaims. When they enter the scene and present their opening lines, our hackles are already up. Much as we might hate to admit it, they present a good question - which is why Jesus decides to respond to it. There have been other encounters where Jesus has refused to answer a question. He could have refused to answer this one, but he didn’t. There’s a bigger lesson to be learned from this interaction, and Jesus takes advantage of the moment for just that reason.

The disciples of the Pharisees try to prime Jesus with flattery. They say, “You’re so sincere, Jesus. You teach the truth. You’re impartial.” We could say that everything they use to describe Jesus is everything they are not - they are not sincere; not truthful; they do show partiality when it benefits them. Knowing the nature of the questioners as Jesus does, it’s likely that Jesus understood them in this way too. He is not flattered by their praises. Instead, Jesus interacts with them exactly as they are. And what are they?

They are dedicated to undermining Jesus. They are loyal to the Pharisees who sent them, and the interests they have in maintaining power and authority. The people who speak to Jesus in this way are described by Matthew as “disciples.” Disciples are people who dedicate themselves to a leader, or a philosophy, or a teaching, and who then craft their lives around the values they learn. Whether the people who spoke with Jesus truly understood what was going on, or what Jesus was trying to do, is anybody’s guess. And it’s not that important anyways. What is important is that they have chosen a discipleship path, and are prepared to show evidence of that dedication when a moment calls for it.

The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians present Jesus with an important question of the day. They assume that it’s also an important question for Jesus and his disciples. They give Jesus the choice of two possible answers with which to respond. Either it is lawful to pay taxes, or it’s not. No matter which option Jesus chooses, somebody isn’t going to like it. According to the options given, the only real answer is which of these conflicts Jesus would prefer.

Rather than walk into that entanglement, Jesus wisely decides to present his disciples with a teachable moment. The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians were able to produce a denarius when Jesus asked for one. Some commentators call into question why the disciples of the Pharisees would even be handling civic currency in the first place. What Jesus asks for is proof of the values around which these disciples are crafting their lives. In this case the proof of their dedication is a coin with the emperor’s image on it.

We know how important wealth and power is to the Pharisees and the Herodians at this time and in this Roman city. Jesus doesn’t spend any time critiquing their choices. The point Jesus is trying to make in getting them to produce a coin, is to show how readily they can present their values. They were able to demonstrate their faith

immediately when it was called upon. When Jesus says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," it may be a statement to them, but a question to us.

The teaching for Jesus' disciples is this: are we as able to demonstrate the values of our faith so readily? At various points in our lives we find ourselves confronted with people and events that call us to respond as disciples of Jesus Christ. In these moments, will we be able to pull such proof out of our pockets as compassion? Do we have reconciliation at our fingertips? How great a supply of forgiveness do we pack in our kit bags before we set out for the day? Will others know we are Christians by our love? We can use this moment to evaluate how our discipleship to Jesus Christ is developing.

The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians kept a coin with the image of the emperor handy. What do we need to have handy to remind us of the leader we follow, and his teachings? Maybe it's a small token we can carry in our pockets; something we can hold to centre ourselves when we feel like we're being tested. Maybe it's a favourite prayer or hymn we can remember to ourselves in times of need. I know of people who wear prayer bead bracelets that they use when they need to recentre themselves so that they can approach their interactions with the peace of God, and the love of Christ, and the strength of the Holy Spirit.

If we understand ourselves as Team Jesus, feeling vindicated because Jesus won the day, we've fallen into the very trap meant for Jesus. This isn't about Jesus scoring a point against his opponents. It's about Jesus seeing a bigger teaching for his disciples; using the presentation of the values of another group of people to help us reflect on our own values. Look at these representatives of the Pharisees and Herod. See how they move fluidly with their faith in the complicated Roman economic system. If paying taxes or not paying taxes is the most important thing for them, then they need to work that out for themselves. For the disciples of Jesus, we have bigger things to attend to, like are we able to present our faith to others as easily as these questioners?

At the end of this pericope, Matthew says the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians "were amazed; and they left him and went away." Matthew doesn't say they skulked away. He doesn't describe them as having been shamed or angry. They didn't get got, and they don't go away with their tails between their legs. They just go away. As soon as we imagine this moment as one where Team Jesus wins the day, we've missed the teaching, and fallen into the trap they tried to set for Jesus.

Whether the faith of the Pharisees' disciples and the Herodians is honourable or misplaced is not for us to judge. We have no one to judge but ourselves, and we have Jesus as our touchstone for how we'll craft our lives. Life is complicated enough without creating competition where it doesn't need to be. We do better as disciples when we practice being able to produce kindness, and forgiveness, and love right in the very moment when it's needed most. That's what the world needs now more than anything. That's ultimately what Jesus came to teach us. Our role as disciples of Jesus Christ is to keep our faith at the ready, and be prepared to hand out such evidence of our faith as peace and forgiveness, reconciliation and hope, and most important of all: love wherever and whenever it's needed.

And that's good news.