

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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"A Taxing Question"

Matthew 22:15-22 (NRSV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. [16] So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. [17] Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" [18] But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? [19] Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. [20] Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" [21] They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." [22] When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

A TAXING QUESTION

P.J. O'Rourke wrote,

"Giving money to governments is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys."

Many of us believe that. We believe that government is not the answer. Government is the problem. And so politicians of both parties have all become "born again" conservatives when it comes to taxes. In politics if you want to trip up an opponent ask him a "taxing" question.

Senator, will you increase my taxes? Who will you tax? How much will it cost? Is that tax really fair?

Of course it's usually the question itself that is unfair. The question is framed in such a way that the opponent's viewpoints are significantly distorted. When it comes to politics, it's often not about truth and fairness. It's about public perception.

So, politicians beware when someone asks you a taxing question.
And they say the Bible isn't relevant.

ARE TAXES LAWFUL?

Today's lesson could have come from the last presidential debate. Some young aspiring journalists (actually Pharisees) ask with a wide eyed grin,

"Jesus is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Come on Jesus. Give us some straight talk on taxes. We know you tell the truth to the Republicans and the Democrats (I mean the Herodians and Pharisees). Tell us the unvarnished truth Jesus. We're all ears."

But, of course the problem is this: they say they want straight answers, but it is their question that is crooked. This might be the earliest recorded case of “gotcha” politics. There is no good answer to this question.

And there might have been good reason for them to ask this question.

Ned Netterville wrote an essay entitled, Jesus of Nazareth, Illegal-Tax Protester. Ned claims that this opposition to the taxation of Rome is the principal reason Pilate crucified Jesus.

I’m not sure I agree completely but Ned does make some good points.

Jesus interfered with Rome’s collection of taxes by calling Matthew away from his tax booth in the middle of his duties (Matthew 9:9). Pilate may have known that Jesus induced one of his chief tax collectors, Zaccheus to repent and resign his position in a territory where Pilate was personally responsible for tax collections (Luke 19:1-10).

At a trial evidence could have been introduced that Jesus spoke disparagingly of tax collectors and on several occasions even likened them to prostitutes (Matthew 5:46; 18:17; 21:32). Jesus was often accused of eating with tax-collectors. Perhaps, he may have also influenced them to quit their profession and follow him?

It would have been entirely logical for Jesus to have said straight out that it was unlawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus could have said (with the religious leaders of his time) that the very coin used to pay the tax is itself blasphemous.

The denarius had the image of Caesar stamped on it with the equivalent of what we put on our money, “in God we trust.” But, when the Romans said this they meant that Caesar was god.

No wonder the religious leaders rejected those coins and had them exchanged in the temple before a sacrifice could be made. It was idolatry.

But, if you were going to pay your taxes you had to pay them using one of these coins. How could the super religious avoid handling these blasphemous coins? Some suggested not paying the tax at all.

Recently celebrity Wesley Snipes illustrated once again that not paying taxes is a pretty poor idea. And it was an even worse idea in Jesus’ day. They crucified tax cheats in those days.

And of course that was the point. If Jesus simply said don’t pay taxes, the Jewish arm of the Roman IRS (also know as the Herodians) were right there to put down the rebellion.

On the other hand, if Jesus said something like, “Everyone should pay their taxes. It’s our civic duty to pay for roads and the ‘peace’ that Rome brings us” the Pharisees would object.

They would say, “Do you mean to tell me that it is our duty to pay taxes to a corrupt government that has illegally occupied our land? You’re no Messiah. You’re a wolf in sheep’s clothing. You’re a traitor to your own country.”

In this case the Romans wouldn’t have crucified him, but the crowd might have done it instead. The same crowd that had cheered his entry into Jerusalem may have turned on Jesus and run him out of town on a rail.

If Tom Brokaw had been there he would have said,
“Rabbi Jesus you have one minute to answer the question.”

A STRAIGHT ANSWER TO A CROOKED QUESTION

But, Jesus didn’t answer the question. Instead he talked about the hypocrisy of the media (I mean Herodians and Pharisees). He said,

“You don’t really want the truth. You hypocrites just want to win at your stupid political game. Well, let me give you a straight answer to your crooked question. Will someone show me the coin used to pay taxes?”

