Is it: God's or Mine?
Matthew 22: 15 – 22

Grace, Mercy, and Peace from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Amen.

When we start reading the Gospel reading for today, we want to yell using the famous line from the third "Star Wars" movie: "It's a Trap"; "It's a Trap": To warn Jesus regarding that trap the Pharisees were setting for Him. We are also reminded of the famous quote that was taken from a letter that Benjamin Franklin wrote to a friend in 1789: "In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes." Margaret Mitchell in 1936 used a similar phrase in the movie Gone with the Wind: "Death and taxes and childbirth! There's never any convenient time for any of them." How true. When it comes to money – taxes can be very intriguing and at times scary.

It is very clear in this encounter with the Pharisees', their disciples, and the Herodians, Jesus does not let other people determine His teaching or actions, which is in the contrast to the statement made by the priest and elders: "We are afraid of the crowds." Jesus, unafraid listened to their question regarding the paying of taxes. When they brought Him a denarius, He calmly asked whose image was on the coin; and they replied: Caesar's. Jesus clearly answers them: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". We do not read in the Gospel text Jesus flinging the coin away as though it was white-hot with paganism; or that he rolled His eyes at the unbelievable fact that not everyone present truly worshiped God that Jesus called Father. You can almost see Jesus shrugging His shoulders, furrowing His brow conveying the message; IS THIS the best that you can come up with to challenge Me?"

In our Gospel reading for today, we move out of the world of parables into the real world of death and taxes. Whereas the parables talked about God's authority, our Gospel reading today is like a case study in applying God's authority to the real-life situation of paying taxes. The tax that Jesus was referring to was in no doubt the flat-rate tax that was levied on all men from the age of fourteen until death; and levied on all women from the age of twelve to the age of sixty-five. It was levied at minimum, at the rate of one denarius per year; the amount equivalent to a day's wage. Later, it was combined with a percentage tax on property. This tax was critical because the Roman government needed this money to pay their expenses for their occupation of the land which was very costly, and the tax collection was a very expensive undertaking in itself. No doubt there were complaints about paying these taxes and how the money was used: Just like what we experience today.

In the time of Christ and Matthew, the annual paying of this tax to Rome was a painful reminder of living in a land occupied and ruled by a foreign power who worshiped false gods. The tax could only be paid with Roman coins which were not just legal tender, but also pieces of propaganda. Most of the coins contained an image of the Caesar with inscriptions proclaiming him to be divine - or - being the son of a god. One common phrase on coins during the time of Jesus was: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." In this: We must remember that graven images and polytheism were blasphemous to the Jews. Thus, paying taxes with Roman coins raised both political and religious issues. Every time the Jews used Roman money, they were reminded they were an occupied land with the emperor was making himself a god and thus making a mockery of the Ten Commandments.

With this as background regarding taxes and money: What does it mean to be stewards of what God has given to us; and what is God's desire for us to do with our time, talents and treasure? In considering the answer to this question, we need to keep in mind that Jews living in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus was nothing like us living in the United States in the 21st century: They were an occupied land with no freedoms like we have. To understand this conflict for the Jewish people; we must go back to the account of Creation. If we truly believe that we are created in the image of God; that is every tiny part of us; then it follows that the tiniest parts of our body, the smallest thoughts in our heads, and all that has been given to us as possessions belong to God. Thus, we cannot say that only this part belongs to God, so I will give it to God; and since this part does not belong to God, I do not have to give it back to God; it is mine. However: Reality is: Everything we have belongs to God and we are but mere managers or stewards of these gifts God has given to us. This has a profound impact on us when we consider what we do with our "Time, Talents and Treasure." The question we must honestly answer is: Do we sincerely believe our time, talents and treasure are 100% God's for us to use and that we are called to return a portion in gratitude for all God has given us: Or, is our feeling: What about me? Do we proclaim that X, Y, and Z are mine simply because I deserve them. This feeling, what about me, is often heard in the expression of many in the church today regarding Mission and Stewardship: "I am getting sick and tired of always hearing about Mission and Stewardship. All they want is more money. Are they even being good stewards of the money that is given them? I am doing all I can and can afford: What about me? I deserve a good life as well."

In addressing this common attitude regarding Mission and Stewardship: It is important for us Christians to remind ourselves that the primary purpose for the existence of the church, and of every congregation, is Mission. Mission and stewardship are much more than a transaction, a giving a certain amount of one's time, talents, and financial resources: It is regarding a way of life. It is reaching out to others in proclaiming the Gospel message not only in Word, but in actions of our service that provide resources to assist people and for others to serve as well.

