

You know that a triangle is a dangerous shape for human relationships.
A marriage needs two people in it, not three.
No boyfriends, girlfriends, or overweening in-laws, no children who take the role of tiny adults.
Three destabilizes the essential connection.
And in any time of conflict, three is harder than two.
If we enlist a third to help us defeat another, we are pushing a conflict into more dangerous territory.
It is better to be direct, to reach out to the one we most need to talk to.
That is a good habit our church has.

But in a moment worthy of Frank Underwood,
House of Cards' fictional congressman from the fair city of Gaffney,
those who were after Jesus in this Gospel lesson seem to have thought they could catch him in a difficult triangle, almost closing him up in it,
With their question about paying taxes to the emperor.
One side of their triangular trap was the Romans, who certainly wanted their taxes paid.
That was one of the reasons they conquered people like the Jews.
They had a big army and were not afraid to use it.
On another side was the people of Jerusalem,
some of them overhearing this conversation,
who did not like paying taxes to their foreign occupiers,
seeing their money disappear to the building of the Coliseum and Forum
and to paying the soldiers who kept them in line.
And the third side was the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem, those asking the question themselves.
They thought they could manipulate the other sides, the people and the Romans, to keep this rabbi from Nazareth in line.

Such an effort might have worked on you; it certainly would have worked on me,
I'd be scurrying to give "the right answer" and keep everybody happy,
if I possibly could.
Jesus', unconcerned with the opinions of others and self-preservation, saw the trap and was unconcerned.
He provided something of an object lesson and he asked them his own question.
Have you one of the coins? Let me see. Whose image and title are upon it?
A critique was inherent in the question;
Are you carrying of their graven images around, violating Moses' second commandment?
One with the idolatrous inscription in which they claim their emperor is a god?
Whoa.

The space enclosed by of the triangle suddenly expanded a bit; Jesus claimed some more room.

And then his riddling reply; give to God the things that are God's and to the emperor the things that are the emperors.

I won't ruin the wonder by trying (and failing) to tell you what that means.

We could make a list of what might be due to the one and due to the other.

But I don't think Jesus meant to make it that easy.

He meant to yank the premises out from under their question, blow up their triangle, and reveal the vast generosity and pressing demands of God.

Who will you aim to please? The people, the priests, or the Emperor?

Jesus blows all that away, like the head of a dandelion, and places the demands of God before them.

Who created? Who gave your being? Who was and is and ever will be?

When emperors, priests, and people have met their end, who will be?

God is and all things begin and end in God.

So at the heart of Jesus' response to those who would test his loyalties is a simple, subversive, explosive teaching about the rule of God,

God's "**sovereignty**" if you like a big word.

God's sovereignty is not a choice but a truth.

We don't choose to make God eternal or generous or demanding.

This is not a question of loyalty, but a statement of reality.

To put one's life in line with divine reality is to confess in word and deed that

God gives, God invites, God demands,

and that God is, God is forever, and that nothing else is, as God is.

Indeed, realizing the sovereignty of God is the only way to deal with our triangles, our divided loyalties, the trap of life in a fallen world.

Those who put the rule of God at the center of their lives will find their choices simpler, their loyalties confirmed, the opinions of other less significant, and the way of their lives fuller, richer, and clearer,

All by giving to God the things that are God's.