

October 19, 2008  
The Federated Church of Hyannis  
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

## **WHAT IS CAESAR'S?**

Matthew 22:15-22

There was a man who had worked all of his life and had saved all of his money. He loved money more than just about anything. Just before he died, he said to his wife, "Now listen. When I die, I want you to take all my money and put it in the casket with me. I want to take my money to the afterlife with me." He made her promise with all her heart that when he died, she would put all of his money in the casket with him.

When he was stretched out in the casket, his wife was sitting there in black, and her friend was sitting next to her. When they finished the ceremony, just before the undertakers got ready to close the casket, the wife said, "Wait just a minute!" She had a box with her, and she came over and put it in the casket.

Then the undertakers locked the casket, and they rolled it away. Her friend said, "I know you weren't fool enough to put all that money in there with your husband!" She said, "Listen, I can't go back on my word. I promised him that I was going to put that money in that casket with him." "You mean to tell me you really put that cash in the casket with him!?" "It wasn't cash," said the wife. "I wrote him a check."

I think it is safe to say that today many of us worry more about money than we worry about anything else. It is what wakes us up at night and drives us to distraction during the day. This was a question asked Jesus about money, not an optional donation to church. It was about mandatory taxes.

Those sent to entrap Jesus began by complimenting him: "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." Perhaps they were trying to soften him up. Then came the question. This is the first recorded "gotcha!" question at a press conference. They are not interested in knowing what Jesus thought, only in trapping him. The question was, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

I guess one lesson we get from this is that it is OK to ask Jesus questions. Just don't think you know how he will answer it or that he will give an answer instead of another question. The tax in question was probably a poll tax or head tax, first imposed when they became a Roman province in 6 A.D. The poll tax generated more opposition than customs taxes, in part because people paying the customs tax can see a tangible benefit — a permit to transport and to receive goods. There is no visible benefit associated with the poll tax — it simply disappears into the emperor's coffers. While the amount was not crushing, neither is it insignificant. The tax was a denarius, a day's pay for an ordinary worker.

The real problem for the Jews was that the poll tax was to be paid with this denarius, a coin which bore the image of Caesar and the inscription on the coin read, "Tiberius Caesar, August, son of the divine Augustus, son of God, high priest." If Jesus supported the tax, religious authorities could charge him with blasphemy, using the coin thus breaking the commandment against graven images.

Jews considered graven images idolatrous and this inscription blasphemous, so the issue had a substantial religious basis. This was not simply a legal question so much as a religious question. In the Jewish law, is it permissible to pay taxes to support a pagan dictator? Can you pay taxes with coins marked with pagan affirmations? It was simply a trap. Any way Jesus answered it was intended for him to lose and his enemies win. If Jesus answered that the taxes were lawful, he would alienate the Jewish people. For this he could be stoned.

On the other hand, if Jesus said it was wrong to pay taxes to the Emperor he would be in trouble with Rome. If he answered that the taxes are not lawful, the Romans could arrest him for sedition. They would not tolerate some upstart preacher telling people not to pay their taxes. They would take him and make him an example. And taxes have been an issue ever since.

In 1789, Benjamin Franklin wrote in a letter to a friend, "In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes." As we have learned, at least death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets. Nearly 150 years later (1936), Margaret Mitchell used a similar phrase in *Gone with the Wind*: "Death and taxes and childbirth! There's never any convenient time for any of them."

What Jesus did is what we should often do – question the question, in this case a question about taxes. This all happened within the walls of the temple. But in an interesting twist within the story, when Jesus asked them to produce a coin these same spokesmen for the religious establishment had carried into the temple court the very coin in question with the offensive words.

Jesus responded to their question by answering. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The Jewish people, like all other peoples living in the Roman Empire, owed some allegiance to the emperor for the benefits that the Empire provided such as security and an excellent road system. It is now the questioners who must answer the question: What rightfully belongs to Caesar?

The Apostle Paul recognized the role of government when he said that government is “God’s servant, and agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13:4) Part of what we pay our taxes for is to support a judicial system that punishes those who are wrong and protect those who are innocent and build roads and provide education. It is to the government that we entrust our money, yet there is often a question about how well they keep this trust.

