

God's Tax Policy

Exodus 33: 12-23, Matthew 22: 15-22

We hear a lot of questioning during this Presidential election season as to which candidate is going to raise your taxes. Which one will lower them? What is best for the country? What is best for you? The candidates are still talking tax policy. Their talk has a sharp edge these days as this economic crisis we're experiencing seems to be moving into a worldwide recession, at least! Just as dangerous and debilitating as the credit crunch, business failure, and increase in unemployment is the accompanying fear and anxiety for many. Meanwhile, the candidates continue accusing each other of raising taxes or of giving excessive tax breaks to those who already have plenty.

In Jesus' day, the subject of taxes was also controversial. Like members of an opposing political party lying in wait, some religious leaders tried to trap Jesus into making a mistake about tax policy. They hoped he would make a misstatement or take a controversial position on taxes – one that would either offend public sensibilities or challenge Roman authority.

As is usually the case, there is more to this story than meets the eye. There is a back story that, when understood, sheds light on the religious leaders' question and on Jesus' response. We know who the Pharisees were. They were the religious scholars who held themselves up as the supreme authority on the Jewish religious law. But there were others who came to question Jesus as well. They were called *Herodians*, obviously followers of King Herod. These were the ones who collaborated most closely with the Roman occupation. Together, this group represented a Jewish leadership struggling to balance their responsibilities in terms of their own people with their obligation for personal and civic survival under the reality of Roman rule. The survival of Jerusalem seemed to hang in the balance of appeasing the Romans and keeping their own people in line. Of course, these leaders were also concerned about their own self-interest.

The answer to all these questions was *taxes*. "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students." (*The Message* translation) This is called a set up! And then comes the hammer! "So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus was caught in a *no-win situation*. If he answered that it was lawful to pay tax to Rome, it would seem to legitimize Roman authority and the people, who considered him a revolutionary leader, would feel betrayed and turn on him. But if he answered "no," there would be real danger. Jesus would be seen as promoting sedition against Rome.

Jesus responded by asking a question. This is often a good way to respond to a tough question. The gospel writer tells us "Jesus knew they were up to no good." He said, "Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it." (*The Message* translation) What was Jesus up to? Before they knew it, Jesus' counter trap was sprung. It sounds innocent -- "Do you have a coin? Yes? Let me see it."

What was Jesus up to? “Whose head is this and whose title?” Cautiously they replied, “It’s the Emperor’s head, of course – Caesar!” The crowd may have gasped when they learned that these religious leaders were carrying coins with graven image. By this revelation, they were instantly discredited in the eyes of the crowd. Then Jesus sealed the deal -- “Then give Caesar what is Caesar’s and give God what is God’s. The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.”

What was Jesus saying? Many interpret this as Jesus’ formula for balancing being citizens of a nation and citizens of God’s realm. But balancing does not necessarily mean splitting the difference between extremes – in this case between God and Caesar. In fact, Jesus’ whole point is that there is no balance between God’s and Caesar’s. Everything belongs to God and nothing to Caesar. In terms of citizenship, Jesus taught that the balance between God’s kingdom and Caesar’s kingdom is not struck by dividing up loyalties. Balance is found only by giving absolute loyalty to God. Loyalty to any national kingdom, or any nation whatsoever, must come second.

“What is God’s tax policy? The question for us is, “What belongs to God and what does that mean for us?” What belongs to God and what is left over? I came to Kansas City to be the pastor of Crossroads Church. I came with over twenty years of experience in pastoral ministry with training and education. I came with a clear idea about the nature of leadership. I believed in the importance of a leader being part of the congregation, yet also with some space, a certain distance present so that the leader can maintain some objectivity and a strong sense of self – an appropriate distance.

I still believe maintaining both a close connection, but also an appropriate distance. This balance is very important. A funny thing has happened, however. After almost seven years of being with you, the nature of relationships changes. You have come to trust me a little more – trusting not just what I say, but who I am. And I have come to trust you with my livelihood, my family, and to a large extent, my future. That’s what Jesus meant when he was talking about *what belongs to God and what to Caesar*. Ultimately, we have to choose in our lives which we trust more: the world of Caesar or the world of God, the security that comes from money in the bank or the security that comes from trusting our lives to the movement of the Spirit.

The journeys of our lives have many times of crisis. These include the loss in death of a loved one, the failure of a close relationship, the loss of a job, failure in school, the onset of a serious illness, and even a severe worldwide economic crisis that threatens our financial futures and, by extension, many of our hopes and dreams. These crises threaten our sense of well being and security. They can call our basic identity into question and cause us to lose confidence in who we are and what we can accomplish with our lives.

But all these times of loss offer us opportunities as well. I heard the great tennis player Billie Jean King call the stress and anxiety that come with competition “pressure.” That pressure reveals your character. In a similar way, the stress, anxiety, and even fear that are part of living in crisis are opportunities, through pressure, to take stock of our character and reveal how much we may have grown since the last crisis.

Jesus' message was that the world is God's – that the reality behind everything is Spirit. His challenge to us is to trust this reality more than the realities of power, security, and safety that the world offers us. During the present economic crisis, I have found the pressure to be almost unbearable at times as I've worried about lost savings, growing debt, and increased uncertainty. At the same time, however, I have found in myself a capacity to stop, take a deep breath, and hold myself open to what lies ahead. In those times, I believe that my well being lies completely in the hands of God. I trust that future, but to embrace it requires me to actually go there and to place my trust there. That's the journey.

In 1960, the United Nations Secretary General was killed in a plane crash while coordinating relief efforts in Africa. After his death, his aides discovered a manuscript of reflective writing that was subsequently published. In this book titled *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjold described this journey:

I am being driven forward
Into an unknown land
The pass grows steeper,
The air colder and sharper
A wind from my unknown goal
Stirs the strings
Of expectation
Still the question:
Shall I ever get there?
There where life resounds,
A clear pure note
In the silence.

The good news is that the church is in the very business of this journey. We can walk together and help each other. God's tax policy is not a 10% flat tax. Churches talk about tithing, giving 10% of one's income to church, but a tithe of our income and also of our lives, is not what we owe God. 10% is not the portion of my self that belongs to God. Everything I am and have comes from God. All of my being is in God and the challenge for us is to give all of ourselves to live as citizens in God's world.

Let us not hold back in fear -- not commit just when it's convenient and not keeping open the option of going back. The direction is forward, into the future. Put your feet to the journey. Step out into the darkness and place your hand in the hand of God. Of all treasures, only walking with the Spirit is truly precious. Of all strategies, only living in the Spirit is a sure thing.