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What we can learn from the trap set for Jesus by the Hebrew authorities

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<Bible Reading>

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to trap him, Jesus, in what he said. So, they sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians saying teacher, we know that you are sincere and you teach the way of God in accordance with truth and you show deference or partiality to no one for you do not regard people with partiality, everybody is equal for you. Tell us then what you think, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not. But Jesus aware of their evilness or malice said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax. And they brought him a denarius, which is a coin. Then, he said to them, "Whose head is on this coin and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor those things that are the emperor's, and give to God those things that are God's." When the Pharisees and the Herodians heard this, they were amazed; they were speechless, they left him and

went away. (Matthew 22 : 15-22)

First, a little history, because it's very difficult to understand anything in the Bible, Old Testament, New Testament without understanding history. As I tell my students, we can't understand sociology without studying history, so the same with the Bible.

In this passage, you have these two groups, the Pharisees who are a religious group, very devout, believing in God, and then you have the Herodians who are a political group. And the Pharisees and the Herodians both accept the rule of Rome, Rome was the big power. The Herodians were more accepting of Rome's power. The Pharisees, we say in English, reluctantly or with some reservation accept it, no choice, Rome was very powerful. But now these two groups who don't like each other really, they join forces and what do they do? They try to trap Jesus.

And how do they do that? Well, as today, in fact yesterday [Japanese] spoke about the new tax, so nothing has changed in Jesus' day and before Jesus, people didn't like taxes and we don't like taxes, especially when we think they might be unfair. Well in this history, the Herodians and the Pharisees are asking Jesus about not only a tax, but worse, the most hated tax of all, the poll tax. The poll tax was a tax that Rome put on everybody in their empire, which says you belong to us, pay us.

Well, the Pharisees, they were in trouble because they know in their hearts that we belong to God, God's Kingdom. The Herodians, we're not sure what they meant, what they felt, but probably not so much as the Pharisees, okay, yes, no problem, we pay the tax. All right, so these two groups get together and they try to trap Jesus by asking him, "Should we pay taxes?" Should we in Judea, modern Israel, pay taxes to Rome?" If Jesus says, yes, the people will be upset because Jesus was not a fan of Rome or worldly authority. If Jesus says no, we shouldn't pay taxes, well he is in trouble because then Pontius Pilate and the Romans and the ruling authorities will say "You are against the ruling power, we will kill you."

Well, so what does Jesus do? He doesn't say yes, he doesn't say no. He surprises them by saying to them that this coin was made by Rome, it has the picture of the emperor, I forget which emperor, not Augustus, the emperor after Augustus. So, we got this coin from Rome, so we give it back to Rome. Give to Rome what is Rome's, give to God what is God's.

Okay, there are many things I believe we can learn from this sociologically as well, but before that, there's very few of you, time is limited, so let me give you two or three minutes to think about in your own mind and your heart or talk to each other. What can we learn from this because after that I will tell you what I think we can learn? So just two minutes reflection, thinking, talk whatever, what can we possibly learn from this passage about us, society and God? Let's think about that for a moment. Many people think in Chapel, we should not talk, Chapel is a place to be quiet. Well, I don't think Jesus will agree. If you want to talk to your neighbor, [Japanese] what can we learn from this? Before I tell you what I think.

Well, I think, who am I? I am just one person, so I think we can learn, maybe 14 things, some of them related from this passage. Number one; if we are

devoted, if we follow the will of God, he, she, it, the world, the creator, this requires a greater responsibility or allegiance like pledge of flag, pledge allegiance to the flag than to anything or anyone else. Money, things, the emperor, [Japanese] anybody, anything. But we know we have a higher responsibility, sekinin to God than to anything in this world, but this is not an excuse to avoid our responsibilities to self, to others, society, societies and to the world, the environment, which I am speaking about at a conference next month on the sociology of sustainability.

Number two, sometimes and in this case -- or by the way Jesus never said don't pay the tax, he never said we have obligation to Rome, he never said that. But he makes a separation between devotion to Rome with money and devotion to God with our lives. Number two, devotion to God and the mission, whatever that mission is you think sometimes produces powerful enemies, in this case two groups who were enemies come together and they try to trap Jesus, and this happens in life. Now, you're all except us and Murata-san [ph] you're all very, very young, so maybe you haven't experienced this yet, but as you get older and start working, teaching, whatever, sometimes people will not

like you, you will make enemies, especially as Jesus did when he believed he has a higher authority than the religious authorities or the Roman empire.

