

Eric Dupee

10-18-20, Year A, Matthew 22:15-22

“Both – And Thinking”

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” It was a yes or no question. Either it was lawful for devout Jewish citizens to pay taxes to the Roman emperor or it wasn't. It seems simple. It seems that all Jesus needed to do was answer yes or no and the issue would be resolved. But when you take into account those asking the question and those listening to the response, you realize it was a very loaded question.

Since chapter 12 in Matthew's gospel when the Pharisees decided to find a way to kill Jesus, the conflict between them intensified. Here in chapter 22, the Pharisees devised a plan to trap him. No matter how Jesus answered the question he would get into big trouble with someone.

If he answered, yes, it was lawful for Jewish people to pay taxes to Rome he would get in trouble with devout Jews who were really struggling under Roman occupation. They wanted Rome out of their territory. The system of Roman taxes was absolutely oppressive.

If Jesus answered, no, it was not legal for Jews to pay taxes to Rome he would get in trouble with the Romans. And we all know what the Romans did to Jewish people who resisted or caused trouble. They nailed them to crosses. If I was Jesus' lawyer, I would've leaned in, whispered in his ear, and said, “Don't answer that question. It's a trap.”

The beauty of this story is that Jesus came up with a response that nobody anticipated. They posed a yes or no question. They expected the answer to be this or that. It's either one thing or the other. And Jesus took his response in a whole other direction.

He asked for one of the coins used to pay the Roman tax. The coins had the Roman emperor's image on them like we have the image of esteemed people on our coins. Next to the emperor's image was the title “Son of God.”

With the coin in his hand, Jesus asked, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor's.” Jesus said, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”

We're told everyone who heard Jesus' response was amazed and they just went away. I can't say definitively what it means that they were amazed, but I think it has to do with the fact that Jesus demonstrated the ability to go beyond what is often called “dualistic thinking.”

The questioners assumed the answer would be either/or. They expected the response to be yes or no. It was either one thing or the other. That's dualistic or either/or thinking. If Jesus confined himself to that way of thinking he would have been trapped. He would have found himself in hot water.

Instead, he saw the issue more broadly. He imagined the situation such that the answer was not either one thing or the other, but both. He refused to limit himself to the two options he was presented. In his response, he demonstrated “both/and” thinking. And those who heard it were absolutely amazed by it!

Author, Richard Rohr, describes “both/and thinking” as sort of a benchmark for spiritual maturity. He writes about the beauty of not having “to divide the field of every moment between up and down, totally right and totally wrong, with me or against me.”

At the risk of being overly alliterative, Rohr describes how “either/or” thinking compares, competes, conflicts, condemns, and cancels. With that said, there are absolute instances that call for “either/or” thinking. There are two realistic contenders in the presidential election. The winner will be either one or the other.

Jesus said, “You can’t serve God and mammon.” In other words, we all have to decide is God is our ultimate concern or something else? It can’t be both. That’s “either/or thinking,” but Jesus was able to move past “either/or” thinking to embrace “both/and thinking.”

I have to say since I was introduced to the concept of both/and thinking, it has made an impact on my life and my relationships. I find myself really listening to people who hold opposing views. When I disagree with a family member or someone in the church, I find myself looking for the truth in what the other person is saying. There’s usually at least a kernel of truth in both sides of an argument. I feel less of a need to get defensive when I disagree with someone.

I can’t help but think the polarization in our country is due largely to “either/or” thinking. Sometimes it feels like certain issues are presented as if we have to make a choice between two things. Imagine Jesus being presented with the question do Black Lives Matter or do Blue Lives Matter?

Based on today’s story, I think Jesus would wonder why it has to be a choice. I can love black people and desire their wellbeing and value the lives of police officers and appreciate the good work they do.

I agree with Richard Rohr that the ability to incorporate “both/and” thinking into our everyday interactions is a sign of spiritual maturity. It’s about being a whole person. Rohr writes, “Whole people see and create wholeness wherever they go. Split people see and create splits.”

I believe the world is a better place when we embrace both/and thinking. It’s at the heart of our faith. Is Jesus human or divine? Our witness is that it’s not either/or. He’s both. We know from experience that human beings are not either sinners or saints. If we’re honest, we’d have to admit we’re all a little of each.

One of my favorite videos on Youtube is one of correspondent Steve Hartman’s stories for CBS News. It centers on a high school basketball game. One team had a manager who was a young man named Mitchell with a developmental disability.

In the last game of the season, the coach got him a uniform and allowed him to sit on the bench with the rest of the players. Mitchell was thrilled just to have a uniform. However, unknown to everyone else, the coach had a plan to Mitchell in the game.

In the last minutes, no matter what the score was, the coach decided to let him play in a high school game for the first time in his life. So, with 1:30 left, Mitchell checked in. The crowd chanted his name. The team tried everything it could to allow Mitchell to score a basket. Every time the ball came to him he either fumbled it out of bounds or missed the shot by a mile.

With just seconds left on the clock, the other team was inbounding the ball. Suddenly, one of the players on the other team, called Mitchell's name. When he got his attention, he threw Mitchell the ball. Mitchell was then able to make a lay up for the last basket of the game.

There's no greater either/or activity than high school basketball. It's us verses them. Either one team will win or the other. Each team spends all week preparing to be victorious over the other. That was a moment when two high school basketball teams realized there is more to this than "us vs. them," either/or. Just as his questioners were in Jesus' time, the crowd left that gymnasium amazed.

*Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr

*God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Difference* by William Kondrath