

In God We Trust

Luke 20:20-26

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ July 21, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. ²¹ So they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. ²² Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ²³ But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, ²⁴ "Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?" They said, "The emperor's." ²⁵ He said to them, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²⁶ And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer they kept silent.

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Give to the IRS what belongs to the IRS. Sure why not? But give to God what is God's.

Give to your teacher what is your teacher's, if you want a better grade. But give to God what is God's.

Give to SMUD what is SMUD's, if you like air conditioning. But give to God what belongs to God.

Give to the TSA what is the TSA's. Which in my case was three cans of coke I forgot to take out. Over the years I've given them many beverages, a couple shampoo bottles and a really nice Swiss army knife. All right, fine. But give to God what is God's.

We are fresh off the plane from Indiana at "Triennium". Every three years about 5,000 youth and advisors from Presbyterian churches around the country spend a few days at Purdue University. Why? To encourage and remind these young people that we need to hear their voices, that they are the Church of today, not of tomorrow. Nine students and three adults from faith were a part of

34 from our Sacramento delegation. I can only hope that you get a chance to hear some of their stories and that we benefit from their leadership and questions in these next months and years to come.

On Monday night, all 34 of us gathered at the airport and began to check in our bags. The Presbytery had given us prepaid Visa cards to pay for the exact amount that our checked baggage would cost. Then we realized we were paying \$30 per bag instead of the \$25 that we budgeted, and the amount that we were told over the phone.

We tried to reason with our new friend that works for the airline, but she said they were unable to cover the extra that it would cost. To which I said to her, "Don't you realize we are on a mission from God?"

She looked at me as she grabbed another big bag and after only a short pause she said, "I thought Jesus told the first missionaries not to take any extra baggage on their journey."

Ouch! I had to pick the attendant that knew her Bible.

If I were to ask you the question about times in your life that you were unfairly charged for something, I bet we could start a pretty lengthy discussion. Overpriced utility bills, phone upgrades that were supposed to be free, medical bills the insurance wouldn't pay. For those that are younger, perhaps your allowance was withheld because money was tight, or you had to pay for your own movie when your brother or sister didn't. We can all think of times when we have wanted to approach somebody in authority and say, "What's going on? Do I really have to pay this?"

But at the moment that these people approached Jesus, this is exactly the question that many were asking. "Do we have to pay this? -- this tax the Romans are imposing on us?"

The Jews wanted to govern themselves. But they were being occupied by the Roman military. And they were forced to carry around a coin in their pocket with the image of Caesar on it, the emperor, (not the salad).

Our coins say: In God We Trust

This coin said: TIBERIUS CAESAR, MAJESTIC SON OF THE DIVINE AUGUSTUS

The Romans were telling the Jews to break the first commandment that "you shall have no other gods besides the God of Israel." (To be fair, some people felt this was justified since the Romans were bringing in roads, and other tangible forms of infrastructure.) But most of the Pharisees would have loved to have an excuse to not have to pay the tax so that they could honor their one true God and maintain their standing of righteous perfection.

There was one sub-group of the Pharisees, called the Zealots, that were already refusing to pay the tax, and running away to the hills to form their own militia to fight back against the Roman power.

So if you've ever heard a child, or an adult for that matter, cry, "It's not fair!" then you get a sense of what's going on here.

But we really need to back up and take a look at why these men are asking Jesus this question. For these spies, they're not simply wanting to know what to do with the coins. In fact, they really don't care if they have to pay the tax or not at that moment. The only thing they are trying to accomplish is to get Jesus to say "yes" or "no" to the question. Ultimately, they want to arrest Jesus. His crowd of followers is getting too large and he has become a threat, both to the church and to the civil authorities. They want to arrest Jesus, it tells us that clearly. The only thing standing in their way is the people. If they can turn them away from him, they've got him.

So they decide to use this issue of Cesar's tax to turn the crowds against him. It wasn't the first time they tried to do that and it won't be the last.

So... If Jesus says "yes", that they should pay this tax to Caesar, then these people that are following him will lose their faith in him. He is someone supposedly leading a revolution against the Romans. He would have just watered down his message and have nothing left to offer them.

On the other hand, if Jesus says "no", they should not pay taxes to Caesar, then they have solid evidence in which to arrest him. They assumed it was a foolproof, no-win situation for Jesus. And in defense of his humanity even Jesus needed a pause and realized that they were putting him to the test. So to buy time, he asked them for a coin, and ironically, someone has one! One of those spies is carrying around this symbol of the idolatrous nation of Rome even as they asked Jesus this question.

