

Christ and the Coin

Mark 12:13-17

***There was a hidden, secret me,
Portraying what I ought to be,
I wore a mask for men to see.***

***I feigned full faith when all was doubt,
The honest heart I was without,
And latter rain in inner drought.***

***Like Judas, smiling like a slave,
My heart within was like a grave,
Defiled by darkness and depraved.***

***I was the product of my past,
Of choices made and dies long cast.
I needed what I found at last.***

***But first I had to bare my face,
And open to the God of grace
My hidden darkness and disgrace.***

***And then I found what blood imparts
Not new beginnings or fresh starts,
But brand new lives and reborn hearts.***

It was time for a change of tactics. That was obvious to our Lord's enemies. For three years those fundamental Pharisees, liberal Sadducees and political minded Herodians had hounded a miracle working Rabbi from Nazareth. But all to no avail.

So just three days before the crucifixion, they tried something new. For one thing, they abandoned their independent attacks.

The Pharisees and the Herodians roundly hated one another. But they loathed our Lord even more. So they formed an uneasy alliance.

Then the two groups made plans to sneak up on the Nazarene and ambush Him. And since Jesus knew all the leaders, they sent some young disciples instead.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, Matthew 22:15-16

There was no doubt about their aim. Somehow, some way, they would capture and kill the Carpenter. This was merely another effort in that campaign. Later, they would come armed with swords and spears. But this time their weapons were words.

Then they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him in order to trap Him in a statement. Verse 13

The elders carefully coached the young men to make sure they knew exactly how to act and what to say. Those fresh faced young zealots were to start by masquerading as earnest, genuine seekers.

The young disciples did just as they were told. And in the process, they not only showed themselves for who and what they were. They also revealed the Redeemer as He really is.

Pretense

They found the Master somewhere in the forest of pillars and soft shadows of Solomon's Porch. He was surrounded by a crowd of Passover pilgrims, precisely where the old men told their followers to confront the Carpenter.

They carefully worked their way to the front of the crowd until they were standing right in front of Jesus. Then they began with words that dripped with honey.

They came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth." Verse 14

The word *truthful* doesn't really catch the meaning of the young men's flattery. The King James Version is more literal.

Master, we know that thou art true, Verse 14 (KJV)

That word describes a person who is sincere and genuine, honest and authentic: someone who is utterly without pretense. In short, the Savior was their own exact opposite.

Unlike Jesus, those young men pretended to be everything they were not. They acted like sincere seekers of truth.

But actually, they couldn't have cared less what the Master might really think about the issue they asked Him. And while they offered sweet words of praise, their hearts seethed with hatred for the Him and everything He stood for.

The young men were more than confident. Since the Savior had never seen any of their faces before, they were smug and sure could they could hide their true motives behind sweet smiles and soft words. But they were wrong.

But He, knowing their hypocrisy, Verse 15

Hypocrisy comes from a Greek word that referred to actors in a play who wore masks. And that is precisely what those young men did. They hid themselves behind false faces. And our Lord always finds that disgusting.

That is a stern reminder for us. If we would come to Christ, we must come as we really are. We cannot do what those young men did and hide our true aims and attitudes behind a soft face and sweet words. We must dare to be as genuine as the Savior Himself is.

Still, those young men might have been utterly insincere. But the words they used to describe our Lord were all true.

He was and is utterly without pretense. He never hid His true feelings behind a false smile and sweet words.

And so it must be with us. Our praise means nothing if the words we sing are not sincere and our prayers do not come from the heart.

If we harbor a seething resentment and secretly feel God has been unjust and unfair with us, piously praising His Name and telling Him we are His faithful children is nothing less than a lie.

There is a note of sadness in this story. Our Lord could have brought His marvelous light and life to the darkness and death that lurked behind the masks those zealots wore.

But their masks didn't allow Him to give them His joy and peace. And if we come to Christ full of pious pretense, hiding our true feelings behind sweet words of praise, there is little He can do for us, either.

After all, we are fools indeed, if we think we can deceive our Creator. He can read our very hearts. And He demands that we come to Him honestly, openly admitting our true feelings.

Only then can He work His wonders in our lives.

Partiality

The young men's false praise was also right in another sense. As the Son of the living God, our Savior really is without partiality.

He didn't treat derelicts and drunkards or publicans and prostitutes one way and the priestly and powerful an entirely different way.

When Peter stood before Cornelius, the first gentile believer, he declared the same thing those young liars said to our Lord there on the temple courtyard.

I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, Acts 10:34

There is one important difference, of course. Peter believed what he said while the Master's young adversaries did not.

Actually, the reason those young zealots praised Jesus wasn't merely butter Him up or put Him off His guard. Their real purpose was to make it just that much harder for Him to answer the question they had been coached to ask Him.

Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay or shall we not pay? Verses 14-15

Luke's account of our Lord's birth begins with a simple explanation why Joseph and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. Luke 2:1 (KJV)

To make that tax possible, the Roman government demanded that a census be taken and everyone be registered. Afterwards, with the census in hand, the Romans could begin demanding that everyone in Palestine pay a poll tax.

