

What is Due?

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Matthew 22:15-22

So, the story goes that a man after hearing a sermon at his church about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, a man wrote the IRS, "I can't sleep knowing that I have cheated on my income tax. Enclosed is a check for \$150. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

Today's scripture begins with Jesus in the temple. The Herodians and the Pharisees come up to talk with him.

"Big deal," you say. Just another confrontation. Well, actually this is a huge deal. The Herodians and the Pharisees were enemies, absolute opposites in the Jewish leadership of the day. They hated each other. What were they doing there together? What's going on? "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" theory is at work here

So who are these two groups?

The Herodians were Jews who supported the Roman leadership. They tried to keep the populace calm and help implement Roman rule, like taxes. Many people felt they were collaborators, traitors who helped out the occupying Roman force and who benefited from a cushy relationship with the powers of the Empire. They supported Roman rule over Jewish law though they were practicing Jews as were the Herods, (hence the name "Herodians"), who were lifted up as puppet rulers of the region. Above all, they were practical realists.

Then there were the Pharisees. They believed in separating themselves from all things Roman which they considered polluting. Pharisees taught Jewish law, history and practice in synagogues. They hated the Romans and considered them vile profaners of everything sacred. Pharisees were very concerned to follow the law and commandments.

They fiercely believed in keeping the commandment of no graven images and protested the pagan worship that they were threatened with having to participate in as all in the Roman Empire were forced to bow down to the Emperor. They held up Jewish law above Roman rule. Above all, they were idealists who wanted a life separate from all things Roman and contained within the holy walls of Jewish practice.

These two were enemies. So here these two groups are working together? Absurd or diabolical.

They approach Jesus in the Temple, oh so politely. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." You are just wonderful and so on...blah blah blah...with their insincere flattery. Jesus probably is waiting for them to get to the point.

So, they say, "should we pay taxes to the Emperor?"

Aha! The trick question.

Here is the dilemma. If Jesus says "no" it is unlawful to pay taxes to support the Roman empire, he will be very popular with the masses but he will quickly be arrested and sentenced

to death for disobeying Roman rule. [On that note remember the two thieves that Jesus is crucified with? There is a very good chance that those two were part of another Roman faction called Zealots who not only refused to pay taxes but would rob the Roman tax baggage train and give the money to the people. First century Robin Hoods. The Romans hated them of course and called them thieves for stealing from the people, from the Empire, or more realistically, out of the richest folks' pockets.]

So, Jesus will please the Pharisees with his answer but he cannot really say no to taxes without certain death.

On the other hand, if he says "yes" to paying taxes, the Herodians will be pleased but the Pharisees will be horrified and call him a Jew practicing idolatry. The coin for the tax had the face of Caesar along with the words that lifted Caesar up as a God. Using the coin was like worshipping the emperor (which most citizens were forced to do).

Brian Stofferegen uses this analogy: "The annual payment of this tax to Rome was a painful reminder of being in lands occupied by foreign powers who worshiped false gods. The tax could only be paid with Roman coins which were not just legal tender but also pieces of propaganda. Most of the coins contained an image of the Caesar with inscriptions proclaiming him to be divine or the son of a god. One common phrase on coins during the time of Jesus was: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." "Graven images" and polytheism were blasphemous to both Jews and Christians. Thus paying taxes with Roman coins raised both political and religious issues.

What if our coins said something like: "Donald John Trump, august son of the divine, President of the United States, the most powerful man on the planet"? Those who are sympathetic to the Democratic Party may view such money as anathema. Similarly, what if all the money during the previous administration had pictures of Barack Hussein Obama on them and the same saying about his virtues? I'm certain that many Republicans would refuse to carry or use such money. Every time we pulled out our money, we would be reminded that the enemy was in power. It may be significant that the pictures on all of our money are of dead people.

Pharisees, because they wanted to live separately, even had separate coins made so they would not be polluted by the emperor's coins. Any time you went to temple you had to exchange your Roman coins for Temple coins. Remember how Jesus storms in and upturns the money changers in the Temple. This is what the money changers were doing. Changing Roman coins for Temple coins. And in changing money, as you might imagine, the exchange rate always favors the house.

So Jesus is stuck. Offend one group and get arrested. Offend the other group and be denounced as a fraud, never mind possibly cause a riot since most of the crowd were all but desperate due to paying the very heavy tax load.

What's a poor Messiah to do?

Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's".

Jesus dodges. The Herodians and the Pharisees went away amazed. Why is that? What does it mean give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's? Well, we've been arguing about that every since. No one really knows.

Some folks use Jesus' words as evidence of the separation of church and state: that the realm of the real world goes on and the realm of the church goes on and the two are separate and distinct. Some take it a step further saying the church does not need to engage in the real

world, just in spiritual things. Certainly the church should avoid politics and just focus on Godly things, giving to God what is God's.

