

WHAT IS GOD'S?

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

MATTHEW 22:15-22

Nobody likes to pay taxes. When we buy something, we pay sales tax, and that inflates the price. Why, if it weren't for all the taxes, gasoline would not be so expensive!

People have been complaining about property taxes, even though they're supposedly going down. Some of those complaints are legitimate: the appraisals may not have gone down as fast as the market values. But the fellow I heard complain that his taxes had gone way up when he replaced his double-wide mobile home with a five thousand square foot house, he's got no right to gripe.

And income tax? It is controversial. Tax the poor! Soak the rich! Put the burden on the middle class! We hear it all on the radio, read it in the newspaper.

It was no different, and perhaps worse, in the days of Jesus. The residents of Israel paid taxes to the government of King Herod, but they paid even more to the Roman government. They also were expected to pay tithes to the temple, and that tithe was a flat 10%. In addition to the tithe, they made offerings.

I wrote in a piece for the newsletter of another church that if every church member tithed, if every church member gave 10% of their income to the church, the church would have no financial problems. Well, they might have a problem with what to do with all the extra money!

Polly and I tithe. We give ten percent of what the church gives me back to the church. And then we give to special offerings over and above that. I believe that to be the Biblical mandate, the minimum standard, for all who would be faithful servants.

I've had people tell me that they can't afford to tithe. That they can't afford to give 10% to the church. If you haven't tried it, how would you know? Somehow, the 90% that is left after we put the Lord first seems to cover what needs to be covered.

But the question the Pharisees asked Jesus wasn't about tithes, it was about taxes. It was about what belongs to the government. But it was far more complicated in Judea in the time of Christ than it is even for us today.

The Interpreter's Bible (Volume 7, page 519) tells us that "the taxes mentioned here probably were the poll tax or tributum capitas, levied on those who were

under direct Roman rule... The question may be paraphrased: 'Can a Jew conscientiously pay the imperial tax in the holy land, or must he fight for independence on the ground that God alone is King of Israel?'"

Do we honor God, or the government, or both?

Extreme views have gotten so much attention in the media in the recent past. There are those who refuse to pay taxes, those who dishonor the government, those who dishonor the flag, those who mock and ridicule our nation's leaders. I find that contrary to the teachings of scripture. Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

I suspect he chuckled when He said it.

Did you notice that Jesus had to ask for a coin to give His object lesson? He did not have one in His pocket, if His robe even had pockets. He didn't carry a purse. Judas Iscariot carried the money bag for the disciples. The coin Jesus was given was a denarius, a day's pay. On it would have been the likeness of either Tiberius or Augustus, one of the Caesars, and an inscription giving his name and titles.

Do you know you couldn't use that coin to pay your temple tithes, or place it in the offering box in the temple?

To do so would be a sacrilege, for the "graven image" of Caesar appeared on the coin of the realm. Thus, the old coins of Israel were kept at the temple, and people changed their Roman currency for the "holy" coinage. Then at the end of the day, the priests brought the old money out and traded it for the new money, in order to pay the bills of the temple. And of course, a percentage was charged along the way. No wonder Jesus ran the money-changers out of the temple!

But that's another story and another sermon.

Jesus pointed to the picture on the coin and said, "Whose likeness, whose image, whose head, whose inscription, whose title is this?"

When they had answered, He answered. Remember that I said I suspected that He chuckled?

I think He chuckled because He realized, maybe as no one else ever had or could, that if we truly rendered to God what belonged to God, we'd give God everything. For everything belongs to God. God created everything. God gave us everything.

Oh, from time to time, I'll hear someone referred to as a "self-made man." I usually smile when I hear it. Sometimes I'll laugh out loud! No one made

himself. God made us, and God gave us the gifts, the talents, the abilities to become the persons we are. Not all of us have used God's gifts to the fullest, but if we did, then we would indeed be all that we could be, and be what God created us to be.

George Buttrick has written of this passage, "Each individual life is like a coin, separately minted in God's creation. **Whose likeness?** The likeness and the image of God, for he made us. In this realm also, as in the political realms at the time of Jesus, the issue of coinage is token of sovereignty. The impacts of conscience, the trappings of compassion, and our response—however unwilling—to the life and cross of Christ, are God's inscription on us." (Ibid.)

When the world looks at us, what do they see? Do they see a tax payer? A tither? Both?

Whose likeness, whose title is written upon us, for all the world to see?

We Presbyterians have a Brief Statement of Faith, and it begins with the words, "In life and in death we belong to God."

Created in God's likeness, made in God's image, with God's image stamped upon us, and God's title inscribed upon us, we belong to God.

It is not our taxes and our tithes and offerings God desires of us: it is our lives. It is our whole being. It is our love, our devotion, our worship. It is our lives.

As God prepared to send Israel into exile, God spoke through the prophet Amos, saying, "I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs: I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24)

Through Micah, God told the people what was required of them: "To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

If we truly walk with Jesus, we honor God more than with our taxes and tithes: we honor God with our lives.

What is God's? Everything. Who belongs to God? We do.

Let us pray: O God, help us to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, while giving everything we have and are to you, from whom everything we have and are came. Amen and amen.