The Herodians avidly supported the Herods: the puppet rulers Rome appointed to govern God's people. So to them, it seemed perfectly reasonable and proper to pay the Roman tax.

But the Pharisees vehemently disagreed. That tax, they insisted, was tantamount to violating Moses' Law.

After all, Moses commanded that Israel was never to appoint a foreigner to rule over them. And willingly paying Roman taxes, they argued, merely supported foreign rule over God's people.

...you shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. Deuteronomy 17:15

The Pharisees were passionate in their opposition to the tax. And most of the people agreed with them. Both the young zealots and the wicked old men who sent them knew just how violently the people opposed the Roman tax, too. In fact, they counted on it.

The young men smiled sweetly and told Jesus they knew He was utterly impartial in His teaching. But they didn't really believe that was true. In fact, that is why they asked the question. They were sure the Savior would be caught in a dilemma.

If He said they should pay the tax, the people would turn against Him. And if He said they should not pay it, they could run to the Romans and accuse Him of sedition and rebellion.

It seemed like a perfect trap. But it was flawed in its foundation. They posed the problem based on what they believed about Jesus.

But they really didn't know Him at all. They offered lying praise, saying He was utterly

impartial.

But behind their sweet smiles, they assumed He would be afraid to rile the Romans on one hand and reluctant to turn the people against Him on the other.

But Jesus was precisely what the young men said He was. He never showed partiality. Our Redeemer was without any reluctance at all to speak God's truth.

It didn't matter to Him if kings and kingdoms rose up against Him. Neither did He carefully craft His words to please people or to keep them from turning against Him.

And if we call ourselves Christians and claim Christ's name, we must be every bit as impartial as He both was and is. We cannot fashion and form what we say to please anyone.

We dare not alter and adjust the Gospel to please people, even to keep ourselves safe from persecution. We must be as true as the Savior we serve.

The Good News about salvation through Christ's cross must be proclaimed without apology to all men. We cannot minimize aspects of the message that might offend people. If we do, we have fallen into the same trap our Lord's enemies set for Him.

The young men left, discouraged and defeated. But our Savior did more than defeat them and deliver Himself from their trap. He also honored His Father by teaching His Word faithfully.

But that is not possible if we do not dare to proclaim God's truth without regard to the reactions it might produce in those who hear it. Our Lord did indeed *teach the way of God in truth*. And so must we.

In his letter to churches in Galatia, the Apostle Paul put it best.

...am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. Galatians 1:10

The conclusion is obvious. We cannot serve our gracious God and also try to please people.

Payback

The question did not irritate our Redeemer. But the pretension and hypocrisy those young men hid behind their smiles did.

But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." Verse 15

That silver coin was minted by Rome. And on one side it was engraved with the head of the sitting Caesar, Tiberius.

So it is astounding those young disciples dared to carry it up onto the temple courtyard. But right then, the Master was not concerned with God's commandment against carved images.

Instead, He pointed to the coin and asked a simple question.

They brought one. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." Verse 16

The very fact that the young men were carrying the coin said volumes about them. They were obviously prospering by taking part in the booming economy Roman rule brought to Palestine.

They were also living under the umbrella of safety and security Roman legions provided. Marauding bands of raiders once preyed on God's people. But with Roman soldiers clattering down every road, such violence was a thing of the past.

Because of the Romans, peace reigned over Palestine. And for that, the Savior insisted, God's people were duty bound to pay them.

And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Verse 17

The word *render* means to pay back. It was as if Jesus pointed to the silver coin and said, "You got this from Caesar, pay it back to him." The practical principle is obvious. Whatever we receive from government, we are duty bound to pay for.

Like the young men who opposed our Lord, we receive both blessings and benefits from

whatever government happens to rule over us. And because of that and our commitment to God, we are to both honor and obey them.

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ...because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. Romans 13:1-2, 6-7

That is not limited to governors and presidents, either. God also ordained that job foremen, parents and teachers are to rule over us.

And we can't claim to be serving Christ if we are in rebellion to those He has placed over us.

The same principle applies to God. Whatever we receive from God, we are duty bound to return to Him. So since God gave us both our bodies and our lives, we must return them to Him.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. Romans 12:1

God also gave us minds and the ability to think and imagine. So we should also honor Him in our thoughts.

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, 2 Corinthians 10:5

The same is true of whatever else God has given us. If He has given us talents and abilities, we ought to return those gifts to Him by using them to bring honor and glory to His blessed Name.

And if He has given us worldly wealth, we should use it to honor the Lord who loves us so much He laid down His life for us.

The Lord's answer was so clear and concise, the young zealots could not think of an answer. So, amazed and embarrassed, they left.

And they were amazed at Him. Verse 17

Maybe that was the greatest tragedy of all. Those young men had the matchless privilege of hearing God's Son speak to them.

Yet while His wisdom filled them with wonder, that was all it did. Unwilling to be doers of His teaching, they returned to their wicked masters, unforgiven and unchanged.

Still, we dare not look down upon them. If we mask our own true feelings and refuse to respond when God's Spirit speaks to us, we will never experience His life and light and love, either.

We too will be left unforgiven and unchanged.