

Tax Evasion

Matthew 22:15-22

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By

Rev. Jeff O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

The Bible is filled with great questions. Like the story in Genesis, when God comes into the garden “. . . at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and the woman hid themselves from the presence of the Lord, God, among the trees of the garden. But the Lord called and said, ‘Where are you?’”¹ And a little later in the story after the children came along, Cain rose up against Abel and killed him. “Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother, Abel?’”² Simple but penetrating, revealing, even existential, questions.

Elijah was on the run for his life from Jezebel, hiding in a cave when the still small voice of God asked him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”³ As if to say, “Why are you running away, hiding?”

Jesus was being followed by two of John’s disciples “. . . and when Jesus turned and saw them he asked, ‘What are you looking for?’”⁴ Pilate asked a cynical, rhetorical question during the trial of Jesus. “What is truth?”⁵ he said, just before he had Jesus flogged and humiliated. The questions in the Bible are the kind that we too have to answer, for ourselves.

So maybe it shouldn’t be surprising that Jesus is asked some hard questions. I know I have some hard questions I’d like to ask the Lord when I see him face to face, about dementia, cancer, and suffering. This week in the Senate Judiciary Committee, Amy Coney Barrett was asked some hard questions about her views on “hot button” issues like the Affordable Care Act and abortion rights. It was political theater! Senator Dianne Feinstein asked her whether she agreed with Justice Scalia that the 1973 decision on *Roe v. Wade* was wrongly decided. Judge Barrett replied, “It wouldn’t be appropriate to share her legal views on the topic given that abortion cases are still prevalent in the courts.”

“It’s distressing not to get a straight answer,” Mrs. Feinstein said. Tough questions. I bet

1 Genesis 3:8-9

2 Genesis 4:8-9

3 I Kings 19:13

4 John 1:38

5 John 18:38

those who questioned Jesus might have said the same thing, "It's distressing not to get a straight answer."

Jesus has a way of redefining the issues and refocusing the questions we bring. Those who thought it was possible to judge him discovered they were, by their very actions, placing *themselves* under judgment. Jesus has a way of turning the wrong questions around with the right answers.

It's been said that income taxes have made liars out of more Americans than golf. A prominent citizen in Washington D.C. once invited President John F. Kennedy to play golf. On the first hole, Kennedy floated a beautiful shot about three feet from the pin. He walked up to the ball, glanced over at his host to concede and give him the putt. The man ignored him and stared up at the sky. "You're going to give me this putt, aren't you?" Kennedy asked.

"Make a pass at it," the man answered. "I want to see your stroke. A putt like that builds character. Besides, it will give you a little feel for the greens." With an anguished look, Kennedy said, "I work in the Oval Office all day for citizens like you. And now you're not even going to give me this putt?" The man said nothing. "Okay," Kennedy sighed. "But let's keep moving. I've got an appointment after we finish with the Director of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS)."

"That putts good," said the man hastily. "Pick it up!"

Sometimes a little humor at the expense of the IRS keeps us from crying. As someone once said, "The taxpayer is someone who works for the federal government but doesn't have to take a civil service examination." Most folks don't like taxes.

The leaders of two political parties in Palestine come to Jesus with a "damned-if-you-do" and "damned-if-you-don't" question about taxes. It was political theater. Pharisees were reformers, progressive, socially liberal, and critical of what they considered oppressive Roman taxes. Herodians were more conservative and cooperated with Rome, profiting from the tax structure. So, politicians on both sides of the tax question put the issue to Jesus. "Is it lawful for us, Jesus, to pay these kind of taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus says, no, we're Jews, and that paying such taxes amounts to collaboration with the Roman regime, it would put Jesus in big trouble as a political revolutionary. Rome would react quickly. However, if he says, sure, go ahead and pay the stupid tax. What harm is there in a bit of going along to get along?, then he looks like a compromised collaborator, for the power of empire. And, of course, none of this

was what Jesus actually wanted to talk about. But it was what the politicians wanted to talk about. Politics! It's everywhere on the eve of an election. I hear it on the evening news, read it in the newspaper, on my iPad pop ups, and on my Smartphone. So, Jesus asks for a coin. Apparently, he had empty pockets. He takes it and holds it up, "Whose image do you see on this coin?"

"The emperors!"

"Well then, it's simple. The emperor must own this coin if his picture is on it. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. But be careful. Don't give to Caesar what is God's." End of discussion. And people walked away amazed and left him.