Number three; well, I live in a society I was not born, so my cultural upbringing is quite different from yours, because I don't see anybody but Japanese here. However, sometimes I have problems with Japanese society, culture, politics, whatever, but this doesn't mean -- so this is point three, this doesn't mean that I should totally criticize that I should ignore, no, I can criticize, Jesus criticized. Jesus was a revolutionary, but he wasn't a terrorist. So he could accept certain things in society, but at the same time he could criticize.

Number four; in Jesus' world with God possessions; money, things, paper, clothes, glasses have a zero value. Now, of course if we don't have money, none of us are here. If we have no money for the train, we have no money for clothes, so Jesus never denied that we need money or pay coins whatever, but he believes and I think this is point number four, we can learn that material things, consumption [Japanese] your gardens, shops have a zero value when it comes to living a life devoted to God.

Number five related to number two, beware of people, especially people you trust or trusted who you think are your supporters, you would think the Pharisees are Jesus' supporters, they're both very religious. But sometimes these people, their actions do not match their words, and Jesus calls them hypocrites. Hypocrites means say one thing and do another. And this has happened to many of us, older, maybe yourselves as well.

Number six; what belongs to whom. Well, to whom does this world belong, to whom do we belong, keep this question in your mind. Do we belong to [Japanese], do we belong to [Japanese], do we belong to our family, do we belong to Japan, do we belong to Asian society. Yes, but ultimately, we belong to the world that was created by God, he, she, it, creator, whatever.

Number seven; related to zero value, we need to always guard against having too much. So, now I am downsizing my CV, especially as I retire soon. So I am just as guilty as anybody, things, things, things, but Jesus is telling us I think things are not that important, we need to guard against consumerism, materialism. Our belief that consuming and having things makes us happy, we must

continually navigate [Japanese] you see it on the train, our devotion to God and the world and to others.

Number eight; people or groups of people, this is related to hypocrites. People or groups of people whom we think are not friends of each other, sometimes get together to trap us or other groups to satisfy their own needs and wants, why? Because these two people or in this case; the Herodians and the Pharisees, they have a common enemy, Jesus. And they think Jesus is a threat to their interest.

Number nine; as I said before, taxes are not liked throughout human history, nobody likes taxes, why? It's my money, why should I give it to the government? Well, think about this, if we don't give money to the government, poor people don't get anything, elderly people and I am one of them soon if not already, we don't get any support. So taxes are important, but they have been hated throughout history, especially any tax that gives the idea that the taxing authority, for example in Japan, the government owns us, the government owns us, [Japanese] owns us. Our family, well our family doesn't take taxes but government does. So these taxes have been hated and this is a

problem for people who believe that no, no, no government of Japan doesn't own us, God owns us, the world owns us, I mean none of us are here if we weren't born. Is the government responsible for our birth? I don't think so. My mother and father, but then they were also born and the American government was not responsible for their births, whoever we think created this world was.

Number 10, we do have a responsibility to society. Jesus says that, He shows it. He never says we don't have responsibility to society because he said give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, so we do need to pay taxes.

Number 11, related to hypocrites, people who try to trap other people, often get trapped themselves. I have seen this many times in my career here.

Number 12; there are two Kingdoms on earth. One is state and authority or church, university, city office, but the other is based on God.

Number 13, two more. We belong, as I have said, so these are related -- not

even to ourselves, we don't own ourselves, me, me, me, me. But we belong to God. We belong to the world that he created, she, it, whatever. We owe to God, what is God's. So we have to always think and I struggle with this every day. What I am doing, am I doing it for myself, am I doing it for the university or am I doing it because I firmly try, hope, pray, to believe that it is the right thing to do. And doing the right thing is sometimes is very difficult.

Lastly, number 14, our true -- and this is related to sociology society, my research, my teaching, our true citizenship -- our true [Japanese] thank you, whatever our [Japanese] ship is in God's Kingdom. We devote our resources, our work, our being to God's purposes, but we do give to earthly purposes, authorities what is due and paying taxes is one of them. So, as time is getting close to the end, this is what I think we learned from this passage and this is very, very related to society, especially what we are studying here in sociology.

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