

“A Taxing Relationship”
Matthew 22:15-22
October 16, 2011

In my six years here, I've been to at least 25 church board meetings which is not a lot compared to some of you, but it is enough to learn some things, and I have learned that if tension rises up in a board meeting, it usually comes from a discussion about the handling of money. No big surprise. In families, one of primary sources of tension is the handling of money. In politics, one of the primary sources of tension is the handling of money. Even in preaching, one of the primary sources of tension is the handling of money...worrying that if you talk about it from the pulpit, you will offend or that someone will be in the church for the first time and they will think that all you talk about is money. Would all of our regular members raise their hands? If this is your first Sunday or if haven't been attending here long, please ask a regular member how often I talk about money. It's not very often.

Jesus, however, talked about it a lot – a whole lot. You can take your pick from his lessons and his parables. Some are certainly more popular than others, and the "taxes to Caesar" incident tops the list. "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" Wouldn't we all like Jesus to say, no new taxes – wouldn't we all like to hear that our faith makes us tax exempt? This sanctuary would be full, full, full if Jesus Christ made us tax-free. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?

The setting for this question is important. We are reading from Matthew 22 so we are towards the end of Jesus' ministry. He knew he was heading towards Jerusalem, and he probably knew that his death was coming. If you start to wade through all that is going on his life around this tax question, you start to pick up on an urgency in Jesus – he was running full throttle towards a head-on collision with the big eternal issues. You know that by the things was saying and doing: He drove the money changers out of the temple – hey, wrong financial choices catch up with you. He cursed a fig tree because there is no fruit on it. If you are using up God's air, there is an expectation of fruit. Jesus even said to the Jewish leaders the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and instead given to people producing its fruit. Jesus talks about the door shutting on bridesmaids without oil and the goats on the left hearing the words Depart from me.

This kind of talk sets the stage for the "taxes to Caesar" story. Jesus was challenging tradition and belief systems and allegiances and privileges and patriotism. So, yes, his discussion of the handling of money was tense too.

It would have been nice if on one of his lonely sojourns up the mountain, he had taken his laptop and created a kind of TurboTax for the ERS (the eternal revenue service). That is one way to approach the passage—as a tax return putting exactly what belongs to Caesar in these boxes and putting what belongs to God in those boxes and signing off at the bottom that this is a true and accurate statement. So, Jesus, give us the worksheet. What part of our money do you want? Is that before or after taxes? Speaking of taxes, since part of our taxes goes to helping the less fortunate; shouldn't that count as a dependent and result in a tithe reduction? If we tithe, do we get a tax break somewhere else – maybe like in our time? Exactly how much of our time do you want in the box? And, what about prayer? Muslims pray five times a day – don't we get a deduction on that because we claim ourselves as dependent on you? What goes in the church attendance box? Exactly how many verses of the Bible should we read every day and where would you like us to start? What are the criteria for helping needy people who knock on our church door – how do we know who is 'for real?' If you could just tell us what to plug in, that would be great. And, oh yeah, is it even right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

As if just the regular tension around taxes and money is not enough, there was also some prime-time drama going on with questioners themselves. There were two groups: Group #A: the Herodians who loved Rome's political power and there was Group #B: the Pharisees who loved Israel's religious power. Group #A and Group #B hated each other – they never worked together. But, they had a common threat – Jesus, and they hated Jesus more than they hated each other, and we see the marriage of politics and religion – Groups A and B joined forces. Their first strategy was to change the subject. Jesus has not mentioned government or taxes. But, Group #A and Group #B ask the question, “Jesus, is it right to pay tribute –this was a tax – to Caesar or not?” This was intended to be a trick question. If Jesus said that it was wrong to pay the tax, they would report him to the Roman government as a treasonous person and he would be arrested. If he said that it was right to pay the tax, he would be totally discredited in the eyes of the Jewish people who were looking for a Messiah to redeem them from this Roman rule. Remember, Rome's Caesar was called a god. The coin had Caesar's image on it and identified him as this god. This is why the temple had moneychangers, because people were not to give these idolatrous coins to the real God when they came to worship. For people who believed in one God who should have no graven image, to pay tribute with a coin that identified Caesar as divine was just too much. So, Jesus, yes or no, taxes to Caesar or not?

