

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
 Matthew 22:15-22

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Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

I have heard there are loopholes in the tax code, such that it can be interpreted that paying real estate and income taxes is voluntary. I'm skeptical of any financial scheme and don't believe there's any such thing as a free lunch. And yet, every year at tax time, I hear of people who simply refrain from filing their income tax forms and never suffer any consequences. It also seems that there are folks who lie on their income tax return with little recourse. Michael, a former colleague, claimed every piece of clothing he owned as a business expense. Because clergy are considered self-employed, we have complex tax forms and codes. One of the forms we return to our accountant asks us to list any professional expenses involving attire—it's meant to give us a tax break on the expensive vestments (this pulpit robe cost over \$400!) we wear by virtue of our vocation. Well, by the way Michael told it to the tax man, if it weren't for the fact that he's a minister, he'd be naked all of the time because he went so far as to claim his underclothes as a work-related expense.

Michael's excuse for lying on his tax forms is that he gives the money he would pay for taxes to better causes—like his church or other favorite charities. I trust that's the case, but I wonder if what he's doing is ethical—or even Biblical. I don't think it's Biblical because, in this morning's gospel passage, Jesus teaches the religious leaders and his disciples that the taxes that are due to Caesar—the Roman Emperor at that time—should be paid to Caesar. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's, our Savior says. And so it may appear, on the surface, that this passage is a mandate for us all to pay our taxes. But, if that's all we take away from it, then we're missing its depth and rich message for us today.

This directive from Jesus is about a situation far more taxing than just paying our taxes. The religious authorities were trying to frame Jesus. They put him in a lose/lose situation. First they offer words of flattery. If we didn't know better, we'd think that they were saying nice things about Jesus, things about him that we believe to be true and seek to emulate ourselves—being a person of integrity who teaches the truth and isn't swayed by what others think. And though Jesus may have been all of those things, the religious leaders didn't really believe their words—they were mocking him. They're more engaged in playground taunting and bullying than in participating in any real theological or philosophical conversation. And they were doing it because, at this point in his ministry, near the end of his life, Jesus is deemed an "enemy combatant" by the Roman and religious authorities. He is, in a word, dangerous. Not because he carries a weapon or threatens violence, but because he threatens the very existence of the empire and the religious institution by failing to participate in the status quo. When asking Jesus if it's okay to pay the tax, the leaders of the Temple are trying to set him up. If he says, 'Yes, pay the tax,' then he risks alienating his Jewish followers who resent and probably despise the Romans for invading and occupying their country. To sell out to the Romans would be a betrayal of his people and his heritage. Thus the religious officials would be able to discredit him and probably turn off many of his followers if he said they shouldn't pay the tax. But, if he were to say, "No, don't pay the tax," then he would be subject to arrest by Roman officials because he's condoning breaking

the law. It's a lose/lose, taxing situation. But, as is always the case, Jesus trumps conventional wisdom and asks for the kind of coins that are to be used to pay the tax. Because it's a tax imposed by the Romans, only Roman coins can be used to pay it. And, just as he suspects, the religious leaders—who are supposed to deny and reject all identity and claims of the Roman Empire, produce said coins, thus revealing that they themselves have sold out to the Roman Occupiers. And that is why Jesus calls them hypocrites, because they themselves have done just the same dreadful thing—cow-towing to the Romans—that they were trying to frame him for doing.

And though we might enjoy hearing about the wise antics of Jesus, and we may root for him in his many confrontations with both Jewish and Roman officials, the story may seem to hold little bearing on our lives today. Sure, Jesus taught those Roman and Jewish leaders a lesson, but what might this passage say to us?

Well that, my friends, is a bit more difficult to parse out because Jesus' concluding statement is profound, but vague. He advises the Religious Leaders, the Roman Officials, his Disciples, and us of the same thing—"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Which leaves us with the question—well, *what is God's?* And what of ours is God's that we are to be returning to God? When it comes to what to give to Caesar—or in our case the government—there are tax laws and codes that tell us how much to give and when and there are consequences when that doesn't happen. Though it may be mighty painful to pay our tax bill or look at that part of our pay stub that reminds us of just how much of our hard-earned pay is being collected for taxes, it is not difficult to figure out how much we owe, and if it is, then we hire an accountant to tell us what to pay. But the same can't be said for giving to God what is God's because God doesn't send a quarterly statement, a tax bill, or an invoice.

When we wonder what we should give to God, in terms of our money, there is some biblical precedent, based on the Old Testament books of Malachi and Leviticus that suggest we should tithe, meaning we should give 10% of our income to the church. I have heard folks haggling over this one—is that 10% pre- or post-taxes? Is that just 10% of our income or of our *total* assets? If one carefully reads these texts, it can be interpreted that the tithe was really more of a tax paid to the Temple that covered some of the expenses that our taxes do today—programs like welfare, social security, and Medicaid. And so, if that interpretation is true, then perhaps that means the tithe is an outdated form of giving. And yet, many of our more conservative brothers and sisters in faith still believe in the tithe and promote it. I have even heard of religious groups that go so far as to have members submit their W-2 forms to the church finance committee and then expect them to give fully 10% of their income. There was a rabbi in Brookline, MA who had a member of his religious community claiming that he couldn't afford to increase his pledge. A couple of weeks later the member bought a new Lincoln Town Car. The next day the rabbi and a leader of the community were on the guy's doorstep because it had become obvious that he could indeed have increased his pledge. The Episcopal priest in the town we lived in in Rhode Island was known to schedule lunches with members of the congregation under the guise of catching up with them and then he would bring statements of their giving along with him and suggest how much they should raise their pledge for the following year.

