

What About Taxes?

Matthew 22:15-22

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Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, startle us by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own. As we now open your word, teach us what we need to know and show us what we need to do in order to be faithful followers of Jesus the Christ. We ask this in his name. Amen.

Well what about them—taxes that is? No one is wild about paying them. Some abhor them altogether while others feel it is nothing less than their patriotic duty and responsibility to pay them in order for society to function smoothly and provide the things that only a society can provide—roads and bridges, public education and national security. Some think the current tax structure punishes the rich while others think the rich don't pay enough and should pay a whole lot more. What about taxes?

And it's not a new subject, according to our text today from Matthew's Gospel. But might I suggest that the discussion over paying taxes is really just a smokescreen that gets at something else. This is not unlike the debate over taxes today, I firmly believe. Taxes, and whether or not the rates are too high or too low, too unfair against certain people than others, taxes are the vehicle that gets at something deeper, kind of like attacking a garden fence when it's really the garden itself, and the fact that despite its loveliness it does serve as an unpleasant and unwelcome reminder in this affluent part of the city that not all people in our community have enough food to eat, in fact more of them don't this year than did last year. Ok, you get the point, but I believe that a debate over taxes really gets at a much larger issue, namely that of ownership both in this text and just like it does today.

The issue is one of balance between what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar. Or maybe between what falls into the sacred realm as opposed to the secular realm. This is, after all, one of the stronger biblical justifications for the separation of church and state. And not to argue with Jesus too much, but is it really as neat and tidy as giving unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and giving to God the things that belong to God? Can we divide ourselves that way? Are we in a position to know how to do that fairly? Can we effectively function in two separate realms?

My experience is that life cannot be that conveniently compartmentalized and here's why—too much of what we have and of who we are already belongs to Caesar. And believing that Jesus knew that too, I wonder if Jesus' response to those who came trying to trap him that day, is even more radical than it sounds at face value?

In today's text, the Pharisees and the Herodians come to confront and trap Jesus. Now, we know who the Pharisees are but we don't know much about the Herodians. Their name, however, suggests that they are a secular political party that supported the right of Herod the Great's successor to rule Palestine. So they would

have been pro-Roman, since no one in the Mediterranean world could rule without the consent of the power in Rome. The Pharisees, however, were deeply resentful of Rome and their occupation, but they had learned to accept it as a necessary evil so long as Rome didn't interfere with their practice of religion. The joining together of these strange bedfellows, these deeply religious leaders and a secular political party makes for a dangerous combination, which sometimes happens in politics. But join together they did in their opposition of Jesus.

And they ask Jesus a question: "Tell us what you think, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" They think they have carefully trapped him. Because if Jesus says they don't have to pay their taxes, then his name will be turned over to the Committee on Un-Roman Activities and he will be in big trouble. If, however, he says that they should pay their taxes, he will lose support from the general population with whom taxes are never popular, but also for whom the coins minted with the faces of pagan leaders, represented not only an economic burden but also served as a deeply painful and humiliating reminder of their occupation and their loss of freedom.

And please don't miss the significance of their question. While the question is profoundly political, it is couched in religious language. "Is it lawful..." does not have to do with the civil law. Of course they have to pay their taxes. The question is about God's law. "Does the Torah permit the paying of taxes to Caesar?"

And the underlying issue seems to be to whom are we accountable? Who owns what? Who owns the land and who is in charge of the people of Israel? Since the Romans in general and Caesar in particular are usurpers of that ownership, is it then not an act of disobedience to God to pay taxes to this pagan ruler? Make no mistake about it, the Pharisees know the religious law—they have supposedly order their lives according to it and live by it. So they may have a point here.

But instead of taking the bait, and always one for a bit of the dramatic, Jesus, like a magician setting up the audience, asks to borrow a coin. And the simple fact that these lovers of the law can produce one, complete with the graven pagan image of the emperor stamped on it, profoundly reveals the hypocrisy in their even posing such a question. So Jesus takes the coin, looks at it and says, "Oh, I see that you have some of these coins in your possession. You apparently don't have any trouble doing business with them. Whose image and inscription is on this coin?" They answer, "The emperor's." And Jesus responds, "Well then give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor."