However too often, many in the church have considered mission work as an auxiliary function, an optional activity, in which the members may or may not choose to participate: Reality is: A committed believer is necessarily a disciple and a missionary.

Discipleship is being in service to God. As Dierich Bonhooeffer, a noted Pastor and Theologian in Germany in the WW-2 era proclaimed: Discipleship is completely turning oneself over to Christ 24 / 7 and to journey wherever Christ may lead him – even if it meant his death. Dying for Bonhoeffer meant much more than one's physical death; it meant dying to oneself and selfish interests. One could say that one's physical dying for the sake of Christ is indeed a remarkable act of love, however a greater feat may be one's daily living for Christ: To take up one's cross and daily following Him: To proclaim the Gospel in word and action when it is not a popular position to take. Thus, it is very clear that Discipleship does not mean that a person retreats from this world; it means becoming most actively engaged in this world. Thus, we do not gather as a congregation for worship to escape from the world or to run away from daily life in an attempt to feel safe and secure for one hour a week; but rather to seek the strengthening power of Word and Sacrament so that we might go forth into the world to proclaim the Gospel, being present to the people God puts in our life, and confront the evil forces of the world 24 hours a day, day after day, 168 hours a week, week after week, 365 days, year after year.

Yes, Jesus Christ is a sending Lord and we who are His followers are the ones who are being sent. Being sent as Christ's representatives, disciples to all we come into contact daily. Responding to this Call. We must come to the mirror of honesty and determine what the priorities in our life are. To recognize how easy it is to be pulled by the various advertisements that claim, "only if" we use their products or live in certain ways, our lives will be much easier, and yes, even "totally fulfilled". As these messages become more seductive, we move away from the critical spiritual aspects of our lives and into the material arena which many times profoundly disappoint us in the end. This is not to say material things are bad in themselves: But, when they become the consuming priority in our lives, they become idols we worship and these idols demand that we sacrifice to them to the detriment of our lives.

In accepting God's invitation to become workers to further the Kingdom of God simply means it is not just enough to know God, to accept the goodness and graciousness of God: But genuinely to understand and appreciate our redemption through Christ's Death and Resurrection and to respond in gratitude for all that Christ has done for us. This call to discipleship is to acknowledge and accept the authority of God over one's life: An authority which calls for an honest evaluation of what part we are to play in this missionary effort and how we use our time, talent and treasure. Thus, it is not sufficient just to hold membership in a church; to sit at table as an invited guest; to have said yes instead of no to the call of Discipleship. It requires our

reaching out to others in proclaiming the Gospel message and doing what is required of us in doing the Father's will so that the bearing of good fruit will result. As it is stated clearly in the book of James: Chapter 2: Verse 17 "In the same way, faith by itself, if it not accompanied by action, is dead." Once we are called everything is left for each person decide: Obedience or disobedience to the call. We must come to grips with the fact in answering this call: Only the person who believes is obedient and the person who is obedient truly believes. The first step of answering the call of Jeus is obedience, and this proves to be an act of faith in the Word of Christ. In choosing obedience the journey for each of us begins with the words of forgiveness to our broken spirit and contrite hears. It is so precious and costly because it cost God the life of His Son to free us from the bondage of sin. In our call to Discipleship, we must acknowledge that God can use us for His purposes regardless of our sin – no matter how great the sin may be. Our responding yes, gives credence to the power of the phrase in the Lord's Prayer: Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

What will happen to us if we accept the call to discipleship? Will all our troubles cease: NO. Will we be free from all innless? NO. Will everything become perfect in our lives? NO. What will result is that we will be able to live in the freedom that Christ gave us. To live freely in gratitude for the gift of our forgiveness. The forgiveness of our sins and being restored to a right relations ship with God: Living in the peace know that no matter what we may face; God will be with s through it all.

As Professor Long stated in his commentary in the Westminster Bible Companion: "To come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether unmerited invitation of Christ and then not conform one's life to that mercy is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and happy hour in a bus station:" Something for us to honestly think about and then respond accordingly. For this great opportunity to be disciples witnessing to the saving message of Grace using our time, talents and treasure: We say thanks be to God.

May the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in our Risen Lord and Savior; Jesus Christ. Amen.

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