

Exodus 33:12-16

12 Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' 13 Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." 14 He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." 15 And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

1 Thessalonians 1:2-7

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 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.

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.

“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's;”

This statement of Jesus' is among the most remembered and often quoted from the New Testament, often done so in the King James Version: “and unto God the things that are God's.”

I spent some time on Thursday night this week flipping channels between the two town hall meetings set up for our presidential candidates, hoping to weigh their words and opinions prior to the upcoming election. How many of you were doing the same? Ironically, the town hall meetings showed how this question on taxes put to Jesus by the Herodians and the disciples of the Pharisees is most relevant today, and how the issue of taxes can still cause a stir, as we saw the president himself responding to inquiry on his own track record of rendering unto Caesar the things of Caesar. Regardless of where we happen to stand politically, a question on taxes and the president's accountability to this dimension of civic life still draws national attention and invites public scrutiny. Why is that? What is it about taxes, and why should this question to Jesus as to their lawfulness matter in the life of faith?

The short answer to these questions is this: “You belong to God.”

You belong to God. Keep this thought in mind as we explore these texts and their relevance to us today.

We read at the outset of the passage from Matthew:

“Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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.”

Who are these people who come to question Jesus now, in these his final days before the crucifixion, as he is preaching and teaching in the Temple of God in Jerusalem?

Throughout the Gospels, we consistently hear the voices of people called the Pharisees. These figures were the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day, and there were upwards of 6,000 of them throughout the region of Palestine when Jesus walked the earth. These men were of certain special lineage, trained from a very young age in the Law of Moses, and they were determined to uphold and preserve that Law as they understood it - to uphold the Law for them was to uphold the salvation of the Jewish nation. Their zeal for protecting the Law had caused them, over the generations, to create what they called a "fence around the Law," which was a helpful list beyond the 613 laws of Moses designed in theory to prevent someone from inadvertently breaking one of these laws, but in practice making obedience to God an onerous task and heavy burden.

The Pharisees as a group were a by-product of the exile to Babylon, and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in the year 587 or 586 B.C. The people had understood both the destruction of the temple and exile as being a result of generations of disobedience, of their ancestors' straying from the first covenant, failing to hear the voices of the prophets, and incurring God's wrath upon them all. The thinking behind the Pharisaical way was an idea that, "If we preserve the Law and do all it says, we'll prevent further calamities." In their zeal to preserve the Law of Moses, however, the Pharisees lose sight of God altogether, and even prevent others from knowing God as well (Matt 23:4). Jesus' harshest words in Scripture are directed to the Pharisees.

Who are the Herodians? We do not know too much about them, but the name of this group suggests ties to the legacy and political maneuvering of Herod the Great, the king who sought to kill Jesus in the first chapters of Matthew's gospel, when he learned of Jesus' birth. Herod was part Jewish, part non-Jew, and he ruled over the land of Palestine for more than 40 years. Herod had gained control of the land through political cunning, and

because of his connection to Caesar Augustus in Rome. Herod controlled the people under his rule through violence and oppression, and expanded his power through his relationship to the Roman emperor. He was famously paranoid, killing his wife and several of his sons whom he believed to be plotting to overthrow him. Beyond the quest to rule over more cities and territories and to preserve his power, though, Herod devoted his life to impressive building projects throughout the land of his reign, including rebuilding the Temple to God at Jerusalem, in a vain attempt to garner praise from his Jewish subjects. He lived a life devoted to an incessant quest to exalt himself, prove his worthiness to Rome, to the people, and to posterity. In many ways Herod was a brilliant engineer, and the ruins of his building projects show he had a remarkable mind for design. But today they are still just that, ruins. Upon his death, Herod's kingdom was divided into four territories, and his son Herod Antipas ruled the area of Galilee, where Jesus lived most of his life and did most of his teaching. This group then, the Herodians, applied the cynical strategies of violence, extortion, and political scheming to gain and stay in power.