Now, notice that Jesus didn’t have one of these blasphemous coins, but he didn’t have any trouble getting one from the Herodians and the Pharisees!

They might have thought that the coin was blasphemous, but they always had some handy for their personal use. (Isn’t that the way it is with those politicians? They speak with disdain about those rich guys, but guess whose purse is filled with money?)

Anyway Jesus took his borrowed denarius and asked a question,
“Whose image is stamped on this coin?”

This was not a trick question. It was an obvious question. Caesar’s image was stamped on the coin. Everyone knew that. They said as much.

And then Jesus said, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and render unto God the things that are God’s.” Everyone was amazed at his answer. Jesus had managed to beat the politicians at their own game.

He said in effect that maybe you should just get rid of that blasphemous money! It’s Caesar’s money anyway. It’s even got his picture stamped on it.

WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?

But, of course we know that it’s not that easy. The reader is left to answer the implicit questions raised by Jesus’ answer. “What do I owe Caesar? And what do I owe God?”

And that's where the debate really begins. Suppose Caesar misuses my tax money. Should I pay those taxes without protest?

Does this mean that there are two realms? The one is the "spiritual realm" that we talk about on Sunday morning. And the other realm is the "real world" that we live in the other six days.

In this realm does Caesar rule and gets to make the rules? Is that what this means? Does this mean that Caesar has the power to ask whatever he wants as long as we are allowed to worship on Sunday?

Down through history kings have used this passage to claim a divine right. God has chosen them to be king and therefore they have the right to rule. Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's they would say.

And as it turns out Caesar has a rather large appetite.

Even life itself is not too much to ask. Don't question the government; after all "my country right or wrong." In their minds, they are the ones who have been chosen to decide.

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S

But, I would suggest this is a serious misreading of the text. Any Jewish child in Jesus' day could have quoted Psalm 24 from memory. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it."

So, for the faithful of Jesus' day the question was easy to answer. What do we owe Caesar? Nothing. And what do we owe God? Everything.

Now obviously this doesn't mean that we should take the Wesley Snipes approach to tax paying. I don't want to visit any of you in prison next year!

On the other hand, all of life needs to be put in context. For the common good and in order to live we will have to pay taxes and bills. We will make what we hope are prudent investments, and work hard.

But, do not think for one moment that the value of your life is determined by how much you consume or the taxes you pay or the size of your investments or what political party is in power. True value is based upon a greater truth.

The image that really matters is not the image of Caesar (or George Washington) stamped on a coin. The image that really matters is the image of God stamped upon your heart.

The Bible tells us from the very beginning that we are made in the image of God.

The Bible tells us that we were made for more than making money and paying taxes. We were made to have a relationship with God. We are God's children.

And if we settle for anything less than that, we are selling our birth rite for cheap. We have made Caesar and Caesar's money our god, and in so doing we have condemned ourselves to spiritual poverty.

CONFRONTING CAESAR

There may be times when Caesar demands so much that we will have to withhold our taxes and everything else. The confessing church in Germany during World War II said no to Hitler so that they could say yes to Jesus. This cost many of them their lives and their livelihoods, but they could not give Caesar (or in this case Hitler) what belonged only to God.

There have been people in our own country who have refused to pay taxes because they said the money was going to a war that was unjust.

They accepted the consequences of their actions (in some cases incarceration) because they felt that Caesar had asked for too much.

There will always be disagreement among Christians about how and when we must take a stand. But, one thing is sure. When push comes to shove one fact remains. God really owns everything. Caesar really owns nothing.

And that one idea really makes us Christians a subversive lot. We can't be trusted to go along just to get along because we believe God really owns it all.

One commentator saw a connection between this passage and Jesus' early confrontation with Satan. You remember the story. The devil led Jesus up to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world.

And the devil said to him, "To you will I give their glory and authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will be yours."

Jesus replied,

"It is written. Worship the Lord your God and serve him only." (Luke 4:5-8)

According to this commentator, Satan is able to offer "all the kingdoms of this world" because politics is the peculiar province of the satanic! (And I thought that I was pessimistic about politics!)

