

**Matthew 22:15-22** <sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup> 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.” <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Matthew 22:15-22

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“Stewardship 2: A Part of Something Holy”

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“The local bar patrons were so sure that their bartender was the strongest man around that they offered a standing \$1000 bet. The bartender would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass and hand the lemon to a contender. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice out of the lemon would win the money. Many people had tried over time (weightlifters, longshoremen, and so forth) but nobody could do it. One day a short, thin, balding, little man came into the bar, wearing thick, black-rimmed glasses and a drab, gray suit. He announced to the bartender in a faint, warbled voice, “I’d like to try the bet.”

“After the laughter had died down, the bartender said, “okay,” grabbed a lemon, and squeezed away. Then he handed the dry, wrinkled remains of the lemon rind to the guy in the suit. The man clenched his fist around the lemon and the crowd’s laughter turned to total silence as one drop fell into the glass—then another and another. Six drops, in all, were squeezed from the emaciated lemon rind.

“As the crowd cheered, the bartender paid the \$1000, and said to the man, “You’re obviously not a lumberjack or a weightlifter. What do you do for a living?”

“An almost imperceptible smile came across the little man’s lips as he replied in a quiet, but satisfied voice, “I work for the IRS.” [4 ¶s from Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories*, (Nashville: Word Publishing) 2000, c1998.]

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?

Really? Here we are, two weeks and two days out from an election. Both parties are spewing rancor. There’s a ton of tension around financial realities, racial relations, this bizarre pandemic. And this is the text for the day! Politics, money, and religion...and a sermon. Well, what could go wrong here!

Now, for those of you to whom the very topic of politics or financial stuff is enough to stir up instant distaste, take heart. This is not a political sermon. Because this text isn’t really about politics or finances. I stand convicted by the Holy Spirit for thinking a little bit too much like a Pharisee. That’s what they think this is all about, but that’s not what Jesus thinks.

Remember with me that the Pharisees are getting nervous. Jesus is too popular. He’s rocking too many boats. He’s becoming a real problem and not just a minor annoyance. He’s turning over

tables, he's telling difficult parables, and so they get together and think up some questions to try to stump him and trip him up.

"What do you think, Jesus? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? This must have seemed like the perfect ploy to the Pharisees. Would Jesus play to the gallery and encourage disobedience to Rome? Such boldness would have won him followers but at the expense of pitting himself against the Roman government. If, on the other hand, he sided with Rome, he would alienate the common people who despised the outsiders who had conquered them, who collected taxes to support an outside occupation of God's promised land. The Pharisees could not lose here, and Jesus could not win.

"Matthew tells us, however, that Jesus was "aware of their malice." He asked them to show him the money for the tax." [2 ¶s adapted from "God and the IRS" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

I don't know how many of you have ever seen a Roman coin from this time period, but they do exist. Archeologists have dug them up, and even the common lay person would probably not have too much trouble figuring out what it is. They're not that different from ours, really. There's a head on one side and a sun or a warrior or an animal or something like that on the other side. The inscription on Roman coins reads, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus." The coin basically says Caesar is our God, so in Caesar we trust. Of course, such a coin would have been considered very offensive to the loyal Jew—a clear violation of the first commandment to have no other gods. So offensive, in fact, that they would never have used it to make an offering to God. After all, it also bears the graven image of another god—that's TWO out of ten commandments broken right there.

But since Rome was the occupying power, one had to use their coinage in the outside world. When one came to the temple, one would trade Roman coins for Shekels—traditional Jewish money—but to do so, one would also have to pay an exchange rate or fee. We talked about that last week. So in effect, the temple authorities could piously denounce this Roman outrage on the one hand, and get rich off trading on it on the other hand. Bring me a coin used to pay tax, says Jesus, who is preaching right there in the temple square. And they bring him one! The minute they produce the coin, they've lost the argument—instead of trapping Jesus, they reveal their own hypocrisy. You know the rest. Jesus said, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "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."

So maybe our lesson this morning isn't so much about politics and finances as it is about God. Maybe it's not so much about what we need to do as it is who we understand ourselves to be. Maybe it's not about, "...the separation of life into spiritual and secular divisions. [Maybe] it is a call for a reevaluation of the meaning of life itself. Jesus came to wean people away from the spirit of power and awaken them to the power of the spirit. Jesus wanted to wake people up to the reality that there was so much more available to them than they had ever dreamed..." [from "Another Tricky Question" by Johnny Dean, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] We said last week that stewardship is about caretaking, and the single biggest thing God has asked us to care for is God's dream for our world. We talked about being part of something for the transformation of the world. God will overturn tables of fear in order to empower us to live our faith boldly. God will overturn the money tables in our lives so that we can truly be free to understand ourselves as those with a mission to better our world.

This week, I want to talk about being a part of something holy, because Holiness is part of God's dream for our world. Give to God all that is Gods. The Pharisees may be trying to trick Jesus, but Jesus won't play. Instead, Jesus wants to take us on our journey into our own hearts. No tricks. No gimmicks. No lies. Give to God the things that are God's. Which is everything. Our homes, our jobs,

our stuff, our loved ones, our skills and abilities, our time, our bodies, our world, our lives—everything belongs to God. I say that over and over again because it bears repeating. The world constantly tells us that we earn what we've got. Not so.

