

“What Is God’s?”

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 18, 2020

Exodus 33:12-23 ~ 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 ~ Matthew 22:15-22

“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” For some of us, that truly is the \$64,000 question! OK, maybe the \$6400 question. But it’s an important question! Wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus had said, “No way, keep that money!” Right before tax season every year I reread this passage just to make sure I didn’t misunderstand it. But Jesus couldn’t say, “No, don’t pay taxes,” or else he would have been arrested as a traitor to Caesar. But he also couldn’t say, “Yes, pay taxes,” or he would have been seen as loyal to Caesar and would have lost all his popular support. Damned if you do ... damned if you don’t.

And don’t think the Pharisees didn’t know this. They’d been trying for weeks to devise this kind of trap for Jesus ... a trick question that would cause him to either lose popular support or draw the wrath of the Roman government. He kept slipping out of them ... but this time they had him! They even conspired with the Herodians, who were their political archenemies, to help them ... proving that politics does makes for strange bedfellows. Their question was airtight with no loopholes. Yessiree, they had Jesus this time!

But, of course, they didn't. Instead of directly answering their question, Jesus asked to see one of the coins that would be used to pay the tax. This coin was a Roman denarius, worth about a day's wage. On it was the picture of the emperor and the inscription: Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest. So right away, this coin violated two commandments ... do not have any other gods before me, and do not worship graven images or idols. The very existence of this coin was blasphemous to God-fearing Jews. So, when Jesus asked for one of these coins, where did it come from? From the pocket of a Pharisee ... a holy leader standing in the temple ... the most holy place in the Holy Land! Holy cow! Jesus said, "Can anyone show me one of these idolatrous, blasphemous, God-mocking coins?" ... and a *Pharisee* said, "Sure, got one right here." It seems like the Pharisees deserved to be called hypocrites. But Jesus' main point in this passage is his answer to their trick question. After looking over the coin, Jesus gave them their answer ... "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." It's the perfect answer to the perfect trick question. Jesus took their small-minded perspective and exploded it to reveal the workings of God in our lives.

Some say that Jesus is advocating for a separation of church and state. They say that Jesus proves there are two realms in the world ... the political one and the spiritual one ... and that we should do our best to keep them separate ... giving each their proper

time and priority in our lives. But our faith in God is not a part-time commitment to be shared with allegiance to our country ... any more than our marriage vows represent a part-time commitment to our spouse. Jesus isn't talking about the separation of church and state here ... he's talking about something so much bigger.

As Christians, we carry two passports in this world because we have dual citizenship. A real Christian is both a good citizen of the country and a good citizen of the Kingdom of God. This is not universally the case, of course. When these two things conflict, we have to decide which is more important to us. Sometimes the kingdom of Caesar goes against the kingdom of God, and then it's appropriate to turn over some tables and drive out some money changers. But for the most part ... because Christians are people of honor ... we must also be good citizens.

So, let's look at the answer again. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's ... other translations say, "Render to Caesar," which means to "give back." So, what is Caesar's? What do we have that belongs to our government? Well, certainly, a portion of our money. Like it or not, it's a reality that our kind of government relies on a portion of its citizens' income to function. A good Christian has a duty to the government ... in return for the privileges that the government provides. If you enjoy Caesar's benefits, you should pay Caesar's taxes. I don't know about you, but I kind of like having paved roads to drive on ... my neighborhood protected by the police and fire department ... and the security of knowing that my money in the bank will be

there when I want to get it. Jesus says, plain and simple, give to Caesar what is Caesar's.

That's the easy part. But Jesus finishes his answer with a much more involved directive ... "Give to God what is God's." What is God's? Everything is God's! There's nothing that we can name that is outside the realm of God. So, if everything is God's, then we must measure everything ... including the actions of our government ... against God's will. Paying taxes doesn't go against that. But from whom do we receive the blessings of our life ... and to whom do we owe thanksgiving ... God or Caesar?

