

## Scripture – Matthew 17: 24-27; 22:15-22

### Jesus and the Temple Tax

<sup>24</sup> When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?” <sup>25</sup> He said, “Yes, he does.” And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” <sup>26</sup> When Peter said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the children are free. <sup>27</sup> However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.”

### The Question about Paying Taxes

<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.

### Sermon – Thy Kingdom Come, My Kingdoms Go

“To pray and actually mean Thy kingdom come, we must also be able to say my kingdoms go.”

– *Richard Rohr*

“The imposition of taxes provided the means by which the elite extracted the wealth that sustained their way of life. Rome regarded paying taxes as a sign of submission to its authority. For most of the population, living near subsistence levels, taxes were burdensome and oppressive. Since taxes were so central to the power dynamic that marked the Roman Empire, we would expect Matthew’s Gospel, especially if it is a counternarrative that resists Roman claims, to address this central practice.” -- *Warren Carter*

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**Thy Kingdom Come, My Kingdoms Go**

**(Historical details thanks to “Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations” by Warren Carter)**

There’s a section of highway in East Tennessee where the prominent road features are 150-foot high crosses and adult bookstores. When the kids were little and we passed the adult book stores, we used to tell them that the books inside were all about taxes because no kid wanted to learn about that!

Today, we are going to talk about that adult theme – Taxes. Obviously, the United States of America isn’t the first culture to argue about, politicize, and complain about paying taxes. It’s part of our founding legacy to tell the story of the Boston Tea Party – a significant protest event against the tax being levied by the British over the importation of tea. We want to see the tax records of potential Presidential candidates to see if they are paying their fair share like the rest of us, or notice if their debt could make them subject to bribery by political interest groups or foreign powers. Certainly, we have a vested interest in how our own nation’s government monies are spent, but we also have an interest in how they are collected since they come directly out of our paychecks or are determined based on our property and possessions. As much as we might agree or disagree about what is or isn’t fair about the taxes that we pay, we probably would agree that fairness itself is something we should include in our conversations about taxation.

It wasn't that different in the time that Matthew was writing this gospel for the early Christian community. Taxes were collected based on personal wealth, land value and production, on goods in transit, and the exchange of goods, and tolls were paid for the use of public facilities (not unlike the Powhite tax I pay for using the fastest road to get to Ashland from my house). The peasants and artisans, the "regular people" so to speak then bore a high burden of the cost of taxes. The argument went that it was "the price you pay for peace." Pay the taxes – and, let's face it, you had no choice otherwise – or you would be seen as in defiance of Rome itself. Our system still levies punishments for a refusal to pay taxes, and yet we have watched on as tax loopholes continue to benefit those who can afford to pay for them by hiring tax attorneys or giving money to political candidates who will write tax shelters into law. Meanwhile the large numbers of people who are on the bottom of our economic pyramid suffer for the services and support necessary for sustaining a decent quality of life. A sign that one is dealing with an imperial system, or any kind of burgeoning authoritarianism, is that the plebs are valued for their revenue to the state, not for their contributions to society as human beings.

Here's how that works. You have to look at what the tax structure of the Roman Empire paid for. As they say, always FOLLOW THE MONEY. What those taxes supported was the lifestyle of the elite. It supported a strong military. It supported Rome's architectural splendor and vast food supply. And it also supported games and pacifying entertainment to keep the population from thinking too deeply. To run an effective Empire, you create a system in which: *The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer*. Lives lost at the bottom of the chain are of no consequence. In fact, the more that can be squeezed from the downtrodden, the more lavish of a lifestyle the elite can have for themselves.

The United States has struggled with both an attraction to and a disdain for just this kind of hierarchy. Deep in our history we thumbed our noses at the Monarchy. We championed democratic rule – but by landowning men. We invented the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality – and then built an economy on the backs of enslaved people. For generations the United States has been the dream of people who came here to build a better life for themselves. Though the songs I learned as a kid were not detailed about those escaping poverty or running from tyrants, I was taught by the ancient Schoolhouse Rock videos to imagine my nation as the great American melting pot – a place where we welcomed *the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free*, and Marlo Thomas sang about a land where the river runs free and “*you and me were free to be you and me.*” And yet, now many Americans are fearful of the immigrants who STILL imagine a world of freedom within our borders. The American Dream has always been aspirational. We long for it, sometimes we strive for it, and we have yet to fully give it feet on the ground.

So, as Americans, we too pay taxes. We argue about them. We politicize them. We complain about them. In the developed world, for the citizens who live in what I would call middle-class lifestyles, ours aren’t the highest, and they are progressive for the most part – based on your income so that those with less, pay less, and those with more, pay more. One would surely hope that we have changed the model from Rome in that the goal of taxes isn’t to fund the lavishness of the elite, but to create revenue for the good of the state, the common good – to do things like build roads, have public parks, educate our citizenry – and a variety of other things we may again agree or disagree are the responsibility of public works.