It is delegates of the church primarily, the Pharisees, that are posing the question. And so it's to the church and therefore to all of us that he responds.

Give it then, to the emperor, but... and its the rest of this question that we need to bring into focus, as the answer to the first part fades away. Give to God what is God's.

There's a question here that if we're honest, we are still asking today: As God's people, should we pay taxes if we don't agree with the way our country is being run? Is it possible to fully belong to God unless we are free of the burden of our human rulers?

Jesus says, "Yes, it is possible."

For decades, God's people were severely oppressed in slavery under the Pharaoh in Egypt. Eventually God called Moses to take a stand and to lead his people out. In the meantime, they were simply called to live faithfully to God where they were, and to remember who they belong to.

The Apostle Paul did his best work while he was in Chains in prison. He knew one way he could be faithful, and simply trust that God was continuing to build his kingdom. Instead of struggling against chains that were not going to budge, he picked up a paper and pen and wrote letters to the people of

God and told them to remain faithful and... to remember who they belonged to.

There are women that I know who felt a strong call from God into Ministry, but in their tradition they were told that they were not allowed to be ordained. I've watched them be patient and continue to follow faithfully until a door opened for them to be ordained and serve their own church. In the meantime, they needed people around them to remind them who they belong to, because even the church wasn't telling them. We could go on and on.

Notice, that as Jesus begins his answer to these people, he begins with ownership. "Tell me, who does this coin belong to?" They give him the possessive noun — the Emperor's. Apostrophe S.

"Then give it back." There's a time to be obedient in the world in which we find ourselves, even if we don't agree with its rules. For God's people here, giving back the coin actually demonstrates the limits of its power. The coin, then, or the issue of passing taxes, does not own you, it has no power over you.

So, more importantly, with that aside, he can then add: "Give to God what is God's!" Apostrophe S.

Another statement of ownership. The temptation (since we are talking about money), is to start pondering the stuff that we have that we should give up to God. Do I need to donate more money to the church? Do I need to do more for God? Do I need to volunteer in my community more? Do I need to sell my house and buy a smaller one?

Jesus was giving them an invitation into a relationship with him, a relationship that would require them to ask a much bigger question, an ongoing question. But it's into a relationship in which they never have to question again who they belong to.

The most important value for these people is that they are God's people. Hopefully, one person was listening that day that caught that, and realized he was talking about more than stuff. Hopefully, we can begin to be a people that walk out this morning

knowing without a doubt that we belong to God, and God takes great delight in us.

So, give back to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, but also, give him his boundaries. He doesn't have free reign with you, because you belong to God. There's only so much he can demand. For now, don't worry about the tax.

This denarius with Caesar's face on it is after all, only a coin. Sure it's vulgar and idolatrous. But don't let this issue of paying taxes own you. **YOU BELONG TO GOD. YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD.**

As God's people we have to work against the forces of oppression, which we can't deny are very real, keeping people in perpetual systems of poverty and racism and fear and violence. But that begins with reminding one another who we belong to in the midst of it, and not to be told that we belong to someone else or something else.

They say there are only two things certain in life. Death and taxes. And people come to Jesus to ask about both of these things in these last couple chapters in Luke. The Rich Young Ruler asks: "What must I do to receive eternal life?" He so desperately wanted an answer that would make faith more concrete, more definite, so he could make a Google task list and feel the satisfaction of checking those little boxes. Instead, Jesus says sell everything you have and give it away. He's flipping through the Bible saying, "What? I don't see that in here!" He invites him into a relationship in which he will have to constantly ask new questions everyday about what it means to follow Jesus.

The spies in the story today are going to get an answer that is similar. Jesus will tell them in a few brilliant words that their quest is not over, that they can't make following Jesus into a simple list. No! They are going to have to ask every day what it means to "give to God what is God's" in their lives.

I will admit, I want to make Christianity nice and neat, so every day I can wake up with my neat little list and check my neat little boxes.

But now I hear Jesus saying that every time I wake up in the morning I need to burn my list, get on my knees before God, and ask again, "What does it mean that I belong to You, Lord? What does it mean to give to You what belongs to You?"