Jesus was not a “do you like me? Circle yes or no” kind of guy. He asked, “whose head is on the coin and whose title?” “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and give to God the things that are God's.” Give to Caesar the coins on which his image is stamped – that's a graven image you shouldn't have in your pocket anyway. But, give to God that on which his image is stamped. You haven't forgotten that part, have you? Remember all the way back to creation in Genesis? Genesis 1:17: “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”

See what Jesus has done here? He is brilliant! He took a political question and made it a worship question. In whose image are you stamped? Who is the object of your devotion? Who owns you? It is a question of worship –not tax code - the place of God - in your life and the never ending danger of idolatry. In my class, there are 11 of us – all from very different backgrounds and very different theological mindsets. One fellow pastors a large church, and he took a mission group from his large affluent church to the Appalachian mountains to work with a small, very poor church in desperate need of a roof repair. He says we drove up in our brand new SUV's with our brand new power tools wearing our brand new blue jeans – we drove right up to a community full of broken down cars on cinder blocks, with homes that had outhouses, children that had holes in their shoes, old people with no electricity, and not a Starbucks for over 100 miles! But, every morning, I mean every single morning we were there, that little church gave us a huge breakfast. The men fixed pancakes and bacon, the women scrambled eggs and baked biscuits. We ate like kings. When we left, I knew that these breakfasts had cost this little church – I knew they would be doing without something they wanted or maybe even needed because they had taken care of us, and I tried to give them a check. No, no, no –we wanted to do this. I tried to convince them it would be no imposition on us to reimburse them. No, you're our brothers and sisters in Christ. But, it would be no sacrifice on our part. No sacrifice on our part. That's when it hit me... it is more dangerous to have too much than to have too little.

The more we have, the less we want to share. Studies have shown that more people have, the smaller the percentage that they give. The more we have, the more it is OURS and God has nothing to do with it. When God is all you have, it is much easier to make God the top priority. Now, WE (and I include myself in that) tend to think God is NOT all we have. God is one of our

options, and we try to balance God out. If we give God this, then we can reward ourselves with that. As long as we make sure that God is at even par with the rest of our lives, we're ok.

God is not equal with work. God is not equal with sports. God is not equal with politics. God is not equal with hobbies. God is not equal with our social life. God is not looking for a separate but equal place in our lives. God is looking for first place. God is a blue ribbon kind of God because God knows that when God is not sitting in first place, it is not God who suffers. It's us. We're the ones who suffer. We're the ones who miss out. We become the victims of our own way of life bogged down in the details and the stuff and the tension and forgetting that faith is just as real. God is real. His pulse runs through your veins just as sure as your own blood.

That means that what you give to God can't be reduced to a coin. It can't be reduced to a tax code. Maybe that's why Jesus doesn't really answer the question. He wants us to struggle here. He wants us to pray. He wants us to think about our relationship with God. In our day and age, this story sounds almost like a call for repentance. Give to God what is God's. Turn back to the one whose image is stamped on you.

I know – you've got kids, priorities, automobile repairs, and the price of groceries is going out the roof. I know. It's the same for me. And, yet, we still talk about Consecration Sunday. Christmas is looming in the future, and, would Jesus just tell me what to do because I'm tense. The answer in Matthew is no. Jesus will not make the decision for me. I am going to have to do the hard work on my own of discerning where is God calling me and how I can participate in God's work and I am going to have to live with the consequences of the world I create by my choices.

Now, as your minister, I would like to make those choices for you, but that's not how it works here. Here, we talk about giving as a spiritual discipline. Here, we remember that giving is a God thing. Here, God is not a formula or an insurance plan. Our God is in a relationship with us, and that's where to start. I would invite you to consider that in the Christian faith, that relationship means that ownership of stuff and money is never in question. Stewardship is. The place to start your own pondering is not with your calculator and your income and expenditures. No matter how you calculate it, you get the same answer - it's all God's stuff – the earth and everything in it – we are just temporary stewards. So, where will you put your faith? How do we participate in what God has already started? It is kind of exciting to think about how our faith can move into all parts of our lives- the good, the bad, and the tense. So, let it. Give to God what is God's. My advice as you struggle with what that means? Start with your Savior, start with that taxing relationship, and go from there.