

“Honor God with Your Gifts”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 22: 15-22

I don't know about you, but I'm ready for the election to be over. Primarily because of the non-stop political ads we are bombarded with on television, radio, and social media. Every four years, I feel like I'm saying the exact same thing: “This can't get any worse.” Any yet, it always seems to be worse than the last time.

One of the favorite themes for political ads is taxes. One candidate is blamed for raising your taxes, another candidate touts lowering your taxes more than his or her opponent. And all of these ads are playing into our preconceptions about what is fair and what is unfair about having to pay taxes as Americans.

The reality is that taxes are a necessary part of our life as citizens of the United States – or of any other civilized nation. They are necessary to raise funds for public schools, maintenance of roads and highways, police and fire protection, and many other public services we depend on as a society. Taxes are a way for individuals to contribute funds which add to the welfare of the whole. The negativity which is often associated with taxes comes when those funds are used in inappropriate or wasteful ways. The American public deserves the best use of the funds we give on a local, state, and national level through our taxes. When we see waste, corruption, or ineffective use of public funds, our view of taxes becomes drastically negative, and we demand better appropriation and use of our hard-earned dollars.

Taxes, money, uncertainty, greed – these are just a few of the words and emotions which can consume us as Americans. It seems appropriate, then, that the lectionary text for today is this story from Matthew. Commonly referred to as the “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's” story, at its heart is Jesus' insistence on what it means to be his disciple. It's not just a clever riddle meant to throw the Pharisees and Herodians – and us – off our routine. It's a reminder that in the end, nothing we have belongs to us, to Caesar, or to any earthly entity; in the end, all that we have belongs to God alone.

Marvin McMickle writes: *The United States of America is quite familiar with disagreements around the question of paying taxes . . . Apparently those same disputes could be heard among the Jewish people in first-century CE Palestine, and for many of the same reasons. Palestine was a colony of the Roman Empire, and the Jews were paying taxes that supported the army and government that occupied their*

country (much like our nation's situation in the 1700's with Great Britain). The Jewish people had grievances around the question of taxation.

Not surprisingly, there were people in both colonized groups (in America and Palestine) who took opposite sides on that question. America had loyalists who supported the British government and patriots who opposed it. Palestine had Herodians who supported the Roman government and Pharisees who opposed it.

As their name suggests, the Herodians were allied with Herod Antipas, who had been named king of the Jews by Rome. Not surprisingly, they supported paying the tax to Caesar. The Pharisees, who were committed to every detail of Jewish law, opposed paying the tax to Caesar for religious reasons. Jews were required to use a special coin that carried the image of "the divine Caesar." The Pharisees saw the use of this coin as a violation of the first and second commandments (Marvin McMickle, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 189-191).

Right from the start, we have an ironic twist to this story. We have two opposing factions - the Pharisees and the Herodians - working together against a common opponent. The two groups disagreed vehemently on being a colony under Roman rule. But they saw Jesus as a greater threat to both of their status quo's, and in this instance, worked together to try and trick him into sedition and blasphemy. And yet, they begin by saying to Jesus, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth . . ." (22:16). They complement Jesus for being truthful and sincere, while their intentions toward him are anything but truthful and sincere.

And Jesus knows their intent, the purpose behind their confrontation with him: "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" Debie Thomas writes: *The Pharisees and the Herodians attempt to entrap Jesus with a clever question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The Pharisees see the tribute tax as a heretical and antinationalist capitulation to a pagan emperor, while the Herodians see refusing to pay the tax as sedition. Answering this yes-no question is a lose-lose proposition.*

Instead, Jesus takes a Roman coin - a coin that honors the emperor as a deity - and offers his ambiguous both-and answer: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." How typical of Jesus - not only to respond to a challenge with an even greater challenge, but to insist that the relationship between faith and politics is too complex to reduce to platitudes or tweets.