There will be and have been plenty of times in which God's people need to resist against the powers of the day. There are issues now that need attention, and that we should bring before Jesus and ask what should we do? And Jesus will say back to us first, "Remember you belong to me-- offer YOU to me in relationship first. Then, I just want you to trust me to lead you in the rest of those questions."

{Paul Echoes Jesus' words here in Romans 13 when he says to obey the Civil Authorities and don't resist them. They have been put there by God. If Paul can say this in his situation, then we certainly can. There was a deep trust in God by Paul that God was by far bigger than anything the authorities could try to accomplish.}

God just wants us, because we belong to him. God wants us to really ask the question, "How can I more fully give myself to God?"

I'll end with this story:

A cheerful little girl named Jenny with bouncy curls was almost five. She waited with her mother at the checkout stand, and she saw sparkly white pearls in a pink foil box.

"Oh please, Mommy. Can I have them? Please, Mommy, please!"

Quickly the mother checked the back of the little foil box and then looked back into the pleading eyes of her little girl's face.

"A dollar ninety-five. That's almost \$2.00. If you really want them, I'll think of some extra chores for you and in no time you can save enough money to buy them for yourself. Your birthday's only a week away and you might get another crisp dollar bill from Grandma."

As soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her penny bank and counted out 17 cents. After dinner, she did more

than her share of chores and she went to the neighbor and asked Mrs. McJames if she could pick dandelions -- ten more cents.

On her birthday, Grandma did give her another dollar bill and at last she had enough money to buy the sparkly pearl necklace.

Jenny loved her pearls. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere--Sunday school, kindergarten, even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bath. Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green.

Every night when she was ready for bed, her daddy would stop whatever he was doing and come upstairs to read her a story. One night when he finished the story, he asked Jenny, "Do you love me?"

"Oh yes, Daddy. You know that I love you."

"Then give me your pearls."

"Oh, Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess-- the white horse from my collection. The one with the pink tail. Remember, Daddy? The one you gave me. She's my favorite."

"That's okay, Honey. Daddy loves you. Good night." And he brushed her cheek with a kiss.

About a week later, after the story time, Jenny's daddy asked again, "Do you love me?"

"Daddy, you know I love you."

"Then give me your pearls."

"Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll. The brand new one I got for my birthday. She is so beautiful and you can have the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper."

"That's okay. Sleep well. God bless you, little one. Daddy loves you." And gage her a kiss.

A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed Indian-style. As

he came close, he noticed her chin was trembling and one silent tear rolled down her cheek.

"What is it, Jenny? What's the matter?"

Jenny didn't say anything but lifted her little hand up to her daddy. And when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. With a little quiver, she finally said, "Here, Daddy. It's for you."

With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny's kind daddy reached out with one hand to take the dime-store necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet case and handed it to her. She opened it to find a strand of genuine pearls, even more sparkly than the others.

He had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the dime-store stuff so he could give her genuine treasure.

The genuine treasure is that we belong to God only because of the sacrifice of his only son. There is another subtle but very interesting meaning in Jesus' words, in his response to the spies. Their purpose was to hand Jesus over to the emperor. When Jesus says give to the emperor what belongs to him, he was also referring to himself. Jesus is too tricky for them this time but eventually Jesus would be handed over to the emperor. They would give to the emperor what they think is the emperor's. But without realizing it, they were also giving to God what is God's. He would fulfill the prophecy that he would be handed over to the emperor to be crucified and that God would restore him to life in the resurrection (his beloved Son that belongs to him) so that every one of us can collectively say together we belong to God and not even death (or taxes) will stand in the way.

Never.

Amen.



"The Next Step"

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Luke 20:20-26 again. If you are familiar with this story, what are you noticing for the first time?
2. What money that you have to pay each month seems most "unfair"? Have you ever approached God about it in some way?
3. Why did the spies ask this particular question? What was the real issue they were addressing?
4. Who are "they" in vs 20? What were the spies they sent hoping to accomplish if Jesus had simply said "no"? If Jesus had said "yes"?
5. If the coin bears the image of the emperor, what or who bears the image of God?
6. Based on Jesus' answer, is it possible to fully belong to God while under human rule? Read Romans 13:1. Does this confirm or challenge Jesus' words?
7. The question of civil obedience may seem like the point, but what deeper question or questions is Jesus inviting us to ask?
8. What is one area of your life that you rarely ask if it belongs to God? What do you think would happen if you trusted God with that?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How can the words "In God We Trust" on our coins be a good reminder when we spend them?