



Ordinary Sunday 29

THE NEW SHOFAR

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -
anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com

Matthew 22:15-22 - Give to God that which we owe God

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Self-protection makes strange bedfellows

The mission and ministry of Jesus was not political. He was not a revolutionary and he was comfortable living under Roman rule. But he was a reactionary with the most evocative image being his rushing into the Temple and upending the tables of moneylenders and traders. The status quo was not sacrosanct and just because religious people thought they were doing the right thing and doing their best in their service of God, did not mean God was pleased. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Israel had become too comfortable, too self-righteous and too willing to ride on the sacrifices and successes of previous generations of Jews. These are the “temple tables” overthrown

by Jesus and those with vested interests in keeping things ticking along as they had done for decades hated what Jesus was doing to *their* religion. In today’s narrative we see two of these self-serving groups ganging up to silence Jesus. The odd thing is how the two groups – the Pharisees and the Herodians were natural and long running enemies. The Pharisees were passionate about Israel being free and the Herodians were committed to Rome. Look what their hatred produced – coming together to destroy Jesus.

Should we allow Sharia law?

Islam insists on the responsibility of all Muslims to live according to “Sharia law”. These laws have been set down by Allah and passed on by his prophet Mohammed. This is fine when they live in Islamic lands but problematic when they live in secular societies. Should Australian laws make exceptions for Muslims who want to live according to their religious beliefs? What do these demands teach us about the conflict between religion and society? For Muslims it is a clash between what God demands and what governments want and in all cases God must win. How do we argue against this – remembering we need to think about what this might mean for our own Christian beliefs?

The Herodians speak the truth

It is fascinating to see the way the Herodians come to Jesus and speak to him. They say he is a *man of integrity, he teaches the truth (the Way of God) and always teaches with faithfulness to God*. In other words, Jesus does what God wants and brings to the world the Truth of God his Father. There is nothing selfish in his ministry and in him and in his words and deeds the Truth of the Rule of God can be discerned. They go on to add how Jesus is not dictated to by the current political correctness, public opinion or political niceties. He does what God wants and God’s Truth governs all he does and says.

This is important because it means these religious leaders know about Jesus and accept his credentials but see their religious responsibilities, customs and traditions as being of greater importance. This is one of the key points being stressed by Matthew here and he wants his own faith community to ponder on what it might mean in their own situations: *is our mission in the world being compromised by the way we hold on to some of our customs, preferences and traditions? Who are our Herodians and Pharisees?*

To pay taxes or not to pay taxes – that is the perfect question

These religious leaders try to put the question down in black and white terms – do we obey the secular government or do we live under divine rule? Whatever answer Jesus gives he will stand condemned. He will be condemned as a rebel if he says pay no taxes and stand equally condemned by his fellow Jews if he says taxes should be paid to the hated Roman rulers. But is the question ever so black and white? The question earlier about Sharia law were about this question and many Muslims would have sided very much with the Pharisees. Islam’s aim (according to the Koran) is to have the entire world living according to the rule of religion. Why? Because it is the will of God. But Jesus has a different perspective here.

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar...

The coin has the image of Caesar on its face and the Greek used by Matthew says it *belongs* to Caesar. It is his possession and it is a matter of justice that those having it in their possession return it to its owner. That is, pay their taxes. It cannot be wrong to return it to its owner.

Jesus’ reply to the question is given in the present tense – is therefore an answer that is meant for every subsequent generation. He changes the verb from “give” to a verb meaning “give back”. If something is owned, justice demands it be returned. It is right and just to pay our dues to our government in those areas where they have “ownership”. This is a standard belief of the time – Cicero...*who would care for a city without laws?*

Give to God that which is God’s

This is a wonderful response by Jesus. It begs the question: what belongs to God? “All things” is not a helpful answer. In the context of the narrative, what Jesus is reminding believes is how all men and women are made *in the image and likeness of God*. We belong to God and it is God who has first call on our faithfulness and obedience. From the very beginning martyrs have died and countless numbers incarcerated because they followed Christ faithfully to the end. Millions more have persevered in faithfulness, preaching the Gospel and quietly working for renewal in the face of oppressive and anti-Christian legislation. They work away as *leaven* in the society, modelling the Good News and giving witness to the values of living under divine rule. We do not have to blow the world up in order to bring about renewal but we do have to make sacrifices.

Question: *How might we go about restoring the place of the Sabbath in our own lives? In society? Let’s apply this same question to the areas listed in the text box on this page. What might we be able to learn from Islam on this issue and in the relationship between faith and secular society?*

Have Christians rolled over too easily?

While we reject Sharia law (and correctly) we need to ask ourselves whether or not we have given up too easily on some of the fundamentals of what makes a fully alive and faithful Christian community?

The sabbath is just another day.

We are afraid to speak out on moral issues especially on human sexuality and the overly sexualization of life (especially children).

We are not active in protecting and promoting Christian family life.

We have allowed the Bible to all but disappear in Church life and mission.

We are quiet on the sacredness of human life – euthanasia, refugees, the homeless, slavery, drugs, domestic violence, abortion etc – leaving government to regulate these according to humanist and self-centred philosophies.

Do we simply accept these things as the “reality” or do we work in an active and public way to offer a Gospel perspective?