

A Group of Lawyers Meet the Judge of the Earth

Series: Journey to the Cross

Luke 20:20-26

April 2, 2017

Welcome again to worship. It's great to be here today.

For the last few weeks, we have been on a journey with Jesus as He met people on His "Journey to the Cross." Along the way, we met Blind Bart who was healed, Zach who was saved, Richie Rich who turned his back on Christ, and last week the Kingdom Kids.

Today, we are going to deal with an interesting passage on this journey. In fact, I don't believe I've ever preached a message like this, but as I have said before: the Bible changes us, not the other way around. Likewise, a good message allows the text to lead, not the other way around.

Let me set the stage. Jesus is in the Temple, and the religious leaders are in full assault mode, trying to get Jesus to say something that they could use to grab and eliminate Him. That's right. This is life and death stuff here. The religious leaders had had enough of Jesus and wanted Him dead. But Jesus had to wait until the proper time to be handed over.

Needless to say, the tension was in the air. The disciples I'm sure felt it. The crowds may have gotten in to it, observing this verbal match going back and forth; they may even have said, "Oooo," when Jesus got in some really great zingers. And this was one of them.

I invite you to turn in your bulletin to page 5. I'm going to be reading from Luke 20:20-26.

Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies questioned him: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" He saw through their duplicity and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.¹

Having to pay taxes has never been popular. Taxes are not a voluntary contribution. To fail to pay one's taxes, or to pay less than one should, is a sure way to get the attention of the government, and to discover just how strong they feel about our payment of taxes. The payment of taxes is a very pragmatic matter, for governments do not run without tax money. But paying one's taxes is also a symbolic act, evidencing our submission to the one that is paid. Paying taxes is thus a practical acknowledgment of the government's right to rule over us, and of our submission to its authority.

Remember the old saying, "politics makes strange bedfellows"? Well, that is certainly the case here. According to Mark 12:13, it was the Pharisees and the Herodians who formed a coalition. There could hardly be a more unlikely partnership.

¹ Luke 20:20-26 (NIV)

The Pharisees represented cautious resistance to Rome; they didn't like Rome. The Herodians expressed wholesale accommodation to the Romans. They were opposites. About the only thing the Pharisees and Herodians did agree on was the Jesus had to go. The Pharisees hated Him because He was disrupting their religious agenda, the Herodians because He threatened their political arrangements.

Today, it would be like the ACLU and the Moral Majority, or Rush Limbaugh and Gloria Steinheim getting together to fight a common cause. Or the Republicans and Democrats. That's what we will call them. The Republicans and Democrats.

In verse 21 we read:

*"Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth."*²

When the Republicans and Democrats came to Him, they came with a deceitful and hypocritical flattery. They no more believed that Jesus "taught the way of God in truth" than they believed the moon was made of green cheese. They tried to trick Jesus to thinking they were on His side, so they could set their trap. Look at verse 22:

*Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*³

There were three basic types of taxes in Israel at this time:

1. A land tax, 1/10th of all grains or 1/5th of all fruit or wine;
2. A custom tax, collected at ports and city gates; rates were 2 to 5% of the value of the goods;
3. A poll or tribute tax, paid by everyone between the ages of 14-65 when a census was taken, just for the privilege being alive.⁴

Don't tell the Republicans and Democrats about that last one – they could get ideas. Some have speculated that Roman taxes totaled over 1/3 of a person's income.

The trap in this question was that if Jesus said the Jews ought to pay taxes, the Republicans would accuse Him of being subservient to Rome and that would have condemned Him before the people as a traitor. If however, Jesus opposed paying taxes to Rome, the Democrats would accuse Him to Pilate as leading a rebellion against the Roman government. So this inquiry supposedly had put Jesus on the spot. No matter how He answered the question, He could be criticized for being either a traitor or of being treasonous.

Jesus was not fooled by them or taken in by their flattery. He looked beyond their hypocrisy and saw their evil intent. Verses 23-24:

*He saw through their duplicity and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?"*⁵

Jesus asked the Republicans and Democrats for a coin. Not just any coin, but a denarius. The denarius was a small silver coin that had the value of one day's wages. The reason that Jesus asks for the Denarius is more evident in Matthew's account:

*Show me the coin used for paying the tax.*⁶

You can almost see one of the men without thinking reach into his robe and pull out one of these little silver coins. I think there is a touch of humor in this. Jesus first of

² Luke 20:21 (NIV)

³ Luke 20:22 (NIV)

⁴ Life Application Bible Commentary. Luke. (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House, 1997) pp. 456-457

⁵ Luke 20:23-24 (NIV)

⁶ Matthew 22:19a (NIV)

all embarrassed His challengers in that it is they, not He, who are carrying an offensive coin. The Jews didn't believe in graven images. And what was – and still is – engraved on coins? Images. Coins with images were hated among the Jews. Jesus also embarrassed them because by having such a coin, they had tacitly accepted Caesar's rule. Finally, it was unlawful to have such a coin – a Roman imaged coin – in the Temple. Roman coins were exchanged at the gate for Temple coins. So these so-called righteous people had unrighteous money in their pockets.