The Pharisees and Herodians, each in their own way then, sought to influence and control the lives of the everyday people. The Pharisees monitored the Jews in their adherence to Mosaic Law, and "how well" they were keeping the Covenant with God, and the Herodian vassals policed the Jews to quell any stirrings of rebellion under the strain of heavy taxation and oppressive, violent control. Though they despised one another, these groups did work together to preserve the religious/political system of their day, the same system that guaranteed their power. They were mutually dependent upon one another, since the Pharisees gave religious legitimacy to Roman occupation, the Romans being the political power behind the Herodians, and the Romans permitted the Pharisees to carry out their customs, as long as they remained subject to Roman rule. In many ways these leaders created a miserable, oppressive scene: full of spies, extorters, violence, and corruption. Subject to this system, the authorities who worked to preserve it had no concern for human life or dignity, save their own. What was the phrase I asked you to remember at the outset? You belong to God.

The introduction to their question to Jesus, then, is laden with irony: “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.” This is a true statement, because Jesus indeed is sincere and truthfully teaches the way of God, showing deference to no one and not regarding others with partiality. They know this, since it is precisely his integrity and refusal to be intimidated that have so infuriated them, and which has exposed their hypocrisy. They are pretending to praise Jesus for exactly the qualities that so threaten them, qualities so far from their own. They say these things in an attempt to throw him off his guard.

In asking him this question however, “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” these political and religious authorities seek to place Jesus in a political double-bind, applying the same pressures that keep them in check: fear of the crowds, fear of man. For Jesus to answer yes to their question in this public place is to alienate many of his followers (such as the zealots from Galilee, who are scheming to violently rebel against Roman rule, and many of whom would have been within earshot), and be seen as a collaborator with Rome. To answer no is another danger to Jesus, since his enemies would very gladly bring news of such a response to the Roman authorities present in the Antonia Fortress, located a mere 100 yards from where this exchange takes place. The tax in question was the poll tax, a tax which all property owners were required to pay, and which had been around for 25 years by that point. The Pharisees would have grudgingly paid it, despite the humiliation, and the Herodians would have as well, since it preserved the tenuous peace they had with Rome.

The questioners of Jesus likely felt some dismay, then, when Jesus, who sees through their duplicity, responds thus: “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.”

The denarius is a silver Roman coin, the only coin accepted as payment of the tax. It bears an image of Emperor Tiberius' head, along with an inscription declaring him to be the son of the 'god' Augustus and 'goddess' Livia, his parents, whom the Romans regarded as gods, and who they were obliged to worship. Tiberius would be declared a 'god' upon his death as well. For now, however, his title on the coin is *Pontifex Maximus*: Supreme High Priest - a disconcerting name, at the very least, "for any Jew who's committed to worshipping the one, *true* God, Yahweh."¹

Then he [Jesus] said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

Jesus' reply astounds them. Why? First, in essence, he has said yes - give to Caesar that which is Caesar's. Pay your taxes: even to a despotic, blasphemous, oppressive gentile regime. And these taxes did not go to social services or to help fund schools and new hospitals, these taxes, after some of the moneys were siphoned off by corrupt tax collectors like Zacchaeus, would go to feeding the soldiers and paying the salaries of the very armies that occupied the land, funding the same political powers which in just a few days' time would crucify Jesus. His response to this question is the foundation for the rest of the New Testament's teaching on paying taxes to the State, and it signifies to his opponents and followers alike that his reign is not one like the reign of the Caesars', and that his kingdom does not mean a return to the glory days of Israel. His response also signifies to those listening that, as awful as the power of the Roman State is, it still has a claim on them. Pay your taxes.

"And [give] to God the things that are God's." These are the words that likely stunned Jesus' questioners into silence and which send them away in hasty retreat. What are the things of God? Everything belongs to God, God, who is the author of creation and the foundation of everything that is. God,

¹ Steve Wilmhurst, *A Ransom for Many: the Gospel of Mark Simply Explained* <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ransom-for-many/Chapter-19-The-end-of-the-old-regime-Mark-12-13-44>; 2011

the authority to whom even the Caesars must one day answer, to whom the religious leaders must give an account, the one whom they have failed. These words continue the thread from the parable of the wicked tenants, his indictment of them, these leaders who have neglected to bring the fruit of the land to the owner of the vineyard, and who have sought to keep it all for themselves in the name of God - and who have so callously abused and exploited the people's trust. All things belong to God; to so take his name in vain is a most grievous sin - and these religious leaders know they stand accused.