It's important to note what Jesus does not say. He doesn't say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and the secular, and that they require our equal fidelity. What he says is more complicated: the coin is already the emperor's - there's his face stamped right on it - so give it to him. And then consider the harder question: What belongs to God? What kind of tribute do you own him? (*Christian Century*, September 27, 2017, 21).

Jesus was not going to be tricked. He makes it clear whose authority he is under, and lets the inquisitors wrestle with whose authority they ultimately will answer to. If Caesar's image is stamped on the coin, then give to Caesar what is his.

But of course, that begs the question: how do we know what is rightfully God's? Perhaps those things on which God's image is stamped? Brian Stoffregen writes: *What are we to give to God? The things stamped with God's image - us! We are to give God ourselves - our whole selves - not just some part.*

Some may give God their minds, but have hearts far from God. Some may give God their hearts, but are unwilling to learn from God in the Word. Some may give God their muscles, but are unwilling to bring their bodies to worship or education classes. Many give God 1 or 2 hours a week, but God wants all 168 hours a week. Many give God 2% of their income, perhaps think about 10%, but God wants 100%.

We cannot say that "this part belongs to God, so I will give it to God." Everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. Everything we are and everything we have we are to give (back) to God. We are but mere managers or stewards of these gifts God has given to us

(Brian Stoffregen Exegetical Notes, Proper 24A - Year A, www.crossmarks.com).

"Everything we are and everything we have belongs to God." When we are invited to serve in God's name, we are not called to give a portion of ourselves. When we are asked to lead in God's name, we are not called to offer excuses. When we are approached during the week with an opportunity to show Christian love to a stranger, we are not called to withhold that love since it is not on a Sunday. God's image is emblazoned on each and every one of us. As such, we are to offer back to God all of our heart, mind, soul, and being, and not withhold anything as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our ultimate allegiance is not to the government, to our finances, to our retirement funds, to our possessions, to taxes - our ultimate allegiance as Christians is to none of those things. Our ultimate allegiance is to God - the one who loved the world that he came in human form to reinforce the image of himself in our hearts, minds and souls. Does that mean we are called as Christians to withhold our taxes, withhold our participation in society, and live in isolation? Far from it. Our role is to be active, supporting members of the culture so that it might reflect God's justice and righteousness.

Where does your allegiance lie? Are you bound by the lifestyle you are leading? Is your identity forged in the cars you drive, the newest gadget you wish to buy, the activities your children are engaged in, the next vacation you are looking forward to? Are you giving your whole self to God, or just a portion? Who has authority over you - God or your money?

I'd like to close by thinking again about the coin that Jesus uses to illustrate his point. On the coin is the image of the emperor, an icon of the government's authority over the people. But Jesus himself is the embodiment of the image of God, an image that is emblazoned on each of God's children. God's image is stamped on each of us - and thus, God deserves all of ourselves as a tribute offering back to God every day of our lives.

Richard Spalding writes: *Caesar's interest in the well-being of his subjects stops at the point where his power over their livelihood is threatened. The theological claim Jesus makes about God's interest has nothing to do with power. The God to whom we render our days is the God described by the prophet Isaiah in the midst of the looming shadow of an earlier empire, for a people just as much at a loss to grasp the full magnitude of God's care:*

"Can a woman forget her nursing child? . . . Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands (Isaiah 49:15-16)."

We bear God's image - as the palm of God's hand bears ours. True, the image can sometimes be difficult to recognize. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear, what you do, the company you keep. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the kiss of light in the eyes, the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on the forehead, the image of all those children in the arms of their mothers, and the little ember of resolve to remember them. All those faces are a part of your face, when you begin to see the image that God sees, the image engraved in the palm of the hand of the God who, in Jesus, stands behind us with full faith and credit (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4: 192).

As we consider how we are to honor God with our lives and our gifts, may we always remember that we are first and forever embodiments of the image of God, images engraved in the palm of God's hand. May our lives, our gifts, and our service reflect that knowledge of faith, each and every day we are blessed to be on this earth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.