

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Trapped”

Matthew 22: 15-33

October 16, 2005

The people in Matthew’s day often felt trapped. On one side was this and on the other side that.

They were catching it from all sides...

The Roman government on one side was suspicious of their radical commitment to Jesus... They certainly felt tension there. Christians weren’t in vogue in the Roman Empire until about the 4th century.

So they had the government on one side... Matthew’s contemporaries did... and the religious institution on the other. They were at odds with the Jewish faith. They were trapped between temple and Caesars throne.

They were trapped between the prevailing philosophies of the day and the central story of theirs that God had acted in Christ and in the death of Christ.

They lived in a tension daily between what would be best for them economically and what would be best for them spiritually.

They were often hanging between the needs and callings of family life and the callings of their faith.

There were the powers that be and the higher power they had committed to when they were baptized.

In other words... those in Matthew’s world... were trapped just like you often are and like I am. If you are awake... if you’re engaged at all... if you’ve said yes to Jesus, to the gospel, and to the church... then you’ll have known what it means to be trapped even as those who first read Matthew’s gospel surely were.

The state says one thing... **“We’re going to war.”** And your faith says another... and it does and it has... The Church has never written the state a blank check with regard to the use of violence. So... some of us have felt trapped in these days.

Caesar says one thing... Jesus seemingly another.

Or maybe it’s not so much a political Caesar who traps you but a philosophical one. You’ve grown up, most of us have, as heirs of the so-called “enlightenment”, the modern era. And there’s a philosophical Caesar... a real tyrant.. that lords over you because of that.

This Caesar says... **above all be rational.**

Be cynical... doubt everything... don’t trust.

There are rules to the universe and we know what they are.

One and one always make two... what goes up must come down... every action has an opposite and equal reaction.

And your heart... And your spiritual tradition is saying, **“There’s more to life than static laws... more mystery.”**

You’re spiritual being trapped in a modern worldview.

You know this reality. You’re trapped... Your financial planner says, **“Invest... invest... save... be shrewd.”**

Your preacher says, **“Give... give... be a fool for Christ sake.”**

You live between...

What's best for you and what's best for the institutions you are a part of.

Between this shallow culture and cosmology you are a part of culture capitalism...

Hollywood... busyness... The American Way. There are ladders everywhere begging you to get to climbing. And there is another voice saying, "**None of it's real.**"

You deal with this everyday, in some form. "**Do I just try and get along or do I try to change things?**"

"**I could stay here or go there.**"

"**I can protect myself... or risk myself.**"

The way out is not always clean, is it?

That's where you are... where Matthew's church was... and where Jesus was in our gospel reading. First, it's the Pharisees and the Herodians got together and went to trap him. And folks, these are the strangest of bedfellows. This is like saying, "**Howard Dean and James Dobson teamed up.**" It's crazy.

The Herodians were opportunistic politicians. Insiders in Herod's government. Reaganites... Clintonistas... The Herodians ruled because they were all snuggled up to Rome... That's the only way you got to be in power. So, they did what they had to do.

Pharisees couldn't stand Rome, of course. Gentiles... walking on sacred soil. Pagans, running the show. But there was nothing to do about it, so they tolerated their presence but kept a distance, praying for the day when God would do them in. They couldn't stand Herod, whose claim to the throne was iffy anyway... and on top of that he was all buddy, buddy with Caesar whom they revered as a god.

So, it's jolting to see Pharisees and Herodians on the same page, in the same story, teaming up... This is like saying, "**Jerry Falwell and Hugh Hefner decided to form a coalition.**"

But both groups have this common anxiety about Jesus. Fear can bring people together as can hatred... He seems to be a problem for the both of them, so they go to him with a question about paying taxes to Caesar, who remember was venerated not just some government official.

And the question is... "**Is it right... is it permitted to pay this tax.**" They're asking about the Tradition... the law of the temple.

And they've got him. If he says no... off the Herodians go to Pontius Pilot to say he's preaching sedition.

If he says, "**Sure... go ahead a pay it,**" the Pharisees will accuse him of some sort of idolatry.

He's trapped... like we are often trapped. So, let's see what he does... not so we can say... "**Gee, golly, isn't Jesus a clever guy. Let's be clever too.**" "**Jesus is just so wily... think I'll follow him.**"

Let's see what he does with the hopes of seeing a way beyond our traps.

Jesus, asks for a coin... He looks at it and sees it for what it is. It's a piece of metal... and on it is a picture and a name. "**Whose picture? Whose name?**"

"**Caesar's**"

"**Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.**"

Does that clear it all up? Everybody know what to do now when you feel trapped? No? Well, then let's take that to be our first lesson. There isn't a formula. Our faith does not give us a formula for living in 2005. Jesus' response raises a multitude of questions.

