

**Sermon for October 19, 2014**  
**Matthew 22**

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying that nothing in this life is certain except for death and taxes! Today we get to look at taxes and if our lectionary contained the verses following this reading we'd get death.

As we can see from this reading the question of the lawfulness of paying taxes has been around for a long time. The Pharisees along with their disciples and the Herodians are trying to trap Jesus with their question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" Now the Israelites of Jesus' time paid many taxes— Temple taxes, land taxes, and custom taxes just to name a few. But today's question is about a particular tax—a particularly hated one at that—the Imperial tax.

The Imperial tax was paid as tribute to the Roman Empire to support the Roman occupation of Israel. That's right, the Jewish people had to pay the people oppressing them a denarius a year; supporting their own oppression! And we think our taxes are bad!

It's ironic that the question about this tax comes up at the end of Jesus' earthly life because it played an important part at the beginning of his life. Most of us can recall the opening verse of Luke's birth narrative, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." That decree sent Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem to be registered. And what were they registering for? They were registering for a census to see how many people were to be taxed by the Roman Empire—the Imperial tax.

Now not all of the Jewish people hated the tax; especially those who were put into power by the Romans. This group was represented by the Herodians in our Gospel reading today. The Romans kept King Herod in power and the Herodians were his followers and supported the Roman “governance” of Israel.

But many more of the people found the tax to be offensive and a constant reminder of their humiliation. These were the Nationalists or Zealots and Jesus had one of these as a disciple—Simon. And then there were the religiously devout like the Pharisees and their disciples who felt repulsed at paying the tax with a coin that was engraved with a picture of Caesar Tiberius along with the words, “Son of god,” that forced them to break the first two commandments.

There’s quite a mixture of people here listening for Jesus’ response to this hot button issue! One’s opinion about this extremely divisive issue reveals a lot about you. And herein lies the cunning that these two normally opposite groups displayed in their question. The only thing that truly unites these two groups is their dislike for Jesus. Remember, in Matthew’s timeline this is only a couple of days after Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and chased everyone out of the Temple. They thought they had Jesus trapped in a no win situation.

But you would think that they would know better by now. Jesus not only gets out of their trap, but traps them instead. Jesus doesn’t answer their question at first, but asks them one of his own, “Whose image is on the coin?” Without even thinking they pull one of these hated coins out of their pocket and show it to

Jesus and answer, “the Emperor’s”; implicating them in the very system they supposedly despise.

It is then that Jesus answers them, “give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s.” And with that the tables are turned and all who are listening realize that everything belongs to God. From the Persian Emperor Cyrus we read about in Isaiah to the statement in Psalm 24, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” In one short sentence Jesus reveals the truth about those accusing him and calls them to a higher allegiance than they’d ever imagined.

When I hear Jesus’ answer my mind automatically goes back to the first chapter of Genesis; “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;’” Maybe the question we need to be asked isn’t whose image is on the coin, but whose image is on us and everyone around us and that seems to get lost when we talk about money and politics. I don’t really care what your political persuasion is, but we all need to remember that first we are children of God; made in God’s image and that’s to whom we belong!

When we forget that then it becomes really easy to think that it is our possessions and bank accounts that define our worth and value. But they don’t tell the whole story or even the most important part of the story. No matter what we may do, what we may say, or where we may go—nothing will change the fact that we are God’s beloved child. That is the identity that should shape our behaviors and help us to be the people God has called us to be.

So I have an assignment for you. When you get home today take out the credit card you use the most or if you don't use a credit card take out your money. Then take a magic marker and mark your card or money with a cross. Not so hard to do, but every time you use that card or money I hope that when we see that cross we are reminded about whose we are and reflect on whether or not this purchase that we are making aligns with our God given identity. Does our faith impact our spending? What we may find is that no amount of spending or saving can change our identity as a child of God. Maybe it can root us deeper in our faith and see how that faith shapes our daily life.

And while Benjamin Franklin may have felt that the only two certainties of this life are death and taxes; we know the one who overcame death and shows us that God's love is more certain than anything in this life.