

To Whom Does the What of Our Lives Belong?

Matthew 22:15-22

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Let me ask you a few questions that I am sure you can answer:

Did you put on shoes this morning, or did you come to church in a car? Do you eat cereal for breakfast, or don't you like football? Are you Presbyterian, or do you live in America? Will you obey God, or will you pay taxes to Caesar?

Welcome to the world of false dichotomies--things that are set against each other wrongly, "either/or"s that really aren't.

A false dichotomy is not much different from the question posed to Jesus by the Herodians and the disciples of the Pharisees: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? It's not that the question itself is a false dichotomy, but the alternative that Jesus faced by the question as it was posed to him does, like a false dichotomy, put him between a "political rock and a theological hard place."¹ It was a question meant to trick Jesus into saying something that would get him into trouble. It was a well-devised trap.

You see, if Jesus were to say "Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Caesar," then he would run the risk of alienating himself from those Israelites who resented having to pay taxes to Rome in the first place. Furthermore, payment of tax would be required in the currency of Rome, the denarius; on that coin was an image of Caesar, with an inscription that declared Caesar to be divine. Therefore, to deal in that currency would be considered idolatrous and blasphemous.

On the other hand, if Jesus were to say, "No, it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar," he would have been accused of treason against Rome. And the Herodians, who were Jews that were favorably inclined toward Rome, would have had Jesus arrested on the spot. A simple "yes" or "no" answer to the question would put Jesus in trouble.

But Jesus sees through the false flattery of his questioners. "Show me a coin," he says. Notice that Jesus doesn't produce a coin from his own pocket. Notice also that the very religious leaders who are asking him about the legality of paying taxes to Caesar are the same ones who DO have a coin. Jesus continues to turn the tables on his accusers: "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" When the leaders admit that it is Caesar's image that appears on the coin, then Jesus replies to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. In one simple statement, Jesus has successfully escaped the trap set by his detractors, and at the same time Jesus has affirmed that there is a place for civil government in the life of the person who desires to follow God. In fact, scripture will bear out that governments are ordained by God to foster the common good and to place limits on lawlessness that would threaten that common good. And so not only is there a place for both Caesar and God in our lives, but as faithful Christians we are called to be involved in the civic life of our society.

But through the centuries God and Caesar have had a strained relationship. I'm reminded of the time that Jay Leno noted that George Washington's inauguration speech lasted only a minute and a half. Leno's observation was, "I guess there's not much to say if you're a politician and you cannot tell a lie." Or there was the time when two women were strolling through a very crowded old cemetery. They came across a tombstone that read, "Here lies John Smith, a politician and an honest man." "Goodness," said one woman to the other. "Isn't it awful that they had to put two people in the same plot!"

Through the centuries, God and Caesar have had a strained relationship. If government is too closely identified with God, then we risk abuses of power in the name of God. If, on the other hand, God is kept at arm's length from the political sphere, we risk the endangerment of important principles that maintain order and justice in our world. Nevertheless, involvement in the civic life of our nation is our Christian duty. And so every one of us who is eligible has a God-given responsibility to do everything within our power to exercise our right to vote in the November elections.

But in truth, Jesus was not really addressing the relationship between church and state. Nor was he fully addressing the issue of whether or not certain levels of taxation are just. Instead, Jesus lays down for us a principle that says we are accountable. We are accountable to the authorities in our society (though these days not very many of them want to be accountable to the people)--Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But even more important, and in a way that is overarching all other ways, we are accountable to God--Give to God what is God's.

You see, we are people of dual citizenship. We belong to the kingdom of this world, and we belong to the kingdom of heaven. We must live as responsible citizens of both kingdoms. We are to render unto Caesar, but only subordinated to our rendering of ourselves first to God. Because while we owe certain things to Caesar, the truth that Scripture affirms for us is that everything--even that which belongs to Caesar--ultimately belongs to God.

But most people don't hear that message in Jesus' response to his detractors. Most people are satisfied that Jesus gets out of the trap his enemies are trying to set. Yet the second part of Jesus' answer is even more important than the first part. Even more than giving to Caesar what is Caesar's, we need to hear Jesus tell us to give to God what is God's.

The title of this sermon looks like it's convoluted: To Whom Does the What of Our Lives Belong? But I meant to phrase it that way, because every one of us has a life filled with "what." Some of our "what" belongs to Caesar (or to Uncle Sam). Some of our "what" belongs to the bank. Some of our "what" belongs to our families more than any one individual. Some of our "what" we keep for ourselves.

But every bit of our "what" ultimately belongs to God. The psalmist declares, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all those who dwell therein."² The last time I checked, "everything" is a pretty all-encompassing term.

Don't you see, this isn't a teaching on taxation. It's a teaching on stewardship, and on how you and I are accountable to God for everything, because everything belongs to God in the first place. Give to God all our "what", because all the "what" of our lives belongs to God.

And some amazing things happen when we give to God. For one thing, God can take the meager gifts that we offer, and he can multiply them in ways that we never could've imagined. Every year, we encourage you to save your pocket change in the Change 4 Children baskets. At the end of April, we see the result of all that collection. We collect somewhere in the neighborhood of \$3,000. And for some, that

represents a number, but not much more. Yet if we look beyond the number, we will see hundreds of African children whose lives are saved and who are given an education through that modest gift of pocket change. If you look at our budget you might see that we spend in the neighborhood of \$5,000 - \$6,000 per year on utilities for the building next door. Beyond those numbers, though, what you need to see is that more than 5,000 people pass through the doors of Helping Hands for assistance, and 30-40 Hispanic children are tutored there every week, and 20 adults are learning Spanish or English every week. When we give to God, God will take our gifts and multiply them exponentially.

There's one other thing I want to say about giving to God what is God's. In the story from Matthew, Jesus asks whose image is on the coin. What he doesn't ask, but what I would like to ask today is, "Whose image is imprinted in your being?" The truth is we were created in the image of God. We bear God's image. And therefore, we belong to God. In life and in death we belong to God, which also means that we are to give our selves over to God.

I know that we're not really supposed to talk about stewardship except during the month of November--after all, that's the way good Presbyterians have always done it! But I do want to say a few words about this year's stewardship campaign. The theme for the campaign is "What Does the Lord Require of You?" In light of today's text, the best answer might just be, "Give to God what is God's." This year we will broaden our emphasis of stewardship, because stewardship truly does entail our being accountable to God in all things. And so when we make our pledges this year, we're not only going to ask that you pledge to give a certain amount of money every week or month; we're also going to ask that you pledge to be better stewards of your relationships, of your health, of your time, how you conduct your business affairs and your vocation, how you grow in your faith with God. There will be more to say about our stewardship campaign later. But for now, I just want to make this point: If we are going to take seriously Jesus' command to give to God what is God's, we have to consider every aspect of our lives.

Jesus' words serve as a reminder that all of life is to be lived out as a debt of gratitude that we owe to God for the life he has given us. Every day is to be a giving back. Every day, as we wake up, our prayer ought to be, "Thank you, God, that I am awake. Thank you for this new day you have given to me. Let everything I do, everything I say, even everything I think be a gift to you. I am so grateful for the life you have given me. Let me live my life so that this day is a day I give back to you."

For you see, if you're going to render unto God what is God's, you'd better not hold anything back, because all the "What" in our lives belongs to God in the first place. Amen.

¹ A phrase borrowed from Michael Barram, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Oct/Nov 2008, p. 24.

² Psalm 24:1