

Entering the Passion of Jesus – Chapter 3

Teachings: Risking Challenge

After the events that took place in the Temple, we read that the chief priests kept looking for a way to kill Jesus. They were afraid because of the popularity of his teachings with the crowds. This chapter looks at three of Jesus' Temple teachings.

Teaching always carries certain risks and Jesus takes many of them by teaching in the Temple. In addition to the possibility that people will misunderstand him, he also risks arrest for false teaching. This possibility is increased because there are those in the crowd who are more interested in tripping him up and goading him into saying something controversial than they are in learning.

Taxation

The question of taxation in the first century concerns the purpose for which the taxes are paid. The question is not "Should we pay taxes?" Rather, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" This is because some of the taxes went not to provide services for the people, but to provide more money for the Roman Empire.

The question is a trap. If Jesus says do not pay your taxes, he will bring down the wrath of Rome because anyone who refuses to pay taxes to Caesar is therefore Caesar's enemy. On the other hand, if he says you must pay taxes he alienates those who believe that Rome is in Judea illegitimately.

Jesus response (Matthew 22:21), after observing the picture of Caesar on a coin, is "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." In this way Jesus does not really answer the question so much as pose a question of his own. He asks his inquisitors to decide what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar. The New Testament offers differing responses on taxes. The question remains, when do we go along and when must we resist.

Greatest Commandment

"Jewish tradition recognizes 613 commandments in the Scriptures of Israel." One rabbinic tradition says there are 365 negative commandments or prohibitions and 248 positive commandments. "In addition to the list of ten commandments with which most of us are familiar, these other commandments range from the equally familiar ... [to] laws about how priests are to offer sacrifices, about how to plant fields, about the military and the monarchy, and so on." Because societies and their contexts change, these commands need supplementation. This is where groups like the Pharisees come in.

In this context, distillations become common ways of summarizing the teachings of the law. This attempt at summary does not mean that we ignore the particular laws, but it suggests that a brief summary can be an effective means of guidance through which to interpret the whole. We should also remember that there are different such distillations and that the rabbis attempted to preserve all the different versions.

This is the context when Jesus answers the scribe who asks which commandment is the greatest. Jesus response brings together Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. In John 13:34 Jesus gives a “new” commandment to love one another, just as he loved by willingly giving up his life. The love that Jesus commands is an extraordinary love that risks everything. Here Jesus is not asking anything of us that he does not ask of himself. “When we talk about loving God and loving neighbor, what do we mean by that?”

This also reminds us that whatever love we have for God, God’s love for us is even stronger. “This love of God means that we can be fully honest with God; we can say what is on our hearts and in our minds, no matter how painful those comments may be.” Jesus demonstrates the depth of God’s loves for us.

The Lesson of the Widow’s Mite

Many refer to this as the “widow’s mite” because of the rendering in the King James Bible of the smallest coin in the time of Jesus as a “mite.” “The title ‘widow’s mite’ is wrong for at least two reasons. First, the story concerns two coins, not just one. Our widow could have held back, but she chose complete generosity. Second, the story is *not* about the *money*, which is what the focus of the “mite” suggests...The story is about the *widow*, impoverished, and yet willing to give all that she has.”

Translation issues with the NRSV: particularly that in the Greek Jesus comment is not in fact, “all she had to live on” but instead “her whole life.” Jesus’ focus is not on her economic state; it is on her *life*. The widow, like Jesus, gives everything she has. Jesus compares her donation to that of those who have contributed out of their abundance. “For a person with something to spare, giving a donation, even a tithe, is not going to create hardship. The widow gives everything.”

Jesus asks his followers to *see* the widow. She is an exemplar of the way of life he commands. “She does not speak; what might she say? And what might we need to hear?”