So why do some people tithe? What compels them to give 10% of their income? When I researched the meaning of tithing on the internet, I found a lot of rhetoric about God blessing someone in response to that person tithing. Well friends, I admit that, though I would like to, I do not yet tithe and God has done anything but withhold God's blessings from me. I feel incredibly richly blessed and to suggest that God responds to us based on something we do or do not do—well that's just rubbish that is an affront to our doctrine of grace and our religious sensibilities. And as long as we're on the topic, and I don't know it to be true—but I have a feeling that Donald Trump and the likes aren't tithing and yet he

seems to be experiencing some mighty fine blessings in his life. And just one more point on that issue, if folks are tithing because they're expecting to be blessed in return, then that's not the kind of giving I think God wants from us—God wants our gifts and talents, no strings attached. I believe God wants us to give of our time, talent, and treasure because we want to give, not because someone else has told us to give or we feel like our offering is some kind of lottery ticket—that we play the abundant blessings lotto every time we give in hopes that some fine booty is coming our way.

But still, even if we determine that the tithe is an Old Testament principle of giving that no longer applies to us, or if we feel it does still apply but wonder about the mathematics of it—pre/post tax. Do we give 10% of our income or of our entire net worth—we're still left with Jesus' rather vague directive about giving to God what is God's. Because, aren't we taught that everything is God's? Does that mean we're supposed to give it all to God and live like paupers—a whole world of Gandhis if you will?

Again, Jesus doesn't tell us directly. It reminds me of my elementary school principal, Mr. Winzeler. Mr. Winzeler scared the be-jeebers out of me. He was an ex-marine, a principal of the old testament variety who believed firmly in the spare the rod, spoil the child mind-set. Because we were all scared out of our whits of him, we really, really wanted to avoid his wrath and behave within the outlined policies of the school. Problem was, there weren't many outlined behavioral policies at Gorham Fayette Elementary School. So, almost every Friday morning as all the students in the school were crammed into the school gymnasium for our weekly assembly, kids would ask Mr. Winzeler various questions about what was acceptable behavior. "Can we throw snow balls at recess?" "Can more than one of us go down the slide at a time?" "Can we chew gum in the hallway?" "Can we wear shorts to school?" So many questions—and the same answer to every one—"Use your own best judgment" he would tell us. Ugh—we just wanted an answer to what were very simple questions and he gave us an answer similar to the one Jesus offered the Religious Officials—profound and vague—use your own best judgment.

And unfortunately, that's the answer to our question about how much we should give—use your own best judgment as you give to God what is God's. And as long as we keep asking the question—how much should I give—we're going to run into the same answers—or lack there of—I'm afraid.

Judy Walter referred me to an article this week that puts a new spin on this question. The article is written by a financial guru who helps people get out of debt. The article helps people to understand how, by giving away some of their money, they are actually taking control of their finances and beginning the long-struggle of getting out of debt. And though it offers practical advice, I think it also a good lesson in Christian stewardship. Reading it made me feel like I WANTED to give more, it did not guilt me into feeling that I SHOULD give more.

Giving proves the condition of my heart. The very act of giving is an expression of gratitude. It is a tangible way I can say "thank you" for everything I have and for every way I have been blessed. Without gratitude operating in my life, more is never enough and nothing brings genuine satisfaction.

Giving connects me to the world. We live in a materialistic society. We have so much that it is easy to become complacent, perhaps even spoiled. Giving keeps me from being self-centered. It opens my eyes to the big picture -- to the needs of others. It allows me to see the world through eyes of compassion. I see how vast the need, how short the time and how unimportant my stuff is by comparison.

When I connect to the world, I allow my heart to be broken. It is in that brokenness that my pride and arrogance can be washed away. Then I become contented with what I have, and that makes me more useful.

Giving opens my eyes to who I am. When I take a step of faith and give back the first part of my income, I make statements of affirmation about my past, my present and my future.

Giving teaches my brain that I have more than enough. When I give, I tell myself I am beyond scarcity. It is affirmation that someone greater than myself is in control; I have what I need and I am grateful. Giving reminds me that I am only the caretaker of the resources I've been given to manage. I am a steward and I am responsible for the decisions I make.

The author doesn't answer the question—how much should we give to God. But, she does offer us refreshing insights into why we might want to give.

Ultimately, the answer to the question of what to give to God is up to you. And, I think, that might be Jesus' point in this lesson—that it is our own responsibility, an expression of our own gratitude, desire, and commitment—to determine what to give, to give because it brings us great joy to drop that envelope in the plate, not because we feel obligated to do so. It reminds me of Valentines parties in elementary school—back when each kid in the class had to give every other kid a Valentine—that was the rule—either you gave to everyone or no one. And I'm not suggesting that's a bad policy, but we did all see through it as we got older. And so then, in middle school, when it was up to us to decide to whom we wanted to give a Valentine, well then, those cards meant so much more. I'll never forget my first non-obligatory Valentine from a boy—Steve Housier. It meant so much that I still have it. And I think that may be how God feels about our gifts—the ones given out of obligation are accepted and appreciated, but the ones given out of joy, love, and gratitude, well those are the gifts that God really cherishes and keeps the memory of forever.