But today a lot of us would say, "Okay, but I don't get it." What's the answer? Should we pay taxes or not? Jesus doesn't answer the question! Or does he? Maybe when it comes to things between the Lord and the state, you just never know when you may have crossed the line, when we're giving to the state what we ought to give to God. How do I know when I'm rendering to Caesar what I ought to render to God? Jesus doesn't answer that. Certainly not specifically on the issue of taxes. What is Caesar's and what is God's? That's really the issue.

Today, if someone asked Jesus the same question, Jesus would face a much trickier situation. Because if you did a national survey today regarding current levels of giving to churches and the constant complaint of people about taxes, it looks like lots of people don't believe in paying tribute to either God or Caesar. It's all theirs!

It might be worth considering who you pay tribute to during this stewardship season. Next week is Stewardship Giving Sunday when we ask you to make an estimate of giving to the church for the 2021 year. Big challenges, bigger faith! Rising Together!

Politics make strange bedfellows. United in their opposition to Jesus, these two groups set a clever trap. Seeing through their charade, Jesus responds to their question in a most unexpected way – exposing their hypocrisy. The Roman tax can only be paid in Roman currency. And it is a violation of Jewish law to have any "graven images" especially in the Temple, but the Jewish leaders can quickly produce the coin with Caesar's image without hesitation, though they are in the most holy of places.

Jesus gives me no easy answer. I'm not left with a clear certain guideline to follow in my dealing with the government, and surrounding economic and political order on specific issues.

I'm left with tension. Jesus did not solve my problems with my relationship with the surrounding political order. But he does define the nature of the struggle.

If over here, we have the realm that belongs to Jesus; the spiritual, personal, private, religious, and over there, we have everything that belongs to the state; money, power, work, protection, security. In short, everything that's really important in life belongs to the realm of the state. If I could make that kind of simple separation, then I could sort things out. But Jesus recognizes a relationship between the social order, the temporal power of the state and God's authority here and now. And rock bottom, it's all God's – in the view of the Lord.

“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.”⁶ The lands, the skies, the waters, the animals, the people. The proud, the humble, the rich, the poor, Caesar and Caesar's subjects. Christ gives me general guidance and tells me to work out the specifics. That's the hard part. As they say, “the Devil is in the details.” The Lord didn't mean for me to relax with regard to relating to God and civil authority. Christ *and* the emperor!

In his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, Yale University law professor Steven L. Carter writes, “In a sensible zeal to keep religion from dominating our politics, we have created a political and legal culture that presses the religiously faithful to be other than themselves, to act. . .as though their faith does not matter to them. To treat religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant. To imply that there is something wrong with religious devotion.” In other words, meaning in life is to be found elsewhere.

This week there's been a great deal of speculation about the faith of the nominee for the Supreme Court that fits that description. Can someone, who takes their faith seriously, be a Supreme Court justice? We seem to be uncertain about that in this country.

So how does one survive as a Christian in our society? How do I avoid “rendering to the emperor” that which ought to be given only to God? Where do I find the ultimate meaning in my life? A popular view is that the meaning in life is found outside of faith. Faith simply is added like perfume or aftershave. “By all means, don't take it seriously.” While my faith in Christ does not give me all the answers to political or social dilemmas, it does stand as a beacon, giving me direction. It's not some kind of temporary escape from the cold realities of this world. The world remains what it is — the place where I live every day.

6 Psalm 24:1

Some of us are beginning to realize that what belongs to the emperor is really on loan, from God Almighty. The power, the perks, all of it, which means that it's important for me to care about the things which are the emperor's in my world. It's important to be concerned about how people are treated in my society because they belong to God. It's important to be concerned about how truth and justice are talked about, and practiced; how we are taxed and what we are taxed for; what priority is given to war and conflict as a solution for national problems for the environment and care of the earth; and for the care of those in need. And so, it's also important to be concerned about how those whom we empower to represent us perform. Vote in this election!

You know, most crises bring us together — like 911 and flooding and fires. But this pandemic has separated us with the stay-at-home orders. We need to come together in a different way, both in the nation and in the church. In the next several weeks you are being asked to vote with both your ballot and your pocketbook. We often ask the wrong questions, but the Lord has a way of answering that which calls us into question and invites us to return to the Lord what is the Lord's. "Show me the coin. Whose head is this and whose title?"

"The emperor's!"

"Give therefore to the emperor what is the emperor's."

People of faith have discovered that we are actually God's coin! Made in the image of God, as Genesis proclaims. Surely, we belong to God every bit as much as the emperor's coins belonged to the emperor. It depends upon whose image is on it!

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

Amen

