

## “A Taxing Question”

Matt 22:15-22

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“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. I don’t’ this passage and probably would never preach on it if the lectionary didn’t make me. I don’t like it because Jesus doesn’t say what I want him to say. Wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus had said, “No way, keep that money!” About the middle of every April I reread this passage just to make sure I didn’t misunderstand it.

This may seem like a strange time to talk about taxes. After all, April 15 is a long way away and you’d probably rather not think about it. Not only is it Tax Day, but it’s also the day the Titanic sunk and the day Lincoln died. Unless it’s your birthday, April 15 isn’t a great day.

Not only is it not April 15, but from a cultural standpoint, I realize the foolishness of preaching about money and taxes and stewardship in our current economic climate. This is not the time to be talking about money from the pulpit; only a fool would do that. But I also believe in my heart that is it at a tumultuous time like this when the church is most needed to be a place of stability in an unstable world, a place for people who need somewhere to go. We need the church, now more than ever, and the only way the church can be the church is with the support of the congregation.

This is an especially interesting topic to talk about as we begin to see the political election machinery cranking up. I’m always amazed to see what role organized religion plays in a national election and how faith is used or misused to pursue a political agenda. For fun I Googled the words “Jesus Christ” and our two political parties. You should try it sometime. On the same website I can buy one T-shirt that says Jesus was a Democrat and another that says Barack Obama is the antichrist. God bless America!

What we see happening to Jesus during a presidential election is not a lot different from what we do in our own lives, and that is to try and pin him down so that we can better manage his influence. If we keep Christ within the stained-glass windows of the church, then he doesn’t have much say over our finances or our decisions or our vote. If we can pigeonhole Jesus as a supporter of our political viewpoints, we can say, “We got him!”

That’s not unlike what the Pharisees tried to do to Christ in our passage today. They didn’t like the influence he was having and they wanted to put him in his place, so they conspired with their political enemies, the Herodians, to trap Jesus. It would be like the Republicans and the Democrats working together to arrest Mr. Rogers. If only the Pharisees and the Herodians could ensnare Jesus in a cultural faux pas, then they could put him in his place. We got him!

So they devise this deceptive, devious question about paying taxes. If you think we have problems with taxes, be thankful you aren’t a first-century Jew. They lived under Roman occupation and the Romans decided they could tax whomever they wanted whenever they wanted for whatever they wanted. It was the government, so it didn’t have to make sense. Jews paid an income tax for their work, a census tax for being alive, and a poll tax for the privilege of living under the thumb of the Roman empire. It would be like

us paying an air tax for breathing or a joy tax for smiling. “Was that a smirk? That will be two dollars.”

So Jesus is faced with this dilemma: Denounce the paying of taxes and be arrested as a traitor to the empire or affirm the paying of taxes and lose the popular support of the people. No matter which way he answers, the Pharisees and Herodians will be able to say, “We got him!”

But, of course, they don’t. Instead of directly answering their question, Jesus asks 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, son of the divine Augustus, high priest. So right away, this coin violated one-fifth of the Ten Commandments: do not acknowledge any other gods and do not worship graven images. The very existence of this coin and its inscription was blasphemous to God-fearing Jews.

So before he even answers their question, Jesus humorously exposes the hypocrisy of his accusers. When Jesus asks for one of these coins, where does it come from? From the pocket of a Pharisee, a holy leader standing in the temple, the most holy place in the Holy Land! Jesus says, “Can anyone show me one of these idolatrous, blasphemous, God-mocking coins?” And a Pharisee says, “Sure, got one right here.” The Pharisees deserve to be called hypocrites.

But Jesus’ main point in this passage is his answer to their trick question. After looking over the coin, Jesus gives 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. Other translations say, “Render unto Caesar.” “To render” means “to give back.” Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.

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 ancestors created a kind of government that relies on a portion of its citizens’ income to function. A good Christian has a duty to the government in return for the privileges the government provides. If you enjoy Caesar’s benefits, you have to pay Caesar’s taxes. I don’t know about you, but I kind of like having paved roads, public parks and police officers and fire fighters. 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 political leaders – against God’s word. Paying taxes doesn’t go against that. But from whom do we receive the blessings of our life, and to whom do we owe our life as a form of gratitude? 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 currency, bearing God’s image in this world.

Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. In other words, the coin bears Caesar’s image; give it back to him. You bear God’s image; so give yourself back to God! Everything we have and everything we are belong to God. We are 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.

Saying that it must go back to God implies that it was God's in the first place. But then how are we to live this on a day-to-day basis? What does this look like in our real lives? What is ours, what is Caesar's, what is God's? If we think that we deserve to all that we have, then we're overinflating our own importance. But if we don't take some credit for what we have, we're undervaluing our own gifts, talents and work ethic. While part of me knows that all I have is God's, there's another part that says, "Yeah, but I worked hard for what I have and no one can take that away from me," and this sense of entitlement can then make it harder for me to part with it.

So in this situation the word I remember is "entrusted." I have been entrusted with what I have, including my children and my possessions. That doesn't imply that I'm the owner, but it does imply a hefty amount of responsibility and care that is based on trust. God has entrusted us with what we have: our bodies, our earth, and our resources. They are not ours to keep any more than our children our ultimately ours to keep. Instead, they are ours to use for the purpose of furthering God's kingdom here on earth. We are entrusted with these things in order to make God's love known in this world.

But we live in a nation which prizes individual rights and encourages us to mold God into our image, not the other way around. When we make Jesus a Republican or Democrat or fit him into our own little box, we make him a lot easier to follow. There's a quote that says, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." We are created in God's image, not the other way around. Therefore, we are not called to love God until it becomes uncomfortable or to love our neighbor until it stops benefitting us or to give whatever is left over at the end of the month.

So the questions we must ask ourselves when we vote in elections or participate in stewardship programs or simply live our daily lives are this: How is my response a reflection of God's image in me? How is my decision an example of loving God and loving my neighbor? How is what I do a reflection on what I have been entrusted with? Peter says in his first letter that Christians are to fear God and honor the king. We say thanks to Caesar with our taxes. We say thanks to God with our lives.