

Proper 24 A
St. Matthew 22:15-22
October 22, 2017
St. George's Bolton
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What Shall I Give?

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars’ and to God, the things that are God’s”

If Jesus had responded to their false praise, we would not be sitting here this morning. They had no idea who they were dealing with. They hoped to paint him at least a fool, and maybe get him to say something inflammatory that would get him into trouble and rid them of this pest that they feared would disrupt their lives. It did not play out that way. Their flattery did not work.

Neither did the topic of their question. Everyone hates to pay taxes, then and now. I have never heard anyone say how thrilled they are to pay their taxes. Rather, there is always a sense of relief that they did not owe more. No one wants to see their hard earned money wasted, or worse yet, used for the personal benefit of some politician or their family or friends. That was true in the time of Jesus, and it is true in our own time. There is nothing new under the sun. In the time of Jesus, the most hated people were the tax collectors. These were Jewish people hired by the Romans to collect their taxes from them, thinking that it would be easier to have one of their own collect them. They became hated because the Romans also allowed them to collect money over and above the tax for themselves to pay for their services, and this in many cases became a heavy burden upon the working people. So if you think we have it bad, boy what a mess taxes were in those days. That is why Matthew, the tax collector, was on the bottom rung of society that was held in contempt by many who came to hear Jesus speak. If Jesus wanted to become popular, he could have focused on cursing the burden of taxes and encouraged his followers not to pay them, to shun the tax collectors and to keep their hard earned money.

But that was not the case. Instead, he picked up the coin they brought and pointed to the image of Caesar, the Roman emperor on the coin of the realm, and asked who this was. Then he told them to render unto Caesar the things that are

Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. Jesus did not condemn the taxes, but encouraged people to fulfill their earthly responsibilities.

It was not as though people do not get something back from their taxes, either. In the time of Jesus, the Romans protected Israel from the dangerous world and invaders who surrounded them. They kept the peace and order. They protected the people of Israel from crimes and they set up water utilities to bring water to their cities. They built roads and brought trade to the land.

We also get things for our taxes. Protection from the enemies that would attack us and criminals who would harm us; life saving medical help and fire services; a safety net in case we have troubles; education as needed at any age; roads, libraries and parks; care for the less fortunate and elderly (thank you- I will be one of those soon enough) and so many other benefits. It is not as though we get nothing for our taxes, complain though we feel we must.

God says render unto Caesar the mammon that bears Caesar's image. Who then and what bear's God's image?

The image of God is all over God's handiwork. The sky, the forests, the water, the plants and gardens all reveal the glory of God. Even the smallest things are a reflection of the image of God. And as the Bible says in the book of Genesis that we are created in the image of God, male and female he created us. Whose image is upon you?

If that were not enough, remember that in Baptism, after the water was poured over your head, the priest or bishop would take some Holy Oil called Chrism, and would make a hardly visible sign of the cross upon your forehead. Therein is yet another mark and image of God upon you. Render then, what is God's to God.

What would that look like? Truly, we get everything we have from God. "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee."

God wants us to give all we have. He tells the rich man to "Go sell what you have and give the money to the poor." The rich man, who was kind, just, and obedient to God's laws, as he went away from Jesus, was noted to be sad after hearing this because he had many possessions he could not let go of easily. I am that rich man as I stand before you this morning, and I too, struggle to live out these words and the admonition of Jesus. And I also know that when I leave this life, I can take nothing with me.

The simple Christmas poem by Christina Rossetti has special meaning to ponder here, when we ask, what shall I give?

“What can I give Him

As small as I am?

If I were a shepherd

I’d give Him a lamb.

If I were a wise man

I’d do my part.

I know what I would give Him

I’ll give Him my heart.

What can I give Him

To show Him my love?

The stars smile on Him

And twinkle above.

They sing me a song

That shines in the dark.

I know what I’ll give Him,

I’ll give him my heart.”

Giving to God begins and ends in the heart. It is a heartfelt desire to give. Don’t give until it hurts, because giving to others never hurts, and is always a joy by which the rewards double anything you give away. Giving is a way of life, a way of being in the world. We are called to be kind and generous.

Yes, pay your taxes and pay your bills and pay off your debts. Then look for ways to give. You will see them in your heart. Give not because it hurts, but because you love to give and have been given so much yourself. AMEN