

STEWARDSHIP by
Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston
October 16, 2011
(Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost)
8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S
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Texts: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; and Matthew 22:15-22

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.”

And they brought him a denarius.

²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?”

²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.”

Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I am always amazed at how relevant the lectionary scripture texts are. These are the texts that we are to read on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, every three years. We read assigned texts for each Sunday on a three-year cycle that allows us to read through most of the Bible in that three-year time frame. We don’t read ever passage in the Bible, but the lectionary readings force us to read the full range of Biblical material, not just my favorite passages.

What could be more relevant today than to encounter a passage about paying taxes? It is a hot topic in political circles these days and is an ever-present reality for all of us. Should we raise taxes to offset the budget deficit? Should we lower taxes to create incentives to grow the economy and create jobs? Should we do both, that is should some pay more and some pay less? Should we do nothing, keep it just like it is? Should we raise taxes for the richest one percent among us? Should we adopt a 999 plan, as one presidential candidate recommends, or a plan that is 153 pages

long and has many complicated features? Should we turn the oil companies loose and let that grow the economy?

Well, you get the idea. There's lots of talk about taxes these days. Some things never change. Paying taxes was on the mind of people in Jesus' time as well. They were asking the same questions. What is the right thing to do?

In the Gospel reading for today, the Pharisees and Herodians pose a difficult question to Jesus. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? It was a hard question because a simple yes or no answer, as Jesus sometimes preferred to give, could be misunderstood by one group or the other. If he said yes, it is okay to pay taxes to Rome, it would not set well with the people of Israel because they deeply resented the high taxation required by the Roman Empire. If he said no; do not pay taxes, it would certainly be taken as an act of insurrection by the Roman authorities. Remember, this story also comes in that last week of Jesus life. His life is already in danger.

Now Jesus is certainly not afraid of speaking the truth plainly and letting the chips fall where they may. He knew his fate. But paying taxes was not the real issue. The real issue was a life lived in relationship to God. It was a teaching moment. Thus Jesus' answer is, "Give to the Emperor the things that are due the Emperor and give to God the things that are God's." The real issue is also about the Pharisees and other religious leaders becoming very uncomfortable with what Jesus was saying and doing. They had their own little kingdom that clearly defined who was in and who was out, and Jesus wanted just to kick the doors wide open and allow all people access to God. So, if Jesus could be discredited, their own power and authority would be reestablished. The fact that the Pharisees and Herodians had combined together shows that they were desperate. Herodians and Pharisees were usually enemies, but they were willing to unite for a common foe.

Herodians basically supported Roman rule, hoping to get favors for their support. I mean their names give them away. Pharisees on the other hand were offended at the thought of paying taxes to a foreign government. They were willing to combine forces only in an attempt to get Jesus. Last week when I attended the

Board meeting at Perkins School of Theology at SMU in Dallas, I talked to a man who was a member of a former church where I was the pastor. He is a lay member of the Board at Perkins. He said he wanted to talk to me about something going on in his church, so we had lunch together. At lunch he asked me if we had any cave dwellers in the church here. I told him I didn't know what cave dwellers were. He said cave dwellers are people who are consistently against virtually everything. Cave people. I assured him that we did not have any cave people here at St. Paul's, but he said he did at his church. The Pharisees in our story could be called cave people when it came to whatever Jesus said or did.

The other thing that is curious about this encounter is the coin exchange. When the question about taxes is posed, Jesus apparently doesn't have any money, so he asks for a coin from his accuser. Show me the money! There was more than one kind of coin available in first century Judea. Some held the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, the high priest"; whereas, others read "Tiberius Caesar, the majestic son of God, the high priest." Both the image of the Caesar and either language would be offensive to pious Jews. But the Roman Empire was somewhat tolerant and other coins were available that were not as offensive to pious Jews. There were more generic coins that were hard to come by but that were approved for use by the Jews for temple tax, but they had no image of the emperor and no inscription. They were also not as valuable.

But when Jesus asked for a coin from his accusers, he got the standard government issue, indicating that his accusers were already compromised when it came to money. It was at that point that the coin revealed their lack of integrity. They had the coin the Romans approved of that was offensive but worth more. This discussion is really about authentic relationships to God. The coin in the pocket of first-century Jews said that Caesar was God. The coin in your pocket and in mine says, "In God We Trust." Which is more ironic?

Jesus' answer to them is the same as it is to us. Living in a world that is a mixture of the secular and the sacred is part of the reality of all of us. The question is, in that reality, where is your heart, and where is your primary allegiance? How do you

sort out the priorities in your life in relationship to your possessions? The weight of the passage is really not about paying taxes or giving to Caesar. It is about giving to God what God is due.

Stewardship is the understanding that all that we are or have is a gift from God. A steward takes care of something that belongs to someone else. You and I take care of what finally belongs to God. You brought nothing into this world, and you will take nothing with you when you leave. How do you use what you accumulate in the meantime? Stewardship is an attitude that you do as Jesus said. You give to God what God is due.

I want to tell you today three reasons why I believe in the stewardship of my resources.

First, I do believe that life is a gift from God. It is not always easy or fun, but it is a wonderful, precious gift. I give my resources out of gratitude. Ten percent seems pretty small really as a means of expressing my gratitude to God. Tithing helps me keep from being too materialistic. If I can give it away, it is not the most important thing in my life. It reminds me that material possessions are not the stuff of life. Life is a gift. I give out of gratitude so I will not become too materialistic. Give to Caesar what Caesar is due.

Second, I give because it is religious faith that gives my life meaning. Where else do you go to try to answer the big questions in life: death, brokenness, war, peace, human relationships, respect for all of God's children, final meanings, and eternal life? As the disciples said to Jesus, "Where else can we go for these answers, except to you?" H.G. Wells said, "We were not made simply to be safe, well fed, and comfortable." I support the ministry of the church because it is here that I find relationship to God that gives meaning to life.

Third, I give to the church for the sake of others. My gifts help make our helping ministries possible: children growing, developing, deciding, learning the ways of Jesus to take with them into a tough world, youth struggling with how to handle life with its problems and pressures and how to answer life's questions in relationship to a loving community, adults coping with the extremes of joy and sorrow, faith and

doubt, wholeness, and brokenness. In addition to all of these ministries, the hungry are fed and the destitute helped locally and around the world. I give because the ministry of this church helps so many others.

I hope this place is an oasis for people who will not give in to the materialistic excesses of the secular world. We all make choices about our lives in the larger secular world, and we all make choices about giving to God what God is due. Life is a gift from God. I give back in gratitude for God's sake. The church is where I find meaning in life through relationship to God, so I give for my sake. Yet I do not live alone. I care about the young and the old and those who struggle, so I give for the sake of others. According to our text today, a life of difficult choices and questions is finally answered when you give to God what God is due.