

# Give to God What is God's

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

October 22, 2017

Matthew 22:15-22

So how many think the Pharisees and Herodians really wanted to hear about Jesus' tax plan?

No, this was a trick question. This conversation took place in the Temple during Holy Week. A few days earlier, Jesus had staged a demonstration in the Temple that angered and frightened religious authorities. They wanted to get rid of Jesus somehow, but he was popular with the crowds so they didn't want to take the fall.

Then in a moment of evil genius, the Pharisees colluded with the Herodians. The Pharisees were the rabbis, the religious teachers. They opposed Roman government. They believed if the Jewish people could just be holy enough God would restore a descendant of David to the throne of Israel and overthrow the Romans. So they insisted on such strict adherence to Jewish law. They were trying to create a kingdom of priests to serve our God.

The Herodians, on the other hand, had made their peace with Rome. Herod the Great was the father of the current Herod, Herod Antipas. Herod the Great had been raised as a Jew. In the minds of the Herodians that was good enough. Even though he was an evil dictator who levied heavy taxes for his massive building projects, even though the poor suffered while the elites lived in luxury, even though Herod and his son Herod killed their enemies, some still called him the Messiah, the anointed one. The Herodians wanted to keep a descendant of Herod on the throne.

Under normal circumstances, these two groups would not work together. But they both were concerned about Jesus. They both worried about the popular power flowing to Jesus. So they both figured out that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. They got together and came up with a plan to get Jesus arrested by asking a question with no good answer.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?

No one liked taxes. We struggle with them now. We argue about who should pay how much and what they ought to cover, but at least we can see ways in which taxes benefit the common good. Taxes pay our public servants, build roads, educate children, and care for the needy, and that helps us all.

But the taxes on the minds of the Pharisees and Herodians were not taxes of the common good. These were taxes of Roman occupation. They funded Herod's enormous building projects and

lavish lifestyle. Every time 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews paid taxes to Rome they remembered they were living under Roman occupation, which was highly annoying to a people who believed God had given them this land.

So if Jesus said yes, pay taxes to Rome, the crowds would surely turn on him. And if Jesus said no, do not pay taxes to Rome, he would be arrested. Either way, problem solved.

Let's stop for just a minute and think about other questions like the one that confronted Jesus on this day. Gotcha questions. Litmus test questions. Either or questions. Questions no one brings up because they are too divisive. Questions people ask assuming you will agree with them and you don't. In this moment, Jesus faced what many of us face in this divisive, polarized, suspicious time.

And this is where I marvel at the wisdom of Jesus. In this tense moment, when he knew they were trying to trap him with a question, Jesus came up with a response that more than outsmarted his opponents. His response was more than witty or wise. It was freeing and loving.

Several of us heard our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preach last week. He often reminds the church we serve a loving, liberating, life-giving God. This was a loving, liberating, life-giving response from Jesus.

See, the coin used to pay the Roman tax had an image and a phrase on it. Different coins minted at different times under different rulers had different images and different wording, but they all said basically the same thing. This image and phrase were the reason money changers set up tables in the temple. This image and phrase made Roman money idolatrous and unholy. It was a double humiliation for the people of God to have to use Roman money to pay Roman taxes.

The image was the image of Caesar, the emperor, ruler over the Herods, who were more like governors in the region. And the phrase confessed Caesar as the divine son of God. Every time a Jewish person handled Roman money, in a sense he or she broke the first two commandments of Jewish law. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make for thyself any graven image.

So, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? No. It was not lawful under Jewish law. The money changers in the temple were making things worse by profiting from the dilemma. The person who pulled a coin out was not supposed to have a coin in the temple in the first place.

So Jesus could have taken a hard line. He could have said Absolutely not. Refuse to pay the taxes. Suffer the consequences for the sake of your faith. He could have been like Satan at the time of his temptation. He could have suggested God would rescue them from the consequences. Satan told Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple and promised, "He will give his angels charge over you lest you dash your foot against a stone."

Jesus did not do that. He saw their hypocrisy and named it. But his answer was a gift of love and freedom.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Jesus was not supporting or defending Caesar. He simply acknowledged reality. They lived under Caesar's and Rome's harsh rule. Roman soldiers could demand the shirt off your back or force you to carry their pack for a mile. In another teaching Jesus said give them your cloak as well and offer to carry the pack two miles. In other words, the way to deal with Caesar was not by force or opposition. Give to emperor the things that are the emperor's.

But thank goodness that was not the end of the lesson. Jesus kept talking, and he reminded them of another power, a higher power, a power stronger than Rome and fully on their side. Give to God the things that are God's.

What is God's? The world. All creation. Human beings made in the image of God. The history of God's saving work even in difficult times. It is all God's.

It was easy for the Pharisees and Herodians and even the crowds to forget. They lived in a confusing, frightening time that led them to turn on each other, kind of like people do today. We're not the first.

Jesus acknowledged how hard it was for them to live in the world as it is. He knew how hard it was for them to give to Caesar what Caesar demanded. But he also reminded them that Caesar did not have the final word. This world still belongs to the God who holds us all in love.

I leave Tuesday for a mission visit with our bishop to the Diocese of Cuba. The Episcopal Church has survived in Cuba even through the revolution and the embargo and the collapse of the Soviet Union. What I am most eager to hear from our sisters and brothers is how they held on to faith during the turmoil of the past fifty years. I have the feeling part of the answer will be that they remembered God was bigger than Castro.

Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's.

When we look at the state of the world, we may be tempted to despair, just like people in the time of Jesus. Jesus has a word for us. Give to God the things that are God's. When you see something on the news that makes your head want to explode, when your neighbor spouts a hate that turns your stomach, when you despair about where we seem to be headed, remember that God is bigger than all of this. Give to God what is God's.

Your pledges are one way we give to God what is God's. They are a sign of remembering that everything belongs to God. We set aside a portion of God's gifts in thanksgiving for all God's marvelous works. They are an act of trust and surrender to God's ways. They are a pledge of hope that God's kingdom will come and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. They help

this community, St. Thomas, be a place of hope and trust and growth and proclaim to the world the good news of our loving, liberating, life-giving God.

Thank you for giving to God the things that are God's.