Now that's the anticlimactic part since the producing of the coin already answered their original question. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to say, "...and give to God the things that are God's." And I wonder if in the text, this is where the emphasis needs to be placed? Because it can be a confusing statement. On the one hand we assume that we know what it means but on the other hand, it needs unpacking and exploring.

As Christians, we believe in the separation of church and state, but only insofar as the State's promise not to interfere with our religious freedom. It is not, however, the way we as people of faith are expected to practice

our faith. In other words, Christianity is not some private thing we practice outside of and apart from our national citizenship. You and I are members of the church, we are citizens living under God's reign and realm while at the same time we are citizens living here, in society.

And when those dual citizenships clash, as they often do, our allegiance must always be to the Christ of our faith who is the head of the church. "My country, right or wrong, my country," is never a theologically acceptable option for followers of Jesus. It's just not.

And while there is an apparent parallel between the things of the emperor and the things of God, they are not equal. Caesar's role is vastly inferior. In other words, what Jesus is *not* saying here is that there is a secular realm and a sacred realm and equal respect must be paid to both. That's tempting and an easy way of hearing and understanding this text—of compartmentalizing and ordering our lives in that way.

What Jesus is saying, however, is this:

"Go ahead and pay your taxes to Caesar." The Jewish understanding of the world believed that anyone who ruled over Israel only ruled because God allowed them to rule in the first place—a belief John Calvin would argue several centuries later. Pay taxes to Caesar because it's God's will that Caesar rule, and when God chooses to liberate the people of Israel, Caesar's power will amount to nothing. In other words, "That coin you carry around and use every day may bear the image of the emperor, but God says, 'You are my people and you bear God's image.'"

The emperor's coins may belong to the emperor but in a way far deeper and certainly more lasting, you belong to God. It's what we celebrated in baptism just moments ago. It is in the act of baptism that we celebrate who we are and that we belong to God. It is a rite of identity.

Before all other structures and identities compete for our allegiance and lay claim on us and try to tell us who we are—long before Abercrombie & Fitch started telling young people how they needed to look and dress in order to be acceptable and cool; and long before Lexus started telling us, as we'll start being reminded in their commercials all too soon now, that the only really meaningful gift we can give at Christmas to the one we love is a brand new Lexus with a red bow on top; and long before that college rejected you claiming you weren't right for them, for whatever reason; and way before you received that recent diagnosis which is now threatening to define you as a victim—long before any of us took our first breathes in this world, God claimed us and made us God's own.

Each of us comes into this world as children of God. In baptism we celebrate that. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth did not make her a queen. You can only become Queen if you are royalty in the first place. The nation was simply saying, "This woman is royalty, put a crown on her head." And in every baptism we are saying these children belong to God.

The question about paying taxes is really getting at something much larger. It's getting at the question of ownership. Jesus said, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's." And I hear in that a bold statement that nothing ultimately belongs to Caesar, it all belongs to God. And what Caesar thinks is his—what you may think is yours to do with whatever you please, is really just on loan to you. Don't get too attached to it!

The God who claimed us is interested in our total loyalty and devotion. God is not interested in a negotiated set of terms, or in an arrangement where we are willing to share with God only certain portions of our lives while living completely autonomously and independently from God in other areas of our lives. God is not interested in only the balance of what we have left to offer. But I hear it a lot as a pastor and feel it myself, believe me.

We're so busy. We're pulled in so many directions.

We need our alone time—our family time.

Once we figure out our hectic lives, we'll think about church again.

How liberating it must feel to say, "Oh, I'm sorry that I cannot attend, I'll be at church."

"Give to God the things that belong to God." Can anyone really make the case that it's asking too much?

Amen.