Do you remember the phrase again? You belong to God. The Pharisees entrust their salvation to outward appearances, to deception and lies to ensure the continuation of their control. They are held captive to their lies, and have no response for Jesus. The Herodians entrust their salvation to connections, to political maneuverings and to the violence of the Roman empire. They too are in bondage to their schemes, and to the power of the occupiers. These are the teachings of the world: money, deception, and power are what ultimately have the final say. But Jesus stands before them all, unswayed and undeterred from every political pressure, fearless in the face of their onslaught and the growing prospect of his death. Even his request for a coin from an onlooker speaks to his poverty. He did not have a coin on him: Do we pay taxes to Caesar, teacher, you who are a man of integrity and truth, who will not be swayed by public opinion and fear of the crowd - precisely the forces that control us?

Watching the exchanges between candidates and their questioners this week, and in light of this week's passage, I was thinking about loyalties. To render unto Caesar the things of Caesar, beyond paying taxes, is the responsibility we share as citizens, to take part in the governing of the United States, by casting our ballot in a few short weeks. As you go to the ballot box or send in your vote by mail, remember that you do so as an expression of the truth that all things belong to God. You belong to God, and the U.S. government, by design, has entrusted certain rights and privileges, certain responsibilities to you, to contribute to its work to live out its vision of one nation, under God, as many of us said each day in the

Pledge of Allegiance at school. And this is a vision we all contribute to or we distort, through the millions of choices and driving motivations that influence our lives and the lives of others. The choice is ours, each day it is today, to be captive to the truth, and so be set free, or to be kept in bondage to the lies that corrupt and distort, oppress and deny. And while the vision of one nation under God has been marred with the stain of racism, historical and present-day injustices, sins of abuses of power, slavery, and genocide, a society today where countless contributing members are denied any participation or voice - our undocumented brothers and sisters - still, each of us will give an account before our Creator.

Each of us, in casting our vote, is offered a task of discernment and an opportunity to express ourselves in full trust that it is God, ultimately, who is sovereign, and our public leaders, like the ones confronting Jesus in the lesson today, will likewise stand before God to answer for how they responded to what has been entrusted to them. They too, each of the candidates, belongs to God, ultimately, and will one day, offer an account before the Eternal One who embodies love and justice in all its fullness of light and truth, and answer for their upholding of what God entrusted to them. Caesar too will have to answer for the coins calling himself high priest and son of god. We all will stand before the One who has a final claim on our every loyalty, and we will give an account for how we have honored what has been entrusted to us, for good or for ill.

God understands the pressures of the crowd and the fear of death, the temptations and stressors the powers of this present age exert on us to confuse, confound, and otherwise corrupt our lives. In the life of Jesus we see God in human form exposed to every vulnerability and trial, every human scheme and demonic ploy to throw him off his task, and he overcomes it all. Upon his baptism, as he rises up from the waters of the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, the beloved, in him I am well pleased." In Jesus we see a life whole-heartedly and sacrificially devoted to declaring God's call for you to receive and live out this same reality and

unshakeable trust, if you have received his invitation. If you have not, know that today, Jesus is calling you to pass through the baptismal waters with him, to move from death into resurrection life, as you persevere in that same trust and faith, to lay down every sin that entangles along the way: "You are my son, you are my daughter, beloved, in you I am well pleased." When you stand in this trust, when you rest assured in the truth of who you are before God, who loves you in spite of you, who took on every sin for you, who poured out his life to extend forgiveness and life to you, no power of hell, no fear of the crowd, no other loyalty can have a claim on you. You are the beloved. Give to Caesar that which is Caesars? Yes, but you belong to God!