

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Luke 20:20-26

What we see in this passage is the religious leaders continuing to try (emphasis on “try”...not really succeeding) to squelch the momentum and enthusiasm that constantly surrounded Jesus. So they sent some “spies” to see if they could trap Jesus on a very specific and hot topic of the time. Paying taxes to Rome (represented by “Caesar”) galled the Jews. They absolutely hated it. At the same time, they were powerless to really do anything about it. But that didn’t stop them from arguing amongst each other, at least in theory, as to what their doctrinal/theological position on the topic ought to be based on the Old Testament Law.

It was also a divisive topic, which is what made it something they thought they could use to trip up Jesus. Because it was divisive, they figured, however Jesus answered or whatever stance He took, He’d lose half His audience/following that disagreed with Him. For example, if Jesus said, “Yes, you must pay tax to Caesar,” then people would consider Jesus traitorous and certainly not a possible Messiah. On the other hand, if Jesus said, “No way. We shouldn’t pay taxes to Caesar,” then they would have a charge against Him that they could take to the Roman governor. (Incidentally, that was actually a trumped up charge they levied at Jesus during His trial.)

So the religious leaders thought they had Jesus on this one. But, of course, they underestimated Who they were dealing with. In brilliant fashion Jesus handled the question/challenge and really turned the tables back on them as to what actually belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. What rightful/legitimate claim does Caesar have versus what rightful/legitimate claim does God have?

Regarding that “claim” it is interesting and important that Jesus asked “whose portrait” is on a denarius. The world translated “portrait” is the Greek work “eikon” which means “image”. So without saying it directly, the initial hearers would have understood (simply by the use of that word) the implied question, “And whose image is on you (humans)?” One of the first things we ever learn in Scripture is that we are made in the image of God. His portrait is stamped on us. So what does it mean, then, to give to God what is God’s? We need to give Him ourselves. Paul states that idea this way, “...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Romans 12:1)

So while Jesus never directly answers the question regarding paying taxes (for them back then or for us today) He acknowledges that there will always be tension on this matter (and many other matters). The claim of God and His kingdom upon the world that He created and sustains runs directly against the claim of the powers and systems of this world. And we are invited and challenged to determine to which we are going to give our ultimate allegiance to. Beyond that, we’re invited and challenged to figure out how to navigate the various tension points that inevitably exist with the reality of 2 kingdoms in conflict with one another (of which paying taxes is but one tension point).

What we also want to keep in mind is that throughout history God's people have constantly had to deal with this tension. Regardless if we're discussing the Israelites in the Old Testament, the early Christians in the New Testament, or Christians/the church throughout history, this tension is a constant reality. We must wrestle with this tension.

Part of the challenge is that we (as humans) tend to be drawn toward the path of least resistance, the easy way. We try to alleviate the tension because, let's face it, it's unpleasant. Unfortunately, in so doing, we tend toward compromise of our convictions, and prove to be less than faithful. Add to this the fact that today, for American Christians, being part of the leading empire of the time, things are pretty good. Why cause ourselves undue stress? But, again, our main concern needs to be *"What does it mean, what does it look like, to be faithful to God in the world we live in?"*

As a community of believers this question should dominate our conversations. It should be the framework that our discussions within Home Groups, within leadership meetings, within any/all gatherings operate in.

Yet another layer of challenge that goes with this is that we are also called to maintain our unity in Christ. But we often do not agree on what the various tension points are, or even if we agree on what they are, it's easy to disagree on how to address/deal with them. But part of being faithful is maintaining our unity even within disagreement (and let's face it, history proves that we're not particularly good at that.)

I remember the Sunday after the last presidential election (we all remember that, don't we?), someone came up to me after our Sunday worship service and said that if he found out that any of the leaders of our church voted for "so & so" he would leave the church. I thought to myself, "Brother, you just don't get it." We will all never agree on what "being faithful" looks like. But we must constantly process/wrestle with it...together. Part of the problem, actually a really BIG part of the problem, is that we tend to be more concerned about being "right" (i.e. that our opinion on the matter is the authoritative one, and everyone should just rally around our ideas), which in itself undercuts the whole idea of being faithful...because being faithful requires us to be loving (i.e. listening to others—their cares, concerns, thoughts and ideas). But let's be very clear...this is NOT easy. Yet, we were never called to easy, we are called to the way of Jesus, which is the way of the cross. There is no "easy" in that.

So what we have before us looks something like this...

Courage & Faithfulness

vs

Cowardice & Compromise

And the way we navigate that is to take all our God-given gifts/resources and proceed with...

Communal Discernment

(which implies humble prayer, Scripture saturated minds, and as much historical perspective as we can muster...it also implies that this is not an individual pursuit)

- Q. What are the various “tension points” that you/we recognize between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world? (In brainstorming fashion, list as many as you can come up with as a group. Try to be as specific as possible.)**
- Q. Try the “meet & greet” question from Sunday at Home Group: Of all the programs and projects that our tax dollars go toward, which are you happy to contribute to, and which are you unhappy to contribute to? (*HG leaders, there will likely be some disagreement on this...actually, that’s sort of the goal. BUT, more important than getting people to all agree, or having people to try to convince others that their opinion is the correct one, the goal ought to be for others to hear what is important to their friends/brothers/sisters. So a good follow up question might be something like, “Why is that important to you?” As the leader/facilitator it is your job to make sure proper respect is offered and given. We must always remember that HG should be a safe place where divergent voices can be heard and yet love prevails.*)**
- Q. Who are inspiring examples of courage and faithfulness to you? (historically and/or presently...people who know personally and/or people you’ve heard of)**
- Q. Historically or presently, when do you think the Church has got it right (“it” being faithfulness in the midst of challenge, keeping unity in the midst of disagreement)? And when do you think the Church has gotten in wrong? (*HG leaders, it’s possible that there might even be disagreement on this topic too*)**
- Q. Often in our desire to avoid tension and disagreement we simply avoid the tough topics/issues? Can you give any examples of how/when we do that (or the topics/issues we tend to avoid)? How is this detrimental?**
- Q. What are some of the unique challenges you think American Christians face in being faithful to Jesus? In what ways might our perceived advantages possibly be disadvantages?**
- Q. Jesus said, “...give to God what is God’s”. How are you doing with that? How can your church community help you (or each other) with that?**