Jesus is talking about total commitment to God's dream for our world. Total commitment to peace, to love, to hope, to grace, to generosity and putting others first. "It's tough to live a focused and committed life. From every direction, something or someone clamors for our attention. A distraction draws our eyes and the next thing we know, we've swerved off the road and headed down another detour, and the trip is sidetracked.

"One Chicago youth pastor came up with a clever way to keep his group on track. Concerned that the balmy beaches and bright sunshine of southern Florida—the site of their upcoming mission trip—would lure the teens from their purpose, he fashioned a cross from two pieces of lumber. Just before they climbed on the bus, he showed it to the group.

"I want all of you to remember that the whole purpose of this trip is to glorify the name of Christ, to lift up the Cross—the message of the Cross, the emphasis of the Cross, the Christ of the Cross," he announced. "So we're going to take this cross wherever we go."

"The teenagers looked at one another, a little unsure of his plan. But they agreed to do it and dragged the cross on the bus. It banged back and forth in the aisle all the way to Florida. It went with them into restaurants. It stayed overnight where they stayed overnight. It stood in the sand while they ministered on the beach. It stood against a wall while they tutored school children. It stood among the tables as they worked in soup kitchens.

"At first, lugging the cross around embarrassed the kids. But later, it became a point of identification. That cross was a constant, silent reminder of who they were and why they had come. They eventually regarded carrying it as an honor and privilege.

"The night before they went home, the youth leader handed out two nails to each of the kids. He told them that if they wanted to commit themselves to the one the cross stood for, they could hammer one nail into it and keep the other with them. One by one, the teens drove their nail into the cross.

"Just recently, one fellow—now a stockbroker—called the youth leader. He told him that he still keeps that nail with him in his desk drawer. Whenever he loses his sense of focus, he looks at the nail and remembers the cross on that beach in Florida. When everyone else around him is panicking, he holds that nail in his hand and remembers what's important. It reminds him of what is at the core of his life—his commitment to Christ. [previous 7 ¶s adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories*, (Nashville: Word Publishing) 2000, c1998.]

If ever there was a sign of God's commitment to us—God's willingness to give us everything—it would be the cross. Do we carry it with us? There's a traveling question as we ponder what is God's. Do we carry Jesus Christ into the world? Are we so committed that others can tell our allegiances? There's an old cliché that still rings true that goes like this: If we were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us? Give to God what is God's. Give everything. Total commitment.

This is where the preacher usually stops. Total commitment. That's what this passage is about. Yes, it is. But friends, in and among the malice and the jealousy, Jesus offers a word of grace here to those who would hear it. Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's. Part of giving to God what is His means giving what's hard to let go of. We have agreed that everything comes from God—our homes, our jobs, our stuff, our loved ones, our skills and abilities, our time, our bodies, our world, our lives. And every one of those things must be given back to God. But hear this:

We're called not only to turn over not our homes, but our secret closets in the heart where we hide our sinful selves.

We're called to turn over not only our jobs, but our bills and our obligations.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our stuff, but our burdens and trials.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our loved ones, but our enemies and our grief.

We're called to turn over not only our time, but our fear.

We called not only to turn over to Him our skills and abilities, but our weaknesses and our failures.

We're called not only to turn over to Him our bodies, but our limitations and illnesses.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our world, but our problems and our crises.

We're called to turn over to Him not only our lives, but our broken dreams and lost opportunities.

A journey to holiness must include an awareness of our brokenness. Otherwise, we become arrogant and self-righteous. When we give our whole selves, we must give our warts and all, for only God can purge the sin and heal the pain. Give to God what is God's. Total Commitment. Total surrender. Do not hold on to what will drown your spirit when God has said, 'give it to me and I'll take care of it.' The truth is that God cannot make God's dream for our world a reality until we give up to God all that holds us back.

Would that the Pharisees could have understand that total commitment meant total surrender—that in letting go of petty suspicion and limited vision would have opened up for them the very power of God! That peace and courage and strength would have welled up within them like oil from an underground pocket and life as they'd never known would plunge them into the depth and joy of divine relationship in Christ hitherto unknown.

"I want to end this morning with a story Leonard Sweet tells about a husband and wife who were preparing to go to a memorial service for the son of friends of theirs. The young man had been killed in Afghanistan. His family was dedicating a window in their church to this young man who had lost his life. The window cost \$50,000.

"In their discussion of how wonderful it was for this family to give this money to the church so that their son could have a window in his memory, suddenly the wife turned to her husband and asked: "What are we going to give?"

"We don't need to give anything," he replied. "Our son came back alive and safe."

"That's what I mean," she said. "They lost their son and they're giving \$50,000. We got our son back, and we're not giving anything? What are we going to give?" [4 ¶s from "Trip Questions" by Leonard Sweet, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

If we understand Jesus rightly here, we can see how he calls us to give our total commitment and our total surrender. We can see that this is not about taxes or elections or Dow-Jones Industrial Averages. Not that those aren't important, but only that God is so much *more* important. Can we give God the praise that is due in our journey through life? Can we give God the baggage that side-tracks us and trust his leadership? Total commitment. Total surrender. So, what are we going to give? Amen.