Other folks say these words are the justification in the Bible that we should pay our taxes. All of us. As one person quipped, "civilization is expensive, and taxes pay the tab." So, cough up the money and move on. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But what about giving to God what is God's.

Psalms 24:1 says, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." That means everything is God's. All things. All that we own. All that we experience. Everything in our lives in our homes. Everything. So do we give everything to God?

What does it mean to give everything to God? Even now as we are in the midst of our stewardship campaign we wrestle with what it means to give to God. Folks come up to me to ask about tithing, the practice of giving 10% of what we receive to the church. There are questions like:

--How much is 10 %?

--Ten percent of what? My gross salary? My net salary?

--My net minus what I give to other charities?

Is there an exact answer? Probably not. Jesus didn't provide one. Jesus didn't even proscribe tithing.

What did Jesus say? Give to God what is God's. Well, that is not very helpful in coming up with a number for our pledges but perhaps that is the point. Jesus asks something harder of us. Give to Caesar, to the government, to our obligations as citizens, what we must, what we should. (We could read this to say don't cheat on your taxes either.) And then what do we give to God?

Listen to the parable again with one important addition. The Herodians and Pharisees ask Jesus whether they should pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus asks for the coin. And he asks whose picture is on it. They say Caesar and he says to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Imagine then Jesus puts his arm on one of their shoulders and asks, "And whose image is on this coin?" Perhaps the person mutters an answer; perhaps he does not need to. Then Jesus says, "and give to God what is God's." (Arthur Wasklow)

For while we may feel strongly about our political loyalties, before we are Democrat, Republican, or Independent, we are Christian. And while we may be confident that how we spend our money is our business and no one else's, yet if we forget in whose image we have been made we may succumb to the temptation to believe that we are no more than the sum total of our possessions and that our bank accounts tell a true story about our worth and value.

God wants for us abundant life. Because while Benjamin Franklin may have once said that death and taxes are the only two certainties of this life, each week we have the opportunity to declare that the one who was raised from death shows us that God's love is more certain than anything else.

What we are to give to God is our very selves: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind."

Dan Clendinen says, "Paying your taxes is simple. However distasteful, you hold your nose and write a check. Rendering relative honor to that subordinate Caesar is the easy part, and perhaps even necessary. But absolute allegiance to an ultimate God, rendering our entire selves to God without preconditions or limits, without hedging our bets, demands a higher order of magnitude. That takes a lifetime."

We are to give to God who we are. We are coins that are die-stamped in God's image. Each of us is a coin of God's creation. It is our very selves that are God's.

I think Jesus is clever in this exchange. He avoids the trick question. He sends off the questioners and lives to see another day, though not many more days given that this text comes from his final week in Jerusalem.

But the truly clever part is that Jesus tells us that the real world is full of divided loyalties and that there are no easy answers. We have to figure it out ourselves day in and day out, week by week, year by year. It is not easy. We pay our taxes but it doesn't just stop there. We may give to Caesar with our money but what about our hearts? They belong to God and God calls us to justice seeking.

This reminds us that everything we have, all the money we own, all our possessions, everything, our very life is God's. Everything is God's. That means every time we pull out our wallet and use our credit card or put down some money, we are using God's money. Every time.

Timmy didn't want to put his money in the offering plate Sunday morning, so his mother leaned over and whispered to him.

"You don't want that money, honey," she said softly in his ear. "Quick! Drop it in the plate. It's tainted!"

Horrified, the little boy obeyed.

After a few seconds he whispered, "But, mommy, why was the money tainted? Was it dirty?"

"Oh, no dear," she replied. "It's not dirty. It just 'taint yours, and it 'taint mine," she replied. "It's God's."

Yes, that's right. It is God's. And now just what we put in the plate either.

It is all God's.

Our money, our selves, our church.

For this is not "our" church either. It is God's. We gather together to sing and pray and listen and play together. We are proud of what we do here and what we envision doing. But ever mindful that it is not our. This is not my church. It is not your church. It is not our church. It is God's church. And here we render unto God what is God's.

That can be hard sometimes. Especially if we don't get what we want. If we don't have our particular need met by the church as we want it met. If the church doesn't sing the worship music that we like. Or the church doesn't support the special ministry that we favor.

But we are not here to get what we want. We are not here because it is our church. It is God's church and God's alone. And here we give to God that which is God's. Which is our heart, our mind, our strength. And yes, our money, too.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. And give to God what is God's. In thanksgiving for all that we have received, everything that flows through our lives, we give to God. May we give thankfully, gratefully and with an understanding of how complex many of our decisions may be.

Amen.