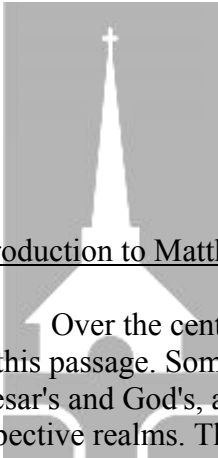


The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



Because I Said So!

Exodus 33.17-23 and Matthew 22.15-22

October 16, 2005

Amy Jacks Dean

Introduction to Matthew text:

Over the centuries, many Christians have based their attitudes toward government on this passage. Some have thought that Jesus' statement establishes two separate realms, Caesar's and God's, and that people should render to each what they ask for in their respective realms. This interpretation strikes many Americans as obviously correct, given our separation of church and state. Yet in their historical context, these words of Jesus had little to do with taxation or political authority in general. Jews in the first century paid several taxes: tithes to the Temple (averaging about 21% a year), customs taxes, and taxes on land. The people identified as Jesus' opponents were not questioning taxes in general. Their question was more specific: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" Caesar, the emperor of Rome, was the head of an imperial domination system. Rome took control of the Jewish homeland in 63 B.C.E. and ruled it through client kings (such as Herod and his sons) and Roman governors. This domination system benefited the elites who created it. Wealth in the ancient world came primarily from farms. Through a combination of taxation and ownership of farm land, the Roman and native elites of the first century (and most centuries) extracted about two-thirds of agricultural production. The farmers who produced it (90% of the population) got the remaining one-third, leaving them with a subsistence (or worse) level of existence. The tax in question was the annual tribute tax to Rome. Jews were divided about this tax. The Temple authorities and their retainers (including Temple scribes) collaborated with Roman rule and endorsed the tax. But Jews sympathetic to the resistance to Roman authority rejected it. Such refusal was the equivalent of sedition. The question put to Jesus was a trap. Either a yes or no answer would have gotten Jesus in trouble. "Yes" would have discredited him with those who found the imperial domination system reprehensible and unacceptable. "No" would have made him subject to arrest for sedition. Jesus avoided the trap with two moves. First, he asked his opponents for a coin. When they produced one, Jesus looked at it and asked, "Whose image and inscription is this?" ("What Belongs to God?" - Marcus Borg)

How is it that prior to becoming a parent one is an expert on parenting and then, just as soon as one becomes a parent, all of the aforementioned expertise flies right out the window? How is it that any sentence that begins with the words "I will never . . ."

will come back to haunt you faster than any other phrase uttered? About ten years ago, I thought the response “Because I Said So” was lame and lazy at best – cruel and unusual punishment at worst. It is quite the irony how much sense that phrase means to me now. It is a showing of my ultimate parental authority: But why can’t I ride my bike around the neighborhood by myself? *Because I Said So!*; But why can’t I watch just 30 more minutes of television? *Because I Said So!*; But why can’t I stay up and watch just one more inning of the Braves’ game and why can’t I have a second bowl of ice cream and all the chocolate I want right before I go to bed? *Because I Said So!*; *Because I Said So!*; *Because I Said So!* I never knew how powerful those words could be – and how much a part of me would relish saying them – the very words I had promised myself I would never say as a parent can drip from my lips with frustrated glee. Let me hasten say, in a moment of self-defense, that we have on numerous occasions discussed at length the danger of riding bikes in the neighborhood alone – from careless drivers to stranger danger, I guess I won’t feel completely comfortable with this until a child is about the age of 20 or so. And we have gone over and over how the television can rot your brain and too many sweets will rot your teeth, as well as, the need for good rest and sleep. But at some point in the many conversations, I have found that what ultimately works best is a good ‘ole *Because I Said So!* There is a sense of finality that comes with this phrase, as well as a healthy dose of power – authority if you will. The bottom line/The Board has met policy of parental authority. Ah, the sweetness of it.

In the sixties a popular slogan could be found on bumper stickers, T-shirts, and buttons alike: Question Authority! It was a phrase that spoke of the times – in the midst of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and those crazy days of coming of age

known as the sixties – some of the radicals were encouraging folks to challenge the powers that were – particularly the government. And it seems we have been on a steady path to question authority at every turn ever since. Given the abuses of authority in our history, it is not without reason that we often find ourselves skeptical and cynical. But has our skepticism and our cynicism taken over? Does Jesus speak today of some balance on the issue of authority?

We hear it all the time: Our children don't show respect for their elders like they used to; parents more often than not question the teacher in an effort to claim solidarity with their child at all cost; everyone functions out of fear of litigation; we take the law into our own hands when the law doesn't uphold our own personal beliefs or convictions. Who and what has authority over us? Not much anymore. The more independent and self-reliant we become, the more we seek to look after ourselves - good old number 1 - the more we fall into the trap of believing that no one has authority over us. It is the American Dream - freedom. But it is simply not true. We are beholden to the laws of the land. We are beholden to tradition. We are beholden to one another in the life of community, of neighborhood, of family. What is it that holds authority over you? Who are your authorities? Have you allowed yourself to be wooed into thinking that you are simply your own person - not subject to anyone or anything? Then I think you are fooling yourself. Authority has become such a negative word for us. But authority - proper and balanced - can bring order and expertise and balance and perspective.

“Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question about paying taxes to Caesar [Give to Caesar what is Caesar's to God what is God's]. . . doesn't solve all difficulties, but it points out the way one may go in dealing with conflicting loyalties. And we all have

them. Conflicting claims run through our entire society, inviting conflicting commitments at every age. [See if any of these real-life examples of authority sound familiar.] Career opportunities and parenthood may pull in two directions. Teenagers may waver between [family] loyalty and the pressure of peer groups with their own codes of conduct. The need to put bread on the table may lead one to be silent in the face of tainted business practices, even though one's personal moral code, shaped by one's Christian faith, conflicts with it. Political pressure and the need to fund education may lead a government official to support legalized gambling, even though he or she recognizes the cost that addiction to gambling takes on the lives of people seduced by the (almost empty) promise of riches. Life-threatening addictions of every kind claim us (tobacco, alcohol, food--name your own), even when we know the threat to our well-being. How do we deal with conflicting claims [of authority]? . . . When the questioners produced a denarius, Jesus asked them to identify the image and legend. Their use of the coin and their answer, "Caesar's," was recognition of Caesar's authority to issue coinage--and, by implication, to tax. Jesus then told them to give each legitimate authority its proper due. That put the responsibility for deciding between two legitimate authorities squarely on the questioners' shoulders, and that responsibility continues today. *We cannot evade hard decisions by denying authority's legitimacy* [my emphasis]. . . Simplistic answers will not do, for as some unknown person formulated it, 'The gospel is simple, but not simple minded.' Aye, there's the rub!" (Edgar Krentz is professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Christian Century, Oct 9, 1996)

Marcus Borg says that "this text offers little or no guidance for tax season. It neither claims taxation is legitimate nor gives aid to anti-tax activists. It neither counsels

universal acceptance of political authority nor its reverse. But it does raise the provocative and still relevant question: What belongs to God, and what belongs to Caesar? And what if Caesar is Hitler, or apartheid, or communism, or global capitalism? What is to be the attitude of Christians toward domination systems, whether ancient or modern?" ("What Belongs to God?" - Marcus Borg)

The difficult global questions of authority face us, and we, The Church, must be willing to speak to them - but we will have nothing to say if we do not speak in our own lives and in our own families and in our own workplaces and in our souls as to what holds authority over us. The difficult global questions of authority face us, and we, The Church, must be willing to listen to them - but we will hear nothing if we are not present for the dialogue. Every issue, every decision, every opportunity calls us to ask ourselves the question - what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God.

I do despise sports analogies and illustrations, and while this does not compare to authority issues such as Hitler, apartheid, or global capitalism, it does speak to the issue. Yesterday at the baseball field I witnessed this issue of authority run amok on both sides. It occurred while eight-year-olds were enjoying "America's favorite pastime." A questionable call by the ump turned into a slightly heated debate which led to the ejection of the coach and then the ejection of a parent who simply could not resist shaming the masked guy behind the plate. (I must add that no one with the last name of Dean was involved in the incident!) The umpire with the authority lost his cool and went on to make a blatantly unfair call against a batter - to which the batter's father responded by dragging his son off the field and picking up his toys and stomping off to home. All in all,

it ruined a perfectly good day of eight-year-old baseball. Over-the-top authority met with righteous indignation - and all present for the explosion were the losers yesterday.

I'm afraid we live in a world where over-the-top authority is met with righteous indignation. It is the cause of wars and oppression and injustice everywhere - in the global realm, in the political realm, in the personal realm, and on all the baseball fields of life as well.

We are all subject to authority – that of Caesar and that of God. The real questions before us are: Will West learn about who God is under the authority of his parents? Will he learn to follow Jesus under the authority of The Church? Will he do justice and show mercy and walk humbly with God under the authority of Scripture and from those who walk with him in his journey of faith? Will he abide by the laws of the land as they are subject to the Law of God? Will he learn to discern who the Caesar's of his life are and will he be able to distinguish God in the midst of the chaos of his life? Only if we live up to our commitments that we all made to West today. Only if **we** live subject to the ultimate authority which is the overpowering, unconditional presence of God. Moses caught a glimpse. It was just of the back side, but it was enough. And so can we – if we are watching, listening, only if we are engaged with all that holds authority over us – asking the question of ourselves: what really belongs to Caesar and what really belongs to God?

“As I was putting our nine-year-old son to bed, I bent down to kiss him goodnight. He reached up, pulled my face toward his, and gave me seven kisses -- four down and three across -- on my forehead. Then he looked me in the eye and said, ‘Mom, you are blessed.’ ‘Did you realize you kissed me in the shape of a cross?’ I asked him.

`Yep,' he answered, `I planned it that way.'” (Susan Pendleton Jones is director of special programs at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. This article appeared in the Christian Century, October 6, 1999, p. 931)

So West was marked today. I pray that he will recognize that his ultimate authority is God. But that's not *Because I Said So*, it's because Jesus said so. May that be so.