But we participate in an economy, governed mostly by quite prosperous individuals, that is gravitating quickly toward the rich getting exponentially richer, and the poor verging on destitution. Therefore, we need to find some ways past lobbing political accusations of socialism or crony capitalism to get to true conversation about who we want to be, and what economic “fairness” actually looks like. Our current national dilemma is rife with significant polarization – yes, it is around politics – but I dare say it is even more so around money. The haves and the have nots. Our current financial system is beginning to look more like Rome and less like the thriving middle-class America that is remembered and idealized from the middle of the last century. (Yikes – it’s hard to say that as someone born in 1970)

So, I set all this up as a comparison so we can talk taxes with Jesus. So often these texts are brushed off and ignored. The Bible talks a LOT about money and fairness in the economic realm – but talking about money is “supposed” to make us uncomfortable. It isn’t a topic for church – they say. It’s private – they say. Except that it’s not. Taxes are PUBLIC money. Jesus got this. In fact, he called out exactly what was MOST heinous in his own time, and Matthew extrapolates that to talk about how to understand taxes in the time he sat down to write this gospel narrative.

It is argued by Warren Carter in his book “Matthew and Empire” that the text we read from chapter 17 today is about the “Temple tax” levied on Jews specifically after their defeat by Rome in 70 A.D. As a defeated people, they were taxed to pay for the Roman temple to Jupiter. It was both a political and religious tax meant to be punitive and difficult to pay. For the writers of the gospels, the time line could be less historical than we might imagine it to be. So, the writer, Matthew, lets Jesus have a word about this. Simon-Peter gets asked if his teacher pays

this tax. He says “yes” and then has to justify the answer. Jesus answers with a question, as he often does, “From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tribute?” That title “kings of the earth” is according to Carter “a common phrase to denote rulers OPPOSED to God’s purposes.” Rome is that opposition. So does Rome tax their own children, or others? Of course they tax the “other.” In imperial rule, the taxes always come from the “other” – your conquered powers, the peasants, the unimportant ones, or from the merchant and artisan classes so you can make money off of their goods. The kings of the earth are robbers – emboldened solely to enrich themselves. Therefore, when Jesus says, “The children are free.” The children of God are free. God requires no tax from the children – in fact will provide for the needs of God’s children - with a Roman coin showing up in the mouth of a fish. This isn’t a text on being a good citizen and paying taxes, it’s a text about freeing oneself in the midst of unfair, oppressive systems. Sure – pay the tax – but don’t consider yourself beholden to the kings of the earth. Your kingdom is not of this world!

A similar premise holds in the “render unto Caesar” passage. Guess who the “Herodians” are? Well they aren’t *opposed* to Herod – that’s for sure. They are Roman sympathizers – oozing with praise for Jesus just to catch him in a trap. He understands that, obviously. The question of paying taxes to the Emperor is a test. Do you pay them, or not? They wanted to catch him in defiance of the Empire because he was a troublemaker. If he says pay them – then all his followers will be in obedience to Rome. If he says don’t pay them, they can have him arrested for crimes against the government. Win-win. Except Jesus doesn’t play those games. He turns it around and asks them what picture is on the coin. Of course we know the famous line. They see the Emperor’s face on it, and Jesus says, “Give therefore to the Emperor the things that are the

Emperor's and give to God the things that are God's." Again, paying the tax doesn't mean acquiescence to a corrupt government. Your kingdom is not of this world!

Jesus is presenting us with some ideas on how to live your life fairly in a terribly unfair world. Remember, he teaches his disciples to pray to God – YOUR Kingdom come. YOUR will be done. Recently, Father Richard Rohr said some mighty powerful words when he said that in order to pray "Your Kingdom come" we also have to pray "my kingdoms go." This is telling. We need not be captive to the corrupt powers of this world. We don't give our obedience to the kings of the earth. We are children freed to live differently. Taxes or not.

In another time of corrupt government, a group of Christians planted what they called "The Conspiracy" against Hitler and his Third Reich. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was probably the most famous in that group, and most people think that the conspiracy was just a plot to kill the Hitler. And yet, I learned this week from the Rev. Rob Schenk, the current director of the Bohhoeffer institute that the prime function of the conspiracy was to pray for the downfall of the unjust government. That really made me think. Our prayers for God's kingdom to come must be paramount, in every generation, whether we find ourselves in a happy place with our national government or a fearful one. God's kingdom is the only one free from corruption and constantly blessing those who are among the children. In God's kingdom, my best guess is that there can be no "other" unless one self-excludes from God's grace. In God's kingdom, what we need is what we will have, and what we have more of, is what we are challenged to share with others. God provides. The kings of the earth take. The King of heaven always gives. So, pray for God's kingdom to come. Pray for God's will to be done. And let your kingdom idols, whatever they are, go. Amen.