

I'm guessing we've all had this happen at least once...you're scrolling happily, distractedly, not really paying attention through Facebook and you see the inevitable post. Something that goes along the lines of, "*If you love God...*" "*Stop if you have time for Jesus...*" "*I bet I won't get many people to read this...*" "*How many people will dare to share this?*" And what follows is any number of things, explanations of faith, descriptions of Bible verses, how God is working in the world in the midst of our current divisive climate. Honestly, the content of the posts don't even necessarily matter. It's how they get you initially.

I'll confess, this happened to me earlier this week. I think the initial line was the "*Stop if you have time for Jesus...*" one and I kept on scrolling past, because that's generally what I do, but after about ten seconds there was that little voice like, "Oh God, what if I just said I don't have time for Jesus?! What if God is watching my social media use and is like, 9:45 Monday night, Tina Melusky, plenty of time to watch Monday Night Football, not enough time for Jesus?" Now, did I go back to the post and read what was there? No...sure didn't. But it was what immediately popped into my head as I read the gospel this week and heard these words about the Pharisees leaving to go plot to entrap Jesus. I read that text and was like, man...if the Pharisees had had Facebook, they probably wouldn't

have had to work so hard to trap him, all they would have needed to do was make a meme or a post saying something like, “*If you’re the Son of God, would you pay your taxes?*” and they’d have their whole plan worked out in about five seconds.

Our scene shifts a little bit this week. The Pharisees seem to have finally had enough of being lambasted in front of the crowds with parable after parable about all the ways that they have messed up. You can almost imagine the whispers going through their group like, “How long are we going to stand here and take this?” “Why don’t we get out of here?” and then inevitably someone asking the question, “What can we do to get rid of this guy?” And it’s just the perfect little nudge that sends the Holy Week ball downhill. They start to disperse away from the crowds, filtering slowly away to back rooms where they can put their heads together and figure out just how they can do this. How can they get Jesus to say just the wrong thing to get him arrested? How can they turn the tide of the crowds in their favor not his? How can they trip him up, trap him in all of these words he throws there way where people finally start looking at him with skepticism and anger? So finally, they decide to turn Jesus’ own tactics against him. He wants to spin parables and fill people’s minds with words and questions,

then they are going to throw their own question to him, one that they feel is invincible, a ready made trap that will get him in trouble no matter what.

I know to us, sitting here in our 21st century world a question about taxes seems pretty innocuous, like of course you pay your taxes, who is going to argue about that, why is that a big deal? But this question is fraught with layers of complexity. If Jesus says, yes, it's lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, well at best that could mean he loses the support of the crowd, and worst case scenario, the Pharisees can charge him with blasphemy if they want to push it. Because here's the thing, the Jewish people are adamantly opposed to this tax from Rome. They are charged an exorbitant amount, despite not all of them being Roman citizens, on top of the fact that Roman taxes have to be paid with Roman coin so they have to exchange their money to be able to pay and of course get charged ridiculous exchange rates. So if Jesus says he's in full support of paying the tax, he runs the risk of the crowd feeling like he isn't one of them, that he's on the side of Rome. On top of that, as we will see the Roman coin bears the image of the Emperor, the Emperor who very vocally brands himself the son of God, a divine being, so if Jesus acknowledges that the Emperor is a person deserving of taxes and attention, well it's a slippery slope to the Pharisees pushing that he

thinks the Emperor is divine and thus Jesus is a lying blasphemer who is not to be trusted.

Ok, so he can't just say yes, yes, pay your taxes. But what if he says no, no it's not lawful to pay your taxes. Well that's a quick train ride to treason station and even if the crowds would support him in that sentiment, the Romans aren't going to pay any mind to the nuance of the situation. The Pharisees could simply turn him over to the Romans and say, this guy just incited a riot by riling people up saying they don't need to pay their taxes. Suddenly, Jesus' arrest and trial wouldn't be so tricky. It'd be simple. He committed treason. He riled up the crowds. Arrest him. Kill him. He's nothing but trouble for the government.

So the Pharisees think they're in a win-win situation here. No matter what he says, he's going to be in trouble. It's the perfect trap. They're finally going to get what they want and not look like the bad guys because they just asked a simple question. But Jesus does what Jesus does. He reads right through the laying it on thick compliments they give him to usher in the question and then just kind of side steps it. He basically looks at the coin and is like, hey, if this belongs to the Emperor then it probably needs to return to the Emperor, it's his, he should have it. While then also sliding in there that the things that belong to God *also* need to be returned to God.

While that one coin might bear the Emperor's image, all of creation bears God's image and so all of creation, all of humanity, every inch of the world should be rendered unto God for worship, focus, and thanksgiving. It's kind of like, by all means pay your taxes, but don't forget that the whole world is in God's keeping, all people bear God's image, and it is God and God alone that is deserving of worship in this world. So suddenly, the oh so simple question about taxes turns into the oh so complicated issue of where does our focus, where does our worship lie? The Pharisees thought they had laid the perfect trap and Jesus turned it right around on them, refusing to let them tangle him up in semantics and details when the focus should always and forever be upon God.

The reality is...whether it's in Facebook posts or just in regular conversation or even within just our own private thoughts, we seek to do this to each other, entrap each other in questions of faith, because at the end of the day we aren't comfortable sitting in the reality that each of us brings a different perspective, a different lens, a different feeling to our faith. We aren't comfortable with the reality that God moves in all of our lives differently. We would much rather that faith was as simple as being boiled down to if you love God, you will read and repost this huge Facebook post and that's all there is to it. We aren't comfortable sitting in the intricate

nuances of faith with ourselves or with others, because then it makes us confront the fact that faith isn't easy. It isn't simple. Don't get me wrong, sometimes it is, but other times it is immensely complicated. And at the end of the day we aren't all wrestling with the same things...for each of us, the issues of faith which throw our heads into a tizzy are different, it could be grace, it could be unconditional love, it could be forgiveness, it could be the reality of evil in the world, it could be not understanding why certain things happen the way that they do. We're all bringing different things to the table that make faith so much more complex than just going well wow, so and so didn't share my Facebook post, their faith must be less than stellar.

At the end of the day...the thing that bears repeating and embracing from this text, beyond the simple ya know, pay your taxes and be done with it sort of thing, is the fact that all of us belong to God, we all bear God's image in our own unique and different ways. God moves in each of our lives differently, and it's up to us whether we're going to embrace that diversity of experience and faith or if we're going to try and put faith into a box that is small and confined and has to fit a certain way or its not seen as valid. Are we going to own and embrace the fact that no matter what, no matter what our journeys are, no matter what the journeys of our siblings are, they are journeys with God? Are we going to accept that our faith might

look wildly different and we might interpret things differently simply because we're all at different stages and see that difference as beautiful and something that expands our worldview or are we going to see that difference as dangerous and divisive? Are we going to say there's only one way to bear the image of God or lots of ways, we all just have to figure out which way is calling to us?

How can we value the image of God that we all bear when we're more interested in judging each other and tricking each other and defining each other's faith? That's not life in community. Valuing the image of God in each other means not only accepting our differences when it comes to simply how we physically look or how we live our lives, but also in accepting that faith is going to manifest differently in all of us, and each of those diverse lived faith experiences can make the wider story of our communal faith brighter, better, and more complete. It's not up to us to define each other's journeys, but it is up to us to accompany each other on those journeys. Do we want our fellow God bearers to walk alone, especially if the path they are walking is difficult? Or do we want to look at each other and say, hey, I see God in you. It's up to us if we want to talk this journey together with feet moving in the same direction or feet constantly looking out for traps. **AMEN!!!**