**“What all is Caesars? And in our world, who is Caesar?
Culture...Government...Us?”**

“But don’t the scriptures teach us that everything belongs to God?”

“But we are to be submissive to governments, aren’t we?”

“Always... what if the policy isn’t just?”

“Caesar has often been wrong, right?”

Jesus is trapped and Jesus deals with it but doesn’t offer us a formula to emulate. Christianity isn’t a set of rules... it is a path. It’s a radical obedience to the God made known in Christ Jesus. And while Jesus gives us no formulas he does show us the path which is...it is the way of surrender. **“Render to God what belongs to God.”** Remember...

I have no idea about your “trapped ness.” What it feels like... what holds you prisoner... But I do know that the beginning to finding your way through must be found in surrender. It is in your baptism... that moment where you rendered all to God. We will not be set free apart from that surrender. There will always be some Caesar demanding some allegiance and some tax on your life.

Calendars-Cultures-Kids-Careers-Wars-Policies-Philosophies

Christians are those who walk into a world full of Caesars... dripping wet with the waters of obedience to Christ. That gives you not a single rule of thumb... only a living reality to which you have surrendered your being.

It begins there but there are three more stories where folks come to trap Jesus. In the next story, it’s the Sadducees who come. Matthew reminds us that they didn’t believe in the resurrection. Julie Merritt said that **“was what made them sad, you see.”**

They were the cynics of their day. And they come to Jesus snickering because they think him childish and naive. It’s a “one bride for seven brothers” question. **“Okay, Jesus if this widow gets passed from brother to brother, as the law dictates, who does she live with when they all get to that big honeymoon suite in the sky?”** Snicker... snicker.

He’s trapped, they think... and lots of us know this cynical snare. Some of us are just born cynics... and as we’ve said, modernity tends to foster that.

Again, I don’t think... Jesus doesn’t give us quick and easy answers but he does show a way.

“You don’t know the scriptures or the power of God.” Let me paraphrase for a while. **“You don’t even know your own tradition... You’ve not even bothered to explore the wisdom and the best teachings of our faith. You’ve probably just listened to a few TV preachers and assumed that was it.”**

Cynics, I’ve found, are pretty lazy. It takes no effort to be a cynic... It takes no imagination... It takes no heart to only offer a “no” in life.

“You don’t know the scriptures... or the power of God.” And cynics are not only lazy but among the most arrogant people I know. **“You don’t know the power of God but have a very high opinion of yourself and a very low opinion of God. This God you believe in isn’t big enough. Looks more like Santa than the Source of all Being.”**

Again... it’s no formula but it is an invitation. And we will remain trapped unless we’re willing to listen.

Everything will yank our chain...

A million fingers will push our buttons..

We’ll be puppets on the world’s strings.

Jesus invites us to go deep into our Tradition... it takes effort... time... thinking... some work. You won't know what to say about the war in Iraq as a Christian unless you've spent some time thinking with the Saints about it. Go to Amazon dot com and get ready to read about war theory. How in the world can you live a simpler life in this crazy world of consumption without forming yourself first? Jesus invites us to the scriptures.

And Jesus invites us to discard our gods that are too small... it takes humility because we are so like the gods we've fashioned in our own finite image. It takes some imagination. An honest to goodness open mind willing to say, "yes" along the way. Why would you even bother to step out of a trap if there isn't some grand and eternal and freeing reality calling you beyond it? You'd settle for the limitations of that trap, wouldn't you?

I want to close by taking you to the third test. We didn't read about that one. The Pharisees (who weren't really, fair, you see)... heard about how Jesus had put the Sadducees in their place and so one of the scholars thought they'd try a less philosophical approach. **"What's the greatest commandment?"** That was the question... everyone should know that... maybe they'll discredit him as not really being a son of the Torah.

He answers... **"Love... love God with everything you are and your neighbor as yourself. Everything pretty much hangs on this... the law... the prophets... everything."**

It isn't a bad place to end this sermon on what it's like being trapped. This will be the way of it in this world we live in. They'll just keep coming... the traps will, church...your needs, the world's...your comfort, the gospel...hand on...let go. And what Jesus tells us is that we must love... that there is something we can only come to know through love. It is a way of perceiving...of discerning and knowing.

To love will awaken something within us.

...Will purify the heart so we can see.

...Will enable us to discern what could not be discerned.

We love God with every facet of our being and we love the one in front of us even as we are loving ourselves. It's not just a rule... it's a path...and one we must walk.

The world needs this kind of Christian... Radically obedient, surrendered, to the way of Christ. Profoundly aware of wisdom and truth and self and creation, the power of God. And completely willingly to love. The world needs it... and the traps you'll be in... will demand it.

May the Lord be with you as you discover and walk this path. Amen.

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