

Taxes, Tithes, Time

This morning's message is rated PG (Parental Guidance suggested.) Why? Because "dirty words" will be scattered throughout. The most frequent word being "money." We all seem to have a love/hate relationship with money. If you ask, most folks will say that they don't love money - just what it can do for us/others.

One of the reasons we tend to shy away from the subject is that we've been taught from an early age that money is the root of all evil. Actually, the quote is "the love of money" is the root of all evil. If one has too much money, one is tempted to spend it on the *wrong* things. Antidotal evidence shows that one tends to worship money because one must work hard at keeping it. Nobody (especially main-line Christians) likes to talk about it. As a matter of fact, most people would rather share intimate details about their personal relationships than talk about money. Maybe it's because our culture puts so much value on how much a person earns.

If you're careful in your study of the Bible, you'll find that Jesus and the early church talked about money a lot: 16 of the 38 parables were concerned with how to handle money and possessions; in the Gospels, 1 out of 10 verses deal directly with the subject of money; the Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions. (Howard L. Dayton, Jr., quote in Leadership Journal)

In today's parable of the taxes, Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus again. If he says, "do NOT pay Caesar", they can report him to the Roman authorities. If he says, "pay Caesar," the common people who hate Rome will think he is a Roman sympathizer and turn away from him. It appears to be a lose-lose situation.

Jesus turns the question on its head. He asks the Pharisees whose head is on the coinage to be used for payment. When

they respond, “Caesar’s,” he tells them to “Give to Caesar what is Caesar/s and to God what is God’s.” What could Jesus possibly mean?

Jesus used this “teachable moment” to remind them and us to be as attentive to our responsibilities to God as they were and we are to obligations as subjects of the empire/country. How many here would even THINK about NOT paying the IRS? Most would be too fearful of the consequences. So much so that we have pages of instructions and formulas to help us figure out what we owe. So the question becomes, what do we owe God?

EVERYTHING we have is God’s.

We tend to believe that our prosperity has more to do with our work ethic than it does with theology. I read a story about a preacher who visited a miserly but prosperous farmer in hopes of getting him to increase his giving to the church. The minister pointed out that God had given the farmer a fertile piece of land and had blessed him with sunshine and rain so that his crops would grow. Adding, “You know this farm and everything you have is really on loan from you from God. You should be more grateful.” The farmer replied, “I don’t mean to complain, Reverend, but you should have seen what a mess this place was when God was running it by himself.” Just an aside note: our word “stewardship” comes from a word literally translated as “steward” – “keeper of the pigs.”

The big question becomes what is the proper amount to give? Abram and Jacob gave a tenth of their income because Deuteronomic law says to set aside a tenth of the first fruits of the land, fields, and animals for an offering to God. The law even says to set aside a tenth for the future. (God’s first savings account?) Paul says each man should give what he has decided to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor. 9:7) Jesus says to freely you have received

so freely give. (Matt. 10: 8) – out of gratitude not obligation. Giving should be a matter of conscience -not to judge but the widow's mite was all she had.

Now let us remember, giving is not The best translation of this or the government because it has a president's image on it, what can we give God that has God's image on it?

We give OURSELVES to God because we are all created in the "image of God" – imago Deo.

We owe God more than money – we owe our lives because we are minted in God's image – male and female. When we are confirmed or join the church, we promise to be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through our prayers and gifts, our studies and service, and so fulfill our calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. When others join, we promise to guide and nurture that person by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of the church.

The Pharisees were not the only ones who like trick questions. People outside the church sometimes ask trick questions, too. That is one of the reasons we don't like talking about money. When asked we might say something like, "I need to check with Jesus for the answer." Which usually means saying something like, "I pray about 'whatever' and do what the Holy Spirit leads me to do."

Jesus liked win-win solutions to problems. Give when you're asked and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (Matt. 5:42) If you give instead of loan, you will not expect any return. Relationship is maintained. "Do unto others" Jesus says Matthew 7: 12. Now, we like to say, "Pay it forward." Give to someone else who may need it and help in any way – if money is not possible – give time – use skills, etc.

In this country, if you give money or property to a charity or church, you get a tax break-- win-win solution. You can even pick who gets the money be it church, charity, or individuals although taxes do go to help others as well as run the government.

God's image is one of a loving giving being. We are CREATED to be giving. That's why it feels so good to give – it's who we are. Just like all of God's instructions, giving to others will bring us inner joy. God loves win-win solutions, so, trust God to lead you through this coming season of giving and through life!

To God be all glory and praise. Amen.

HEARING GOD'S WORD

Prayer for Illumination

Holy One, true and living God, through the message of the gospel and the power of your Spirit make us imitators of the Lord: Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

OT Isaiah 45: 1-7

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed: ² I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, ³ I will give you the treasures of dark-ness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. ⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. ⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, ⁶ so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. ⁷ I form light and create darkness; I make weal and create woe; the Lord do all these things.

Epistle 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters^[a] beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy

Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹ For the people of those regions^[b] report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Gospel: Matthew 22: 15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹ They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

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