

Goal: The hearers would more joyfully support Christ's Church giving God what is His.

Maybe I have been watching too much TV but these past weeks have been a rollercoaster of political theatre. The list of potential Presidential candidates seems to change by the day but they all agree, there are severe problems with our country. With the debates on the economy, Wall Street bailouts, and the size of government, one topic consistently comes up, that's taxes. Will there be another tax increase or a cut? Either way, there'll be complaining. We don't like the thought of having to pay taxes but we also don't want to lose our benefits. Things haven't changed much since Jesus' day. People then weren't happy paying taxes either. They didn't like the idea of "*rendering unto Caesar*" any more than we do. But what about the rendering unto God what is God's? How are you doing with that?

At first glance, our Gospel seems to be entirely about money. Some of you might be thinking, "*Uh-oh...here it comes.*" Just as you don't like to pay taxes, some of you don't like to be reminded about your financial obligations to the church, and that's what most think stewardship is all about. But that's not the case. Look at today's text. "*The Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"*" (Matthew 22: 15 – 17)

The Pharisees were Jews who prided themselves in religious tradition and keeping the Law. They had a complex system of oral traditions and written requirements far beyond the 10 Commandments. The Pharisees are also the ones who are most often at odds with Jesus. This morning they try to trap Him in His own words. If they could get Jesus to incriminate himself it would be easy to get rid of Him. That's why they brought along the Herodians. The Herodians were Jews active in Roman politics, particularly siding with Herod's party. Normally, the Pharisees despised the Herodians. It would be like extreme left liberal teaming up with a far right conservative! The Pharisees hope was for the Herodians to hear Jesus say something treasonous, label Him a rebel, and politically undermine Him.

They butter Jesus up with fake flattery, hoping He'll let His guard down. Their trap was a clever yet simple question. "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*" It required a simple YES or NO, but either would have gotten Jesus in trouble. A NO would put Jesus in opposition with the Roman government. A YES would go against their expectations of the Messiah, because no true Messiah, in their view, would recognize the authority of Caesar. The Pharisees were proud of themselves, thinking that at last they had trapped Jesus.

But Jesus knew their intentions and exposed them. (*“Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.” (Matthew 22: 18 – 22)*) In asking for a coin, He reveals how they’d broken their own laws. Since the coins had the image of Caesar, and the Romans worshiped Caesar as a God, by having coins in their possession the Pharisees were breaking the 1st Commandment. Yet, in using these coins they proved themselves to be less righteous than they said they were.

The fact that these coins bore the image of Caesar also provides the basis for Jesus answer. If it has his picture, it must be his, so give it to him. But Jesus didn't stop there. He went on to tell us to give God what belongs to Him. What did He mean? Doesn't everything belong to God? Of course! But Jesus is telling us to offer our very selves to God as living sacrifices. You belong to God. Not only did God create you in His image but He redeemed you by the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You belong to God, so give God what is God's!

This is the heart of stewardship. If you live your life knowing that you belong to God and strive to live as His Child, you’re being a faithful steward. As Luther explains the Second Article of the Apostle's Creed, *“That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him.”* In the coming months you’ll be hearing a lot about stewardship as we start building projects and have church board elections. You will be asked to pledge how you will serve God through this congregation in the coming year. But this means more than money. We want to give God what is God’s. Therefore, commit yourself to be His own in Bible study. Commit yourself to live under Him in His worship. Commit yourself to serve Him in financial support, giving of your time, using your talents for the ministries of this congregation.

About a year ago, our LWML asked if I would approve a grant request to improve our Food Bank ministry. Two months ago, we received \$15,000 to remodel our kitchen and Food Bank storage for better service to those in our community who are in need. I learned quickly, that if the LWML told me they were going to do something, it got done. When I heard that their theme this year, *Being with Jesus – Living on the Edge*, I realized that it meant that they were going to go to any effort to proclaim Jesus Christ and save lost souls, giving God what is God’s. And we can help them do that with Bites for Mites.

What about you? How can you serve? What will you do to give God what is God's? Commit yourself to acts of service for our Lord, whether it be teaching Sunday School, serving in an elected position, serving on the Altar Guild or LWML, inviting others to worship, helping in the Food Bank, or the various other ministries here at Saint Mark. Give God what is God's!

A little girl told a man who was visiting her father that her brothers had set traps to catch birds. The man asked her what she did. *"I prayed that they would not catch any birds."* "Anything else?" he asked. *"Yes. I prayed that God would keep the birds out of the traps."* "Anything else?" "Yes." she answered. *"Then I went out and kicked the traps all to pieces."* Just as that little girl understood that she needed actions to go along with her prayers, the faithful steward of God knows that he or she must put his or her faith into action. Identifying the many gifts God has given you, chief of which is the forgiveness of all sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, you will want to live for Him and give God what is God's!

While stewardship is not limited to money, financial support of Christ's Church must be a part of stewardship. We still need to pay utilities, maintain things that rust and break, and support our professional staff. Jesus didn't prohibit giving monetary resources to God, but taught that it was to be only a part of giving to God what is God's. If you offer your entire self to God, you return a portion of your blessings to Him in the form of financial offerings. The Biblical standard is 10%; 10% of your finances, 10% of your time, 10% of your abilities to His church.

A Christian woman remarked to a friend that her church costs too much. They were always asking for money. Her friend replied. *"Some time ago a little boy was born in our home. He cost me a lot of money from the very beginning. He had a big appetite; he needed clothes, medicine, toys, even a puppy. Then he went to school and that cost a lot more. Later he went to college, began dating, and all that cost a small fortune. But in his senior year of college, he died. Since his funeral, he hasn't cost me a penny. Now which situation do you think I'd rather have?"* After a pause, the lady replied. *"As long as this church lives it will cost. When it dies for lack of support, it will cost nothing. A living church has the most vital message for all the world, therefore I am going to give and pray with everything I have to keep our church alive."*

Friends, we have a living, active, and vital congregation. We've been united in the most important message you'll ever hear, the Good News of salvation for the sake of Jesus. And we need to share this message with those around us. This shared ministry will continue in this place with God's blessings as long as we remain His faithful stewards. Let us therefore commit ourselves to be God's instruments with our entire beings, and GIVE GOD WHAT IS GOD'S. Amen.