

RENDERING UNTO CAESAR

I have to ask. Have you paid your taxes yet?

Since at the moment we've got an April 17th deadline staring us in the face, that question may sound terribly contemporary. It's a question, however, that undoubtedly goes back several thousand years.

Beginning with the rulers of the smallest fiefdoms, and continuing through the kings of major nations, and the variety of Prime Ministers, junta generals, Presidents, dictators, and despots who have come and gone, taxes have been a part of the telling of human history everywhere.

Someplace there in the middle, someplace between when taxes first have their origin and now, when our own taxes are due to be filed, we find Jesus approached by local religious and civic leaders and asked, "Jesus, have you paid your taxes yet?"

These Pharisees and Herodians are not Jesus' friends, and he knows that. He's being set up in some way, and that is apparent in the question that they pose: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" (12.14b). The Law to which they refer is the religious Law under the Torah--as in "the Law and the Prophets."

Even without having read this little story this morning, we know how Jesus handles the tricky situation--starting with his asking to see a denarius, the coin of the day. In requesting that they produce one, apparently Jesus doesn't have one in his pockets. Holding up the coin, he asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" "Why, the emperor's, of course," they answer. "Well, then," he says, "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's"--which sounds like, "So, dummy, pay your taxes!" And that, in turn, doesn't seem to us to be anything but obvious.

Often, it is in this rather ho-hum fashion that this story tends to be understood. However, if that were the whole point to it--that we should be good citizens and pay our taxes--then that would be that, and we could all go home now.

But wait a minute! Before you quickly gather up your things, you may have noticed that second part to Jesus' answer: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and [render] to God the things that are God's" (12.17).

Because we are so far removed from and so uninformed regarding the historical situation of the early 1st Century, we totally don't catch the zinger that Jesus delivers in appending that second part to his answer. We completely miss the fact that, in Jesus' time, "And [give back] to God the things that are God's" is the answer of a revolutionary. That is why, in contradistinction to our rather dull reaction to Jesus' answer, those Pharisees and Herodians are, per Mark's reporting, so "amazed at him" (12.17).

Granted, our Greek is not real good, and so we are a bit slow to pick up on the fact that the original word which is innocuously translated as "taxes" primarily means something else. It is the Greek word *kansos*, and it means "tribute." Knowing that, let's reframe the question that they press upon Jesus: "Is it lawful to pay tribute to the emperor or not? Should we pay the tribute to the emperor, or should we not?" My, that does change the perspective on things, doesn't it?

This query of Jesus is intended to push him into a corner. It's aimed at getting him to expose himself to the authorities, who are on constant watch for anyone who potentially might stir the population into open rebellion.

It's to find out just how much of a zealot--and therefore how much of an adversary to Rome--he really is. Does Jesus, as a Jew, think it right, under Jewish Law, to pay the required annual "tribute" to Caesar?

It's not at all about "taxes," then, in the sense that we understand that word as meaning the providing for the common good. In paying this "tribute," it's about recognizing Caesar as King and, as King, therefore as the rightful owner of the land and all its inhabitants. For Jews, that King is God, not Caesar, and so whether or not to pay the tribute--in fact, an insult to the faith--is a decision of considerable magnitude.

Jesus' two-part answer couldn't be clearer: The crux to it concerns God's sovereignty: The land and the people are God's, not Caesar's. In Jesus' view, then, Caesar is entitled to be given back the denarius, not because he deserves "tribute," but because it's simply his coin--his picture, his name, are stamped on it. Caesar has issued it and distributed it, the coin belongs to him; so, give it back to him!

And now comes the radical corollary: In the same manner, God is entitled to be given back the land the Romans have seized for themselves, because it is God's land, not theirs. God has created it, and given it to Israel; the name of God is stamped all over it--therefore, Caesar, give it back to God!

It's just the sort of answer that eventually gets Jesus killed.

So, what does any of this have to do with us, with our taxes, with the looming deadline? After all, at the end of this long and tortuous Bible study this morning, the Romans are not in power, and there's no "tribute" expected to be paid.

Jesus' pointed answer, now properly understood, does suggest a question, though, that each generation of his people must consider if they are to follow truly and fully: Are we giving back to God what God is entitled to get?

If--individually, congregationally--we are, then we are numbered among the faithful. If we are not, then we are but the captives, the subjects, the possessions of some other thing which functions as the ruler of our lives--our "Caesar," as it were, who has subjugated us, and who effectively owns us, body and soul.

In short, to whom do we really belong? Do we belong to God or not?

We know where Jesus comes down on that question, and he's willing to give his life to answer it emphatically.

At the very personal level, what are we giving?