He then asked them in essence, "Who owns this coin? Who gives value to it? Who did you get it from? Who's image in on it?" The answer of course was Caesar. Then Jesus replied in verse 25:

*"Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*⁷

Jesus tells them, "This is really not that complicated. Give back to the one you got it from. It's not yours. It was provided for your use, but it really belongs to Caesar. So give it back. It's that simple."

In this response, Jesus teaches two profoundly important truths.

First, we have an obligation to the government.

Jesus is teaching something important here. These Jews benefited from Roman rule, they used the system of Roman roads, and the peace that came with along with the Roman army. Jesus is saying that those who enjoy Caesar's benefits should pay Caesar's taxes.

What do we owe our government? Is there an obligation there? Jesus says there is! A Christian's civic duties can be wrapped up into 3 things. Write these down.

First, Pay. Here's what Paul says in Romans 13:5-7, from the Message Bible:

*That's why you must live responsibly – not just to avoid punishment but also because it's the right way to live. That's also why you pay taxes – so that an orderly way of life can be maintained. Fulfill your obligations as a citizen. Pay your taxes, pay your bills, respect your leaders.*⁸

Now, what government is Paul talking about here? He's talking about the Roman Empire, a pagan government with Caesars who called themselves divine and who would eventually kill him. Yet he says to pay your taxes.

God calls on us as Christians to be good citizens. We need to pay our taxes. We enjoy the benefits; we should pay our share.

Our second civic duty is to Pray. Pray for the government. Again, Paul writes:

*I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.*⁹

Pray for the government, even for those you disagree with. We prayed for the local government, the state government, and the Obama administration. And we will continue to pray during the Trump administration, even if you can't stand the government.

This is exactly what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

⁷ Luke 20:25b (NIV)

⁸ Romans 13:5-7, MSG

⁹ 1 Timothy 2:1-2, NLT

“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.”¹⁰

We are to pray.

Our third civic duty is to Obey.

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul expands on the words of Jesus, and this teaching has been so important that it has helped to shape the world as we know it today. Paul sets out the general principle in verse 1 of Romans 13 when he says:

Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God.¹¹

Paul tells us that we are to submit to human government, even pagan governments, so long as they do not try to cause us to violate the Word of God. God has placed governments on the earth to restrain sin until He comes. We are to obey government, not as an enemy of God, but as the agent of God.

Pay, Pray, and Obey. That’s our obligation to the government.

There is something else here in Jesus’ response to the Republicans and Democrats.

... give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.¹²

Here we have 2nd obligation. **We have an obligation to God.**

Just as the denarius was Caesar’s coinage, we are God’s coinage. The coin belonged to Caesar because it bore his image, and we are God’s because we bear His image.

If you are reading the daily devotions, you read this week from Genesis 1:27:

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.¹³

Because we bear His image, we then owe God what belongs to him; our lives and our allegiance. The Greek word for image in today’s passage is *eikon*,¹⁴ from which we get our word icon. It is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when it translates the verse from Genesis that I just read to you telling the story of how God created us in His own image. We are literally the *eikon* of God.

Look once again at what Jesus said in verse 25:

... give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.¹⁵

I want to close by asking you. What do you have today that belongs to God?

Are you holding on to your time? Do you really think it’s yours? Perhaps God is saying to you today, “I want time with you. I want to know you personally, intimately.” Perhaps God is calling you to make a commitment this day to faithfully block out time for Him daily.

Are you holding on to God’s tithe, mistakenly thinking that it’s not really His, but yours? Are you robbing God? That’s what Malachi the prophet calls it in Malachi 3:8. God cannot and will not bless those who are stealing from Him. Perhaps He is speaking

¹⁰ Matthew 5:43-45a (NLT)

¹¹ Romans 13:1, NLT

¹² Luke 20:25b (NIV)

¹³ Genesis 1:27 (NLT)

¹⁴ εἰκὼν

¹⁵ Luke 20:25b (NIV)

to your heart today, calling you to give up what doesn't belong to you, but belongs to Him. He only does so in order to bless you. God has promised to pour out an abundant blessing upon those who obey Him in the matter of the tithe. Obey Him today. Begin to tithe today.

Perhaps you're holding on to the talents and abilities God has given you. Perhaps you're sitting back, unwilling to really get involved, unwilling to really commit to participate fully in the life of the church. Perhaps the Lord is speaking to you today to get involved, to get committed, to report for duty. If God is speaking to you about what you owe Him, be obedient today. Bring your account up to date. It is our duty to do so.