Matthew 22:15-22

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

God Gets All

In today’s scripture reading, we have the Pharisees setting a trap for Jesus. Our Lord is teaching in the temple, and the Pharisees, with some Herodians in tow, approach him with false respect and ask him to explain if it is lawful to pay taxes. Herodians were people who benefited from the rule of King Herod who was instilled by the Romans to rule over all of province of Judea wherein Jerusalem resided. Herodians were probably looked upon with similar scorn as the Vichy French were looked upon by other citizens of France during their occupation in World War 2. They were traitors who had compromised rather than resisted the enemy, and since there was no distinction between Church and State in the days of Jesus, the Herodians had compromised the Jewish religion as well.

An outward sign of the Herodians betrayal of the Jewish faith was their use of the coin called the denarius. On one side of the coin was an image of the Roman Emperor Tiberius with a Latin inscription which translated, “Tiberius, son of the god Augustus.” On the other side, “Pontis Maxum,” or “High Priest.” You can imagine how offensive it would be for a devout Jew to conduct commerce with such a coin. Many a Jew considered it treason to have such coins in one’s possession.

The Pharisees were doing some political jockeying. They opposed the Herodians, but they were also interested in obtaining political power. They were wise enough to know that the Jews did not have the strength to resist Roman rule, but they thought that they could do a better job than the Herodians in leading the people. And Jesus was a thorn in their side. He was popular with the people, perhaps too popular. He attracted the likes of the zealots, radical patriots who might easily evoke the wrath of an intolerant Rome.

The recognition that Jesus was a threat to the peace was the one thing that the Pharisees and the Herodians had in common. And so some clever Pharisees figured that they could take advantage of the politically charged environment in Jerusalem during Passover and either defame Jesus or get him arrested. Jesus is asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes?” There seemed no good answer for Jesus: To say “Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes” would appease the Herodians (and any Romans who happened to get wind of the discussion), but it would erode his popularity among the devout religious masses; to say “No, it is not lawful to pay taxes” would enamor him to the masses but end his mission (and most likely his life) quickly as the Romans would look upon his proclamation as treasonous.

What Jesus does and says astound his audience as it astounds the reader today. His response is not mere political acrobatics; it’s an indictment of both the Pharisees and the Herodians. First, Jesus minces no words in his analysis of the scene; he ask the Pharisee “hypocrites” why they are trying to trap him, why they would set Jesus up to publicly proclaim something that they and Jesus agreed upon in order have Jesus arrested. They wanted Jesus to say what they were too afraid to say in order that Jesus would be cleared off the political field forever.

Jesus next asks for a coin, a denarius and asks whose image is upon it. Likely it was the Herodians who produced the coin and answered the question. They could have answered, “the son of god,” since that was indeed the title that was written upon the coin, but to say that would have incited the temple crowd and completely discredited *them.* Instead they answered, “the emperor.”

Jesus responds, “Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and to God what is God’s.” A better translation of the Greek word apodidōmi (translated give) is “pay back,” or “return,” implying that something was received prior. In a not-so-subtle way, Jesus is reminding the Herodians that their power and position is a “gift” from Rome, but like most political gifts, it comes with strings attached; the Herodians could keep their power only as long as they “paid back” the Romans in the form of tax revenues. Hence the power that the Herodians enjoy comes at the cost of slavery to their overlords. To enjoy their status, the Herodians must compromise their own religious convictions and forfeit the friendship of their own people.

And if the Herodians are to pay the emperor back for what Rome has given them, what are they supposed to give to God? A good Jew knew that “the earth is the LORD’s and everything in it (Psalm 24:1),” that “dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations (psalm 22).” Jesus thus reminds the Herodians of the extent to which they have compromised their faith.

How are we doing today as Christians? Are we giving to God what is God’s, which is *everything?* Most of us would not consider it treasonous to pay our taxes; in fact, we would consider it treasonous not to pay them. But in light of the fact that all that we have belongs to God, we, as citizens in a democratic nation, have a responsibility to affect political change so that the taxes we pay are spent in ways that are pleasing to God. We cannot parcel are lives between the religious and the secular – our faith is a 24/7 faith. Today we celebrate Laity Sunday, and as I look upon this congregation I rejoice for the people I see who are such stalwart servants of God and of Christ’s Church. God has empowered each of us to affect change both within the Church and around the community. In today’s Epistle lesson, Peter describes how our service to God plays out:

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.11Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11)

It’s so easy to underestimate ourselves, but when you consider that we belong to God, that he empowers us to speak *His* word, to serve Him as we serve one another, perhaps our underestimation is more a confession of our own compromise. None of us individually have the ability to solve all the world’s problems, but we have the ability to serve God faithfully with our hearts and minds and strength. Give to God what belongs to God, in order that He may be glorified in your life.