

Value Added in the Kingdom of God

Matthew 22: 15-22

More than likely, none of us would object to a world that was a bit more just than this one, more peaceful, a world in which people were kinder, more respectful, more loving, more honest and joyful. We'd consider all those things welcome improvements. After all, is it possible to have too much of heaven, especially here on this imperfect earth? Let us pray.

Lord of heaven and of earth, we ask that you would mold us until we can see that all the moments of the life you give us, from those we spend in the living room to those we spend in the board room, are sacred opportunities to serve your heavenly kingdom here on earth. Amen.

Why were the Pharisees and the Herodians trying to entangle Jesus in his talk in the passage we just read? What had he done wrong? Sure, in this passage, and throughout the book of Matthew, Jesus has the rather annoying habit of presupposing God's sovereignty over the things of this world.

He demonstrates this by talking in a matter of fact way about God's kingdom, as if it were just as real as the material world in which he walked, and we live. In so doing, though, Jesus didn't reject the things of this world, the things of Caesar--spreadsheets and annual reports, profit margins and stock prices--he just insisted that we remember that they aren't all there is. What's the big deal? Everybody gets his due; earth its; heaven its; the stockholder hers. Nobody gets too upset. All go home with their fair share. Right? Wrong say the Pharisees and Herodians.

Consider the point of view of the Herodians. They were a faction of Jews who were supporters of Herod's family. Be clear. They did not support Herod because they were convinced of his fitness for leadership, or because they believed in his vision for the future of Galilee. Instead, the Herodians saw their support of Herod's family as the last hope of keeping for the Jews any semblance of home rule. They were all about accommodation with "reality" as they understood it.

Holding their noses they would have counseled, yes, go ahead, pay the tax to Caesar even if it goes against Jewish religious law, which it did. -Make that small compromise for our people's greater good. If we butter up the local Roman guy, maybe we can hold on to a bit of power for ourselves. Or, at least get Herod to throw some choice tidbits our way; maybe some tickets to the coliseum next week, or an invitation to a state dinner, or a nod and a wink as he sets regulatory and tax policies that curry favor to Jewish interests (as we, of course, define them.)- Sound familiar? We are not the first to think about politics as a sport called, "What's in it for me and mine?"

The Herodians did not seem to be as worried about the size of the piece of their own souls that they might have to trade for "autonomy." They were more worried about how

a man who talked about a more excellent way might ruin their hopes for wielding influence in the Kingdom of Herod.

And the take of the Pharisees on Jesus' two kingdoms? They were a group of very pious Jews who were very serious about following the religious rules for how people should live. They are often accused of religious hypocrisy, but they were only a very faithful people who also believed in listening to the voice of reason, status quo, order and restraint. They were those more concerned more about the stock market's continued rise than about growing inequality in their country. -They heard the voice that says: "Come on. Do you REALLY want to turn the world upside down and follow Jesus? Aren't we doing well enough following the rules as they stand? That's all God asks. Can a new and better Kingdom REALLY be made? -Who is this fanatic Jesus anyway? And what does he really know about living in the world?

Don't our economic, political and religious systems, the rules we live by, work well enough? -Maybe they could be tweaked here and there, but do we really have to measure them or our own actions as we navigate in them against Jesus' ideas regarding the requirements of a possibly fanciful Kingdom of God?

Yes, yes, yes, says Jesus Christ in the passage we read today. His claim is that the Kingdom of heaven he spent so much time talking about is no pipedream. It is the will of God for the world. That was enough to make the authorities in Jesus' day really, really nervous. It should make you and I nervous as well. That's because God with us, Immanuel, will not be managed. -Can you imagine Jesus Christ as an employee?!

Christ would spend too much time worrying about everyone our company came in contact with, from the contractors who clean the restrooms to the non-repeat low budget customer. -He'd probably demand we pay a decent living wage for all our employees, even those who work in maquiladoras in the border regions with Mexico. -He'd want our company to work to be a better steward of resources, to engage with the communities in which we're located, to care about the well being of the people in them, about the impact our waste or our product might have on their health.

He'd also probably want us to make our own decisions -about what value--added means and what our actions say about the values we hold. -He might even suggest to us that Adam Smith's invisible hand is not invisible at all, it is a reflection of the ethical choices, choices that carry by nature an ethical component, producers and consumers make. But

wWe like our rules as they stand. They tell us that the field we play here in the United States is level. That no one has any privilege or advantage over anyone else when they are born, when they start work, or in how they are treated as they carry out their work. Thus, if we work hard enough, we're smart enough, tough enough, we'll be rewarded. We'll find ourselves standing very tall in terms of the bar they set. Our economic rules tell us that those who work hard prosper and those who don't work hard don't prosper. Isn't that ubiquitous phrase "~~Doesn't~~ God help those who help themselves actually in the Bible?" They tell us the free market is fair because, -it doesn't make value

judgments. But they don't tell us who how we are to make the value judgements the market doesn't make. -They do tell us we can therefore trust the almighty market to define value for us. -~~The data of the market, we are told,~~ the discipline of the free market, we are told, in it, that we can trust.

But that is not what this country's money says. On the back of the money in my wallet every bill from \$1 to \$100 says "In God we trust." -And, that is not what Jesus says when he makes the subversive suggestion that there is a reality beyond this world. God with us, as the Pharisees and Herodians both acknowledge "does not regard the position (or the rules) of men." And the last thing we sometimes think we need or want is anything that makes management of life, or the things in it, any harder than it already is.

But Matthew's Jesus loves us too much to let us settle for measuring value as the world does. He was unwilling to sit silent, without objection, as His Father's good creation was married off, entrusted into the hands ~~,~~ of a spouse whose values were determined primarily by Caesar, or by next quarter's financial report, or by the Dow Jones Industrial Average. ~~+~~ Matthew's Jesus speaks up, objects to such unholy matrimony, stops that particular marriage subtly but firmly. He tells us in verse 21 ~~+~~ -sure, pay your taxes, build your business, nurture worthy grand ambitions fueled by visions of solid, healthy companies, providing worthwhile goods and services to human beings who need them. Just don't, in all your striving to build your own dream, forget God's great dream for all the earth, which is t, ~~which is t~~ the establishment of God's kingdom, here.

The world longs for business, political and religious -leaders who understand that honesty, respect, love, a willingness to admit wrongdoing, an ethic of stewardship of resources and of people – that these things are much more than a ticket into the Kingdom of God; they are the stuff of which it is made ~~of~~. -Loving God's kingdom, longing for it, these leaders would by definition ~~d~~ want to become the raw material of its construction. And in becoming that, they'd finally understand what Jesus knew very well, whether they worked in business, politics, non-government or religious organizations, how to live on the earth and continue to serve ~~h~~ heaven.

Let us pray: God of all, bless our humble efforts to be true to the ethic of your kingdom wherever we work. —Loving you for the gift of yourself to us in Christ, we confess our thirst for even more evidence of your justice, your righteousness, your peace, your way of love, here on earth. -We ask that you would use us until the seeds of your kingdom take root in the rocky soil of our lives, so that we may rejoice in the abundance of your heavenly harvest even here, even now, living on the earth. Amen.