But, he has a point. God and Caesar are often in conflict even today. And we are part of that conflict.

It is not enough to just work hard, pay our taxes and go along to get along. We are called to be involved in the great issues of our day. We are called to bring the perspective of faith and Scripture to the world. This is what God requires of us.

Jesus said that we are to be the “salt of the earth.” He meant that in a tasteless, cruel and self-centered world we are to promote a different way, a way based on forgiveness, peace, love, justice and righteousness. Instead of selling others out we are called to purchase a new way of life.

Just a little bit of salt can change the taste of any dish, and just a few Christians who are willing to give God what is rightfully his can change their community.

STEWARDSHIP, GIVING GOD HIS DUE

We’re in our second Sunday of the Stewardship campaign, and one thing that really amazes me is how just a little bit faithfulness on the part of a few Christians can make such a big difference. Someone several years ago came up with the idea that we should contribute just two cents a meal per person toward a hunger project.

It seems like such an insignificant amount of money (and it is). But, it has become one of the most successful mission projects of our church. Much good has been done around the world because some of us have put our two cents worth in the bucket! Our small church alone contributes \$1400 a year by giving pennies.

To me this is symbolic of what God can do when we become faithful stewards. Even a little can become a lot in God’s hands.

We live in an age when everyone seems to be demanding more of us. But, don’t be distracted by the demands of the world and the claims of Caesar. Caesar doesn’t own any of it nor does JP Morgan or Wells Fargo. God owns it all.

And to demonstrate His superior power God asks us to give what we owe. Give your time. Give your worship. Give your two cents worth. Give your offering. Give your tithe.

Each year the church asks you to try an experiment. Give a little more in God’s name.

Perhaps you would be willing to give by hosting a new Bible study. Perhaps you would be willing to give by teaching a children’s Sunday school class. Perhaps God is calling you to serve a meal to a homeless person. Perhaps God is calling you to serve this church as an officer.

I’m not sure what you may owe God. That’s between you and God. But, there’s one thing for sure in all our lives. In some area of our life all of us are in some way holding back. We are failing to give God His due, and we are spiritually impoverished by our actions.

THE CHOICE: CAESAR OR GOD

This year is all about Caesar. This year is all about the election of a president. It's an important decision. A good president can make a big difference.

But, even good democratically elected governments begin to act like "godlets". They take on airs and make claims that are unrealistic.

Hillary Clinton once said, "All the American people are asking for is security." That seems like such a simple request. Is that too much to ask ... just a little security?

Well actually that is too much to ask. Even the best of governments cannot offer help when it comes to the big issues of life. Death, old age, sickness, and anxiety ... these and many other problems are (in the final analysis) beyond the control of the government. We need more than even a maverick or an agent of change can give us.

We truly need a Messiah, a Savior. And with all due respect to the fine men who are running for office this year, they are not qualified.

The mainline church has often been accused of mixing "politics and religion." In fact, we in the Presbyterian Church were often known as the praying wing of the Democratic Party. But, then the more conservative evangelicals took up the mantle, groveling before politicians and turning Sunday morning services into political stump speeches.

I suspect we have both been wrong. We have given Caesar too much, and we have given God too little. We have sought hope in things that do not satisfy. We have asked more from Caesar than he can give us ... no matter how much he taxes us. We need to radically rearrange our priorities.

The early church got into trouble because they had a very simple three word creed. They said, "Jesus is Lord." Now that doesn't seem so bad does it? But, it was dangerously close to another creed that everyone in the Roman Empire was required to repeat. They said, "Caesar is Lord."

But, the Christians wouldn't say that creed. It was giving Caesar something that was owed to God alone. And that got them into some close encounters with ravenous lions.

We still say Jesus is Lord. And that means nobody else gets the job ... not Caesar nor the president nor our family or our friends or our spouse or anyone. That title is Christ's alone.

Believe it or not such a radical statement can still get us into trouble with the world. But, that one statement can also change us and the world forever.

I wonder if we took that simple creed more seriously, what would change in our lives? What do we owe God that we are currently not paying?

God give us the courage, the wisdom and the faith to be good stewards of the grace that He has bestowed upon us.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN