

October 22, 2017  
Pentecost 20  
Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-13 (the inspiration for "Joy To the World")  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22  
The Tax Trap  
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Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It's that time of year, again! Have you seen your property tax statement? Have been following the news out of Washington, DC regarding the current administration's tax plan. Are you one of those planners who is already gathering information for your 2017 personal tax return? Whatever your feelings about taxes, they are part of our life. We are required to "render unto Caesar".

Judging by conversations I have had, few of us "likes" to pay taxes. Neither did the Israelites in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, though perhaps their distaste was for a different reason. At the time Mark was writing this gospel, the people of God were, once again living in captivity, this time under the rule of the Roman Empire. They were allowed to worship in their synagogues where they continued to pay temple taxes for the benefit of the temple leaders, the chief priests, elders, Pharisees, scribes, etc. At the same time, they were required to pay civil taxes.

The temple taxes were paid with plain coins, temple coins. The civil taxes could only be paid using coins with the image of Caesar on them.

By this time, Jesus' ministry had the leaders of the temple and the leaders of the Empire so riled up that they put their heads together to hatch a plot to trap Jesus between blasphemy and sedition. Guilty of either charge, Jesus could be put to death. When the Pharisees – the church leaders – join forces with the Herodians – the civil leaders, it is a puzzling alliance. Normally, these two groups would be diametrically opposed to one another, especially on questions of civil authority. But, they were desperate to trap Jesus.

The Pharisees initiate the conversation with flattering lips and hostile intent. Their preamble is brilliant: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, you tell the truth, you show deference to no one and you do not regard people with partiality". Flattery will catch your opponent off-guard, right? The question is intended to be a tricky one. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Coming from the Pharisees, it's not a surprising question. Jewish law forbade Jews from paying civil taxes. They were expected to pay only Temple taxes. Yet, under Roman occupation, they were also required to pay civil taxes. If Jesus answers no, the temple leaders can turn him over to the Herodians who will charge him with sedition. If Jesus answers yes, the Herodians can leave the matter in the hands of the temple. Both sides hold their breath waiting for Jesus' answer.

We have hung around with Jesus long enough by this time that we can predict his "non-answer-turned-question". Jesus knows this is a trap. He knows that both groups are looking for a way to shut him up and shut down his movement.

Rather than relying on wit or defending civil law or religious law, Jesus asks to see a coin that is used to pay Roman taxes. Whose picture is on the coin? Well, would you look at that! It's Caesar's! So, if Caesar's picture is on the coin, it must belong to Caesar. Give it to him. And while you're at it, give to God the things that are God's.

Jesus' answer may appear like a clever dodge. While both groups of leaders want Jesus to declare for or against the tax, Jesus instead speaks in favor of both. Instead of focusing on the question of temporal loyalty Jesus asks a more important question: "In whose economy do you live? The Empire's or God's?"

It is not a new question. Isaiah sings a song of Cyrus, the new king over Israel. Cyrus was not an Israelite, but was chosen to rule Israel. This didn't go over well with the Israelites. Yet the prophet Isaiah declares that Cyrus is the king to be welcomed. Not because he is from among God's chosen people, but the opposite. His image will be the image of God to every nation.

Psalms 96, the foundation for the hymn "Joy To the World" is similar in its directive. Through the king God's name will be praised in all the nations. All of creation will sing God's praise.

The Apostle Paul rejoices that the Christians in Thessalonica are telling everyone the good news about Jesus. Bottom line, the reign of God, brought to earth through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is proclaimed with joy, no matter who the civil ruler is.

This text is not intended to be the basis for arguing Christianity's relationship to the government – the Empire over against Christianity's devotion to God. It is not an either/or question. We live in the kingdom of the world where the currency bears the image of Washington, Lincoln or Jefferson. AND we live in the Kingdom of God where the image of Jesus Christ is imprinted on our hearts at baptism. We live in the Kingdom of God where we pay nothing for the banquet set before us. We have no need for the currency of the Empire bearing the image of earthly kings. We bear the image of God, to whom we give praise and thanks because all that we need has been bought and paid for on the cross and at the empty tomb.

Thanks be to God!