

DIVIDING JESUS FOLLOWERS

Matthew 22:15-22

The questions are used today to undermine credibility – to divide audiences. Candidates are asked to take a stand on gun control, taxes, health care, abortion, same-sex marriage, immigration, nuclear armament, and the like. They can't just be neutral about these things. When they take a stand, their audience is divided.

And that's the way it is in our text as Jesus addresses the Jews in Jerusalem on Tuesday of Holy Week. The question about taxes was meant to divide - to either make Jesus look like an insurrectionist, (a traitor to the government) - or to look like a Roman sympathizer, (a friend of tyrannical rule). Neither option was a good one; and the Pharisees (who despised Roman rule), and the Herodians (who supported it), became unlikely allies in this quest to undermine Jesus, whom they viewed as a threat to them both.

They approach Jesus with the classic pattern of flattery to throw him off guard: "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." As if they really believed that. You can almost see some snarky reporter out there with a friendly smile and congenial manner ready to pounce in for the kill. And then comes the no-win question. Essentially -- "Teacher, is it true that you support Roman domination, or would you rather we revolt?"

Well, Jesus refuses to play the game. Instead, he returns their question with one of his own. "Show me the coin used for paying the tax. Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's" they replied. "Then Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." In other words, Jesus lets them know His purpose is not insurrection nor patronage to Roman leaders, and He will not be trapped into a false choice between the two. Rather, He creates a new division -- between the things of this world (Caesar's), and the things of God. Between political kingdoms and the kingdom of heaven.

To God we must render the devotion of our hearts, bodies and minds. We must be considering the future of our souls and our spiritual needs. We are God's people. To Caesar, that is, in the worldly realm, we render proper respect, obedience, and fulfill our obligations under the law of the land. They're two very different things.

Jesus wins this battle of the wits - and, at the same time, returns a challenge to those who challenge Him. Are their arguments over political things really worthy of those who were supposed to be dealing with the salvation of the soul? Or are they diverting the attention of God's people away from the things of God and toward things that are worldly concerns.

Good answer, Jesus. Well done. This, however, does not stop the leaders from further attempts to divide Jesus' followers. In verse 23 - the very next verse following the text in your bulletin, Jesus is now challenged by the Saducees. Their question deals with the topic of the resurrection of the dead - another hotly contested issue of the day. Jesus again silences them with a brilliant answer.

He does the same thing yet one more time as the Pharisees return with yet another divisive question "Which is the greatest commandment?" And again, the dividing plans of the religious leaders and scholastics have been thwarted.

Dividing Jesus' followers. Dividing Jesus' followers. This was constantly the plan of Jesus' enemies. Divide and conquer. Break down and plunder. Wear down and wear out in endless quarrels and debates.

Dividing Jesus' followers. It has always been the goal of those who oppose the truth - especially of the Evil One: to get God's people focused on things that do not at all relate to the kingdom of God - on trivialities and nuances and nit-picking rather than the real Son of God who is our Savior.

His name was Richard. It happened to him. He didn't like some things that others in his church were pushing for. They liked contemporary singing. He liked traditional hymns. They liked the color red for the new carpet. He liked blue. They liked buying the new copy machine on credit. He thought they should pay cash.

Richard had been a member of the church for a long time. He had many allies and friends. And so, Richard soon found himself in a similar position as the Pharisees. Richard began to use his influence in the church as a weapon. After a controversial decision that was against his feelings on the carpet, he began phoning his friends and getting them all stirred up about the decision. He began to attack personalities, and to create false ideas of undermining the very foundations of the church. "Next thing you know, it won't be the carpet they're talking about -- it'll be the Word of God" said Richard, "they'll be throwing it out the door."

Soon the church was embroiled in controversy -- having endless meetings, drawn-out debates, and accomplishing nothing. Richard, much as he may have thought he was doing what he did for the good of the church, was really doing it to exert his power -- to get his way. And now he had managed to divide God's people and to diminish their effective working for the kingdom.

A similar thing happened to Bert. Bert was passionate for his political party and firmly believed that the church should take more of an interest in political things. Bert was a pastor; and

soon, Bert found himself preaching from the pulpit about certain candidates, about issues ranging from taxes to health care to assault rifles.

Bert's intentions were good. It began with issues that he thought related to biblical morality and Scriptural mandate. But soon his sermons were focused less and less on God's Good News of salvation in Christ, and more and more on Bert's slant on the latest news. And the church began to suffer – and not so much because of infighting as because its core message had lost its punch. No longer were they expending their efforts to lead people to the foot of the Savior -- instead they were stumping for political candidates, harping on Bert's pet issues, and getting involved in things that were more in the realm of Caesar than on the Lord.

But it can happen personally too. How many times have we let our anger get the better of us over petty, ridiculous things? How many times have we gotten divided from friends, relatives, co-workers, because the Tempter exploited our pride and got us focused on ourselves.

Dividing Jesus' followers. You see what I mean? The Tempter is ready to use any issue and any individual to accomplish his plan to break up the Church, to distract God's people, to get the Gospel caught up in red-tape and endless musings over inconsequential matters. He loves to get us focused on ourselves, because when we focus on ourselves, (and our opinions, feelings, desires) then our eyes turn away from Jesus.

But let's focus on the Savior for a moment. You see what He accomplished in our text? He blasted right through Satan's attempts to divide and presented Himself as the all-wise, all-knowing Son of God. While the Pharisees and Scribes and Herodians were attempting to discredit him and to squelch His message, He kept refocusing his hearers back to what was really important -- back to what really mattered.

And when it really mattered -- that is, when He Himself was faced with the hard choice of breaking down the barrier of sin through His own gut-wrenching sacrifice, or traveling the easy road to His own glory; Jesus forever displayed His commitment to our care. His face set toward Jerusalem, and voluntarily traveled to the cross so that He might pay the price for our sin.

Listen to how St. Paul describes it in Ephesians 2: "For He Himself is our peace who has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." The long and short of it is, that Jesus came to blast through the law of sin and death to bring new life and hope through the resurrection from the dead.

And that's what He wants to do in us. While Satan is intent on dividing Christ's followers and getting them caught up in endless controversies over inconsequential matters; Jesus is

dispatching His Holy Spirit to unite and strengthen His Church, His people, and the message we bring to a world divided.

He says it Himself in His prayer for the disciples (and for us): My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you... so that the world may believe that you have sent me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

My friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, what walls and barriers have challenged you, brought division, and diminished your whole-hearted efforts to shine forth with the Good News of Christ? Is it bitterness? Is it jealousy? Is it resentment? -- Perhaps it is a craving for things, a preoccupation with inconsequential matters, a drive or urge for pleasure, power, pride.

Jesus comes to you and says, "Let me put it to rest. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid."

Nearly 15 years ago now, Ronald Reagan challenged the Soviet Union regarding the Berlin Wall. "Mr Gorbachev, knock down this wall," he declared. And you know the rest of the story. Well Jesus' refrain is different, He says, "Brother, sister...let ME knock down your walls. Let me break down your barriers. Let me bring unity and peace, so that my word may be proclaimed by you in word and action." And He does.

The Bible says: "There is one body and one Spirit -- one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Jesus comes to bind us together, to build us up, to strengthen, sustain, and support us as we seek to follow Him. May we be brought to unity that the light of the barrier breaking Christ might be shown by the people He brings together.

God grant it, for Jesus sake. Amen.