

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Jesus' Tax Evasion

Sermon Reflection Notes

You may not have heard yet, but it's about time for us to vote again. And there are several tax issues likely to be on your ballot. It's not the first time we've wrestled with tax questions on ballots and the odds are good it won't be the last. But we aren't the first people to deal with these questions. The scripture lesson for this week reminds us that even Jesus was asked about taxes, by unlikely bedfellows, the Herodians and the Pharisees. The Pharisees and the Herodians do not like each other; they represent different sides of the political and theological spectrum. They come together against a common enemy, Jesus, in an attempt to back him into a corner. They ask Jesus if he thinks it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. If he says yes, they've got him on blasphemy, on idolatry, but if he says no, well then he's fostering sedition. They think it's the perfect plan. Jesus transcends the question with another question though. He has someone bring him a coin, and it is note-worthy that Jesus doesn't have a coin himself, and asks "Whose face is on this coin?" The answer is obvious—it's Caesar's face. So, if his picture is on it, it must be his. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," Jesus says, "and to God the things that are God's." And with that, the conversation is over.

What has happened is so amazingly simple and perplexing we sometimes are left as confused as the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were so concerned about making sure the law was followed, they focused on the idolatry on the face of the coin and missed the idolatry of money in general. And the Herodians were so concerned about giving Caesar his due, they forgot to give anything back to God. If the coin bears the image of Caesar, then it must be his. Give it back to him, Jesus says. And give to God what is God's. But the unspoken question then is, what bears the image of God? Genesis 1:27, "So God created humankind in his image, **in the image of God** he created them." We humans bear the image of God. You and me. God has his image plastered across the lands in every hotel, restaurant, and convenience store in the world. He has it plastered in our churches, our schools, our and courthouses, and our jails cells, and it's found in the uniform of every NFL player and it's in the uniform of every soldier holding a flag. God's image is found every time we turn on the television and it's on every channel; and it's plastered on every mirror—just look at the mirror you'll see it there.

Maybe that's why Paul writes in Romans 12: "present your bodies as a holy and living sacrifice." Because when we present our bodies, we present to God what belongs to God—after all God's image is right there. Give unto God what is God's—ourselves. We have so many ways of putting people into boxes. Skin color, class, occupation, body shape and size, education level, income level, political affiliation, family name, and titles. We have so many ways of separating and dividing. But these titles and boxes, Herodians and Pharisees, these are simply ways to divide. The image of God is a great equalizer though. We are all living coins, we bear the image of God, we all have dignity because we are God's.

Money has a grip on us. Our greed gives it its power. The way we subvert its power is by giving it away. Currency is strange in our country. Historically, we don't put current politician's images on the coins, we put dead presidents on them. And we put eagles and monuments, and even "In God We Trust." How different is that from the Romans putting Caesar's head on a coin and labeling him 'divine'? Let's assume it is true that "In God We Trust," like it says on our coins. If we truly do trust in God, let us approach money by giving what is Caesar's unto Caesar and giving ourselves to God as a testament that each person, including Caesar, belongs to God. That's the currency that God uses. God's currency is not denarii, or dollar bills—even if they say in God we trust. God's currency is you and me! We are the capital with which God brings about joy.

True security cannot be found in Caesar. Don't presume that we will find true hope, or true liberty, or true freedom by more or less government. Hope, liberty, freedom—these are not some abstract truths, but are the realities found in the person of Jesus Christ. Through Christ we have hope of everlasting life. Through Christ we are liberated from the wages of sin. Through Christ we are freed for joyful obedience. And so, we give unto God what is God's—our whole being...our moments, our days, our hands, our feet, our intellect, our lips, our voices—take our self, our whole selves and let them be, ever only, all for thee.

Scripture

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

Discussion Questions

1. What do we have to learn from the way Jesus answered the question "Do you think it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?"
2. Pastor Ron suggested that if the coin that bears the image of Caesar belongs to Caesar, then all of humanity bears the image of God and belongs to God. (*Genesis 1:27*). How do we, as followers of Jesus, live out our faith in a world that argues against the idea that **all** people bear the image of God?
3. How does the truth that every person bears the image of God become the great equalizer?
4. Every day, in some way, we use currency that is marked "In God We Trust". When we join our voices in the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, we say "One Nation Under God." What ideals are we holding up with these words, and if we really meant them, how would we live differently as citizens?
5. How does having hope and freedom in Christ, give us freedom in the midst of injustice, oppression, violence, and greed? What does that look like – to be a person who is truly liberated from the wages of sin?
6. Will hearing this sermon and talking about it make a difference, in any way, in your life or invite you to think in new ways about government, democracy, voting, etc.? Why or why not?

Closing Prayer

O God, we speak our theology and our faith. We live in a place where our coins say "In God We Trust" and we pledge our allegiance to a "Nation Under God". We know the Jesus stories about the lure of money and how it makes us feel secure. We know that we pay taxes and wars are funded, greed is fed, and children die because guns are easily acquired. And so,

we come before you this day, O God, knowing that our fear about money subtracts from giving our whole selves in your service. Give us courage and energy for the issues of taxation and poverty and welfare. Give us perseverance for justice and compassion and mercy. May our prayers, this day, be in the name of Jesus who watched the coins drop into the temple plate and wondered about Caesar's influence on our lives. Amen.

"Take my life and let it be, always, only, all for Thee."