

As gracious as Jesus could be, he also had an uncomfortable way of challenging peoples' assumptions about what is *important*. Of course, especially in this era of human history, people tend to think that what is important is *whatever we decide it to be*. Are there actually any higher accountabilities...*than our freedom to choose what we want?*

The gospel story is a provocative occasion for this question. And the question emerges out of a very intentional *trap* set by Jesus' opponents.

The hot button question in first-century Palestine that separated Jews from each other was what they thought about the *Roman Empire*. Did you support the Roman occupation--or did you not? Those were fighting words. This issue runs in the background of the gospel stories, often without our quite noticing it. But it is there with the presence of *Pilate* the Roman governor of Judea, and *Herod* the Jewish ruler of Galilee appointed by the *Romans*, and *tax collectors* for the occupying *Romans*. *Matthen*, for whom the gospel book is named after, was a *tax collector for the Romans until he became a follower of Jesus*.

So when the Pharisees and the Herodians banded together to try to trap Jesus, they tried to catch him on the pressing political question about the Roman occupation of Palestine: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the [Roman] emperor, or not?" It was a strange question for the Pharisees *and* Herodians to ask *together*, because they themselves differed on that point. *Pharisees* generally did not support the Romans and the *Herodians* did. Yet even though they divided over this major issue, they were united in trying to trap Jesus.

The question about paying taxes to the emperor was a no-win question—If Jesus said *no*--it was not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor--then he could be accused of *sedition*. If Jesus said *yes*--it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor--then he could be accused of *complicity* with the Romans. It was a very risky question for one Jew to ask another. It would be almost like asking Jesus, if he returned to America right now: "So, who are you going to vote for next year?"

What Jesus did, when the Pharisees and Herodians tried to put him on the spot, was completely unexpected. Jesus asked them to show him a Roman coin, which of course had the image of the Roman emperor on it, and he said "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's." And they were speechless and went away.

They wanted to draw Jesus into a dangerous political divide, but Jesus wanted to talk about *God*. And when he brought up *God*, then a larger question emerged that they did not anticipate: We know what the emperor demands. *But what does God want from us? And Jesus left the question open for them—just as he does for us.*

- Yes, we live with our own charged political divisions--but what does God want from us?
- Yes, we live with important decisions about our personal assets and debts--but what does God want from us?
- Yes, we live within a plethora of personal choices for ourselves and our families--but what does God want from us?
- Yes, we live with our own inner dramas of fears and regrets, yearnings and hopes--but what does God want from us?
- Yes, we live with our own vulnerabilities and mortality--but what does God want from us?

The answers are rarely obvious. But Jesus would like for the question to make a home in us, and be the first question of all.

*What does God want from us?*