Here's another way to think about it. In the beginning, God made many things, and called them good. Then, in Genesis 1:27, God said, "Let us make humans in our image, in our likeness." How do we know what belongs to Caesar? They bear his image. How do we know what belongs to God? They bear God's image! We are God's coins ... God's valuables ... bearing God's image in this world. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. In other words, the coin bears Caesar's image ... so give it back to him. You bear God's image ... so give yourself back to God! Everything we have ... and everything we are ... belongs to God. We are mere managers or stewards of these gifts, including our money. Properly managing our money means some of it is to go to the government, and to groceries, and to pay the light bill. But some of it must

also go back to God as a way of giving thanks.

Not that God needs our money. There is nothing God needs! God doesn't need our resources to fulfill God's plans. The need is with us ... we need to give. We give in order to combat the powerful influence of materialism in our lives. The love of money and the things money can buy is a primary or secondary motive behind most of what Americans do. We want to consume, acquire and buy our way to happiness...and we want it NOW. We sometimes feel that this is the point of life.

A recent edition of the magazine "Intelligent Life" ran an article where they asked six leaders in a variety of intellectual fields to answer a question: what is the point? Noted novelist and atheist Philip Pullman weighed in, as did a philosopher, a poet, a psychoanalyst and, a reporter. Their articulate responses were all fairly interesting to read ... very auspicious-sounding, full of wisdom and observation. Most compelling for me; however, was the four-word response that came from the biographer and obituarist Ann Wroe. She was the one person among that list whose career essentially involves scouring the sum total of people's life stories and finding within them some pattern and meaning. Ms. Wroe responded simply, "The point is love."

Yes, love is ultimately what we ... and no one else ... are able to render to God and creation. It was placed there in the beginning and it remains there still. And even

when our godlike image is so tarnished and broken ... so demolished by our self-serving behavior that we are not sure we are even able to love ... not able to recognize the healing powers of our speech, our intellect, our creativity, much less lift it to God ... then we remember that God has become one of us in that human image. God has loved us into bearing God's image, and now we bear that back!

That, I believe, is what Jesus envisions as I see him flipping that coin back into the hands of the Pharisees. He isn't all that impressed with the power of cash or currency, but rather with the beauty of our very beings offered 100% in grateful devotion ... each one of us, who has learned from Christ that the point is love ... each one of us, our lights glowing from the inside and shining that light right back in praise of the one whose image we bear.

There's a story of a farmer who was taking a sack of corn to sell in town. On the way there, he saw the king ride by in his fancy golden chariot. The farmer flagged him down and stopped him, and said, "Dear King! You give me so much through your benevolence and generosity! I wish there was something I could give you."

The King said, "Well, you can give me all your corn?"

"Oh, I can't do that. I need to sell that in the market. But I can give you five kernels."

"Alright," said the King, "I'll take five kernels from you as a gift."

The farmer gave the king five kernels and then finished his trip to town. When he got

to the market and opened his sack, he found five of his kernels had turned to gold.

And he wept, realizing that if he had given more, more would have been given to him in return.

Now, let me be perfectly clear about this ... I don't believe that is a story about prosperity theology because I don't believe that God tallies up our tithes and returns them to us dollar for dollar. That would be a stingy God in my view because in my experience God pays a far greater return than that. God multiplies our gifts and blesses us when we bless others. Just ask someone who has worked on a Habitat House...or in a soup kitchen ... or visited a shut in ... or gone into a prison ... they will tell you that they received far more than the recipients ... that they were indeed blessed to be a blessing!

We are in the midst of pledging our giving for next year. Don't look at it as just another financial obligation, like paying your taxes. Don't give reluctantly or under compulsion. It's a chance to express your gratitude to God ... a chance to give render a portion to God for all that God has given you ... a chance to be generous sowers for God's harvest. I don't care how much you give to God ... I just care that you give yourself to God ... that you show that God is the true ruler of your life by giving generously and with gratitude. Winston Churchill once said, "You make a living by what you get...you make a life by what you give." I want you to make the most of

your God-given life, by giving it back to God.

The inscription on the Roman coin pledged allegiance to the emperor Tiberius. As Christians, may we give in such a way that reflects the inscription on our money ... In God we trust!

May we pray?

Generous and loving God, simplify our lives and silence the voices constantly telling us we need more. Help us to live counter culturally by living below, not above, our means. Help us hold our possessions loosely and hold to you tightly ... teach us simplicity ,... teach us generosity ... help us to find real joy ... in Jesus' name. Amen.