



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 20:19-26

To understand more about the Christian's relationship to God and government.

Getting the Message

The beginning of Session 73 picks up right where Session 72 ended. Recall the last part of the prior study, and the reason why Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants:

"This parable speaks to the previous question of authority, but addresses a much deeper issue. The issue the chief priests and scribes raise concerning authority is proven to be empty by this parable. The parable illustrates that even when someone (the son of the vineyard owner) comes with real authority (the authority of his father), the tenants will still reject him and kill him because their hearts are hard and full of jealousy. Jesus comes and teaches in the authority from heaven, but that doesn't matter to chief priests and scribes; they are jealous and will reject Him and kill Him because their hearts are hard."

If there was any doubt that this was true, notice how verse 19 begins in this week's study: "The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people." The underlying meaning of the parable was not lost on Jesus' primary audience. They understood what He was communicating, and rather than being led to repentance, they doubled down, hardened their hearts even further, and continued to try and trap Jesus. This week's lesson continues the volley back and forth between those who represent the chief priest (clandestinely) and Jesus.

A (Dishonest) Question About Tribute

Verse 20 unfolds the plan of the chief priests even further: “So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.” Again, notice that in verses 19 and 20, Luke does not include the Pharisees in this growing plot to trap Jesus. The chief priests, having been bested in public in the passage prior have now resulted to sending “spies,” (Gk. ἐγκάθετος). Below is a breakdown of some keywords, themes, and concepts from this passage.

SINCERE

The spies sent by the chief priests “pretended to be sincere,” but this is not the best rendering of the original language. The term for “sincere” in the Greek language is δίκαιος (dikaios), a term that literally means “righteous.” It isn’t that these spies were intending to simply be seen as sincere, but as men who were good and upright in the sight of God. They wanted to look like righteous people despite the fact that they were engaged in a deceptive plot to bring harm against the Lord.

NO PARTIALITY

As they approach Jesus, one of the things they say to Him is that He teaches “with no partiality.” Again, there is a word picture here in the Greek text. The word for “not showing partiality” is literally, “to not receive one’s face.” This quality is a characteristic of God as stated in other places as well (Acts 10:34; Gal. 2:6). In other words, Jesus was not a respecter of persons in that prestige, acumen, religiosity, and any other qualifier made no real difference to the Lord; all have sinned before Him (Rom. 3:23). The irony is that they recognize this quality about Jesus and yet they get angry when He dines with sinners and tax collectors.

PERCEPTION

Jesus does not fall prey to their scheme: “But He perceived their craftiness” (Lk. 20:23). This should not surprise anyone; Jesus knows the hearts and thoughts of all people (Jn. 2:24).

CAESAR’S TRIBUTE

Much has been made in terms of building theological systems on this one verse. To do so is to err in some way or another. The point of Jesus’ response was not a definitive teaching on the relationship between the people of God and secular government, but to respond to the duplicity of the spies in a manner that bested them, leaving them with no accusation. If Jesus answers the question concerning paying tribute to Caesar in the positive, He does so to the chagrin of His Jewish followers who saw Rome as a representative of evil. However, if He answers in the negative, He could be charged with treason by the Roman officials. His answer is brilliantly worded in that He avoids affirming Rome while respecting their temporal authority: “And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent” (Lk. 20:26).

A WEIGHTIER TRIBUTE

One should not read Jesus’ response and come away with the idea that what we render to Caesar is equal to what we render to God; God and Caesar are not equals. What we render to Caesar is temporal and will one day fade away. To serve God is an eternal endeavor and one that should always take precedent over anything else in life.

A Note on Government

While Jesus’ words are not comprehensive, there are a few other passages that speak to the conduct of a Christian before a secular government. Romans 13:1 says, “Let every person be subject to the governing

authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Some have incorrectly read this to mean that the government should be conformed to a righteous standard of leadership in order to argue for a kind of Christian nationalism. This misses the point of what Paul is communicating. It is true that officials should obey Christ and His commandments, but no more true than any other person. The point of Romans 13, however, is that contextually the governing authorities were not righteous leaders and therefore it was tempting for Christians to rebel. Paul is commanding them to obey anyways which would be difficult.

Peter also speaks to this in 1 Peter 2:17: “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” Again, Peter’s words are both in support of honorable and peaceable behavior to authorities that are hostile to the faith, while at the same time recognizing supreme authority does not come from the emperor, but God. 1 Peter 2:17 is chiasmic in form wherein the first and fourth phrases correspond, and the second and third correspond. With that in mind, honor for the emperor is to be no more reverent than honor for everyone, while the higher duty of the Christian is to love God and His people, a mirror of the great commandment (Lk. 10:25-28).

What About Now?

The big takeaway is the importance of serving God and rendering to Him what He is due above all things. Christians must prioritize the Lord in all things lest they reveal that they aren’t really submitted to Him as Lord. Another takeaway is the balance between loving God and serving God and also being peaceable and honorable to those around us who disagree with our faith, even those in authority.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 20:19. Who sought to “lay their hands on” Jesus? Why? What stopped them?

2. Read Luke 20:20. What did they do instead? What was the plan?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 20:21. What did the spies ask Jesus? What did they say about Jesus? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Luke 20:22. What is the question they ask Jesus in order to try and trap Him?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 20:23. Why did Jesus not take the bait?

2. Read Luke 20:24. What question does Jesus ask them in response? How did they answer?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 20:25. What did Jesus say to them?

2. Read Luke 20:26. Were the spies successful in their plan? What did they keep on doing?

Week 73 Discussion: An Honorable Posture

In Luke 20:19-26, Jesus is challenged by spies who are pretending to be righteous men but have the desire to entrap Him. In response to their question concerning paying tribute to Caesar, Jesus reinforces the dual responsibility that a Christian has to both render to government what is rightly owed, and also submit and serve God above all things. Talk as a group about how our demeanor towards government reveals our commitment to obedience to Christ's commandments.

1. Icebreaker: Is government a good or bad thing? Why?
2. Would you consider your posture towards governing authorities respectable?
3. Would other people close to you in your life describe you as honoring towards authorities?
4. Read 1 Peter 2:17. According to the above notes, what is the higher call of Christians?
5. Why does our attitude and demeanor matter in terms of our witness?
6. How can you better live out your calling before God *and* honor governing authorities more fully without defiling your conscience?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus is questioned by spies concerning paying tribute to Caesar.
2. Jesus calls believers to render to the government what is owed while maintaining a higher priority on living out your calling before God.