A young lady was soaking up the sun’s rays on a Cape Cod beach when a little boy in his swimming trunks, carrying a towel, came up to her and asked her, “Do you believe in God?” She was surprised by the question but she replied, “Why, yes, I do.” Then he asked her: “Do you go to church every Sunday?” Again, her answer was “Yes!” He then asked: “Do you read your Bible and pray everyday?” Again she said, “Yes!” By now her curiosity was very much aroused. The little lad sighed with relief and said, “Will you hold my dollar while I go in swimming?” There are times we want to know that the person handling our money is trustworthy. We want to know that the government is a good steward of the money and trustworthy.

We do know that our government asks us to give a lot more than our church and the government has the means to enforce that. A sportswriter once asked Joe Louis, “Who hit you the hardest during your ring career?” His reply was “Uncle Sam.” Some don’t like to spend any tax dollars. Reportedly President Calvin Coolidge, frustrated with the idea of paying

\$25,000 for an entire squadron of aircraft, asked, “Why can’t we just buy one and let the aviators take turns flying it.”

Jesus said we are to, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” But just what is Caesar’s and what is God’s? It is important to understand that Jesus did not say God and Caesar are co-equals. The *Declaration of Independence* declares that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The government was given its authority by our Creator. Our Creator is not given authority by the government. Our freedoms are God-given, not governmentally created. Dr. William Sloan Coffin once said in a sermon, “Christians have God as their authority, and no authority as their God.” Christians are to be committed to the state as God’s agent for justice and peace in the world. But only because God first gave the state this as a trust.

Jesus did not suggest that we owe equal allegiance to God and the government. These are words of permission – give to the emperor what is his – and words of caution – don’t give the emperor what is God’s. In an invocation prayer at the United States Senate, Reverend Peter Marshall said, “Lord Jesus, Thou who art the way, the truth, and the life, hear us as we pray for the truth that shall make us free. Teach us that liberty is not only to be loved but also to be lived. Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books. It costs too much to be hoarded. Make us to see that our liberty is not the right to do as we please, but the opportunity to please to do what is right.”

What is Caesar’s and what is God’s? The world cannot so easily be divided into secular and sacred, a clear division of church and state. The answer is that there is no easy answer. We are constantly called on to make difficult choices. It would have been a help to us all if they had bothered to ask Jesus a follow-up question, but they were only interested in trapping him, not in seeking true wisdom. In effect Jesus told them to figure out the details themselves.

This passage has sometimes been used to support the separation of church and state. That phrase is not in the Bible. There is no mention in the US Constitution of the separation of church and state. This phrase about the

separation of church and state comes from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to a group of Baptist ministers in Connecticut.

I believe that what is Caesar's and what is God's should be understood in the light of scripture. "The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof." What does that leave for Caesar? The only thing that is Caesar's is the proper management of this world of God's creating and of our nation because in the end it is all God's and he will judge Caesar and us on how well we do.

Archbishop William Temple many years ago spoke of the rule of Caesar and the reign of God saying, "While we deliberate, God reigns; when we decide wisely, God reigns; when we decide foolishly, God reigns; when we serve God in humble loyalty, God reigns; when we serve God self-assertively, God reigns; when we rebel and seek to withhold our service, God reigns — the Alpha and the Omega, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty."

The phrase on our money "In God We Trust" challenges us to rely on our good and gracious God, and to believe that he will care for us in the future, just as he has cared for us in the past. We know how much the IRS says we owe. It is for us to determine in our own life and faith how we keep that trust from God.

Holy God, you are deserving of the very best we have to offer — the devotion of our hearts, the place of honor in our priorities, the first fruits of our labors. We enter this place and space of worship, asking you to be in our midst, to speak your message of love and mercy, conviction and challenge to us. We welcome your Spirit, knowing that in so doing, we abandon control and open ourselves in faith and trust to your purposes and plan, rather than our own. Come, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we pray and may our worship be acceptable in your sight. Amen.