

“The Things That Belong to God”
October 18, 2020

Isaiah 46:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

Taxes are back in the news again: who pays them and who doesn't, how much certain people pay, who's smart for avoiding them, who's a loser for paying them.

Now, most of us *do* pay income taxes, property taxes, estate taxes, sales taxes. We are told that we work until—when?—sometime in April—just to earn the money that we need to pay our taxes each year.

Taxes, of course have always caused consternation and complaints.

Ancient tax collectors were despised by most people. Most of them were unscrupulous. They made their living by overcharging the people and pocketing the profits. It was an accepted practice—but it didn't win them many supporters.

And yet “tax collectors and other sinners” are those whose company Jesus seemed to seek out. Or perhaps they sought out him. At any rate, the scorned tax collectors—along with other low life and riff raff—were quite often found at table eating with Jesus.

In contrast with the tax collectors, the Pharisees were good religious people. They worshipped regularly. They read the scriptures and prayed. They were concerned about the upkeep of the temple—they wanted the property well maintained. They hoped in the resurrection of the dead. They get a lot of bad press in the Gospels, but they were pillars of the community. As I've told you before, anytime you see or hear the word “Pharisees,” just substitute “Congregationalists” or “Some members of the United Church of Christ.” It usually works.

So maybe we can see ourselves standing there one day as some Pharisees approach Jesus in Jerusalem. They've rounded up a few Herodians—and we don't really know much about who those people were. They apparently supported the royal family and their interests were most likely secular.

Pharisees and Herodians—religious leaders and civic boosters—approach Jesus with a question about taxes.

They flatter Jesus: “We know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God...and show deference to no one.” With their flattery, no doubt, they hope to catch Jesus off guard when they ask: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

Good question—and not one with an easy answer.

If Jesus answers “No” he could be considered guilty of fomenting revolution.

If Jesus answers “Yes” he will seem to be siding with the government that was occupying Israel and oppressing his people.

But you've read the Bible enough to know that Jesus rarely gives a "Yes" or "No" answer. He escapes the dilemmas and the traps set by his opponents—and his followers—because, as his opponents said, he teaches "the way of God in accordance with the truth." The Pharisees and Herodians are right in describing Jesus as they did. He does care only for what God intends.¹

So instead of an answer, Jesus asks for a coin.

When the questioners produce one, the answer is there on the face: the image of Caesar stamped on the coin along with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus." Since Caesar's image is on the coin, it must belong to him.

So render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

That might have settled the issue.

With those words, we would have had an answer—albeit, a somewhat fuzzy answer—about paying taxes along with a brief glimpse at how one should behave in first century Palestine. And it really wouldn't have much to do with our lives today.

But as we have seen so often, Jesus is not one to leave well enough alone.

We can imagine Jesus pausing so that his questioners can take in his answer about Caesar before adding:

"And give to God the things that are God's."

Oh.

We're no longer talking only about taxes, are we?

Give to God the things that are God's.

With those eight words, everything changes—our understanding of who we are, our understanding of what we have, and our understanding of what our lives are about.

Give to God the things that are God's.

Our understanding of who we are changes.

In faith we affirm that we are—each one of us as individuals and all humankind together—created in the image of God. Since the time of the early theologian, Tertullian, in the second century, Christians have imagined that we have the image of the living God stamped upon us. And in the twentieth century, the great preacher, George Buttrick, suggested that each individual life is like a coin, separately minted in God's creation.²

¹ Reflections on text in *New Interpreters Bible*.

² George Buttrick in commentary on text in *Interpreter's Bible*.

Because we are God's coin, creatures who bear the very image of the Creator, we are free people who are able to freely respond to the love of God, we are free people who are in control of our own lives, we are free to love or hate, to build up or tear down.

The Congregational tradition has long affirmed our individual responsibility to develop our relationship with God in a community in covenant with one another. In faith, we look at our sisters and brothers in Christ and see in each of them the image, the imprint of God.

We are created in the image of God—and therefore, Jesus suggests, we belong to God. And we should give to God the things that are God's.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of who we are changes.

Our understanding of what we have changes.

What is it that we have that belongs to God?

If we speak from faith, we will answer "Everything."

In answering the Pharisees and the Herodians, Jesus is not dividing the world into two orders with two sovereigns, Caesar and God. He is clear the realm of God embraces all of life.

We are creatures of the Creator in whom we live and move and have our being. Our very life and all that gives it value—family and friends, love and desire, this earth with its changing seasons—all belong to God. Our very life and the less important things—our work, our money, our time, our abilities—all belong to God as well.

We bring nothing into the world. We take nothing with us.

The question is: how are we going to use what we have received from God while we are here?

This is why we talk about stewardship as "heart work" in this congregation. Our concern is not so much about raising money for our ministry and mission, although that is good and important. Our concern is that we grow in the appreciation of the reality that everything we have—time, talents, money, health, air, water, property, relationships, the Gospel—is given to us by God and belongs to God. We simply hold these gifts in trust. All things come from God and our stewardship is the way that we use what we have with wisdom and out of love. Life itself is stewardship—responsible care of the resources entrusted to us.

Give to God the things that are God's.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of what we have changes.

Our understanding of what life is about changes.

A life that matters reflects an attitude of gratitude.

Our greatest need is not to *get* but to *give*.

God gives much. Yet in that very giving there is a need created that God can in no way meet—our need to give thanks to God. It is up to us to fill that need.

As we focus our hearts on what God has done, we find we are seized by a desire to respond to the amazing news that God creates us, loves us, and calls us into a community of faith. We find ourselves joining with the Psalmist to sing: “What can I offer to God for all God’s goodness to me?”

This is our greatest need: to offer something to God for God’s goodness to us.

When we thank God for the many gifts we have received, we are involving ourselves in God’s great gift of being.

God gives to us in many ways. We can choose whether or not to respond. Either way, God does not withdraw the gift. If, however, we say “yes” through acts of thanksgiving and return what we have to God, then our relationship with the Creator deepens in the same way that our relationships with friends are made more fulfilling if they consist of mutual give and take.

We are giving to God—more precisely, giving *back* to God—all that we have received, all that we are.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of what life is about changes.

As we learn to give to God the things that are God’s—and that is everything, really—we discover that the giving that supports the mission and ministry of this congregation takes care of itself.

Give to God the things that are God’s.

With those eight words, everything changes—our understanding of who we are, our understanding of what we have, and our understanding of what our lives are about.

Imagine the difference we can make in our world as we learn to give to God what is God’s.

And how do we learn to give?

By giving.

By giving to God the things that belong to God—all that we are and all that we have received.