

October 16, 2011  
Proper 24, A  
Matthew 22:15-22

There are times when living in a nice, orderly, clean country like Canada makes it hard to read the bible. There are times when being part of a middle-class congregation, in a middle-class city in a pretty middle-class province makes it difficult to hear the gospel. Being nice can be a handicap sometimes – and I have a feeling that today, with our text from Matthew’s gospel that Cheryl Sampson just read for us, I have a feeling that now is one of those times. So stop being so nice.

### IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR OR NOT?

It’s the problem of taxes. I don’t mean the problem that you and I have with taxes – like, why do we have to pay so much? and why don’t the super-rich take more of the tax burden? and who asked for the HST, anyway? Those are the fairly routine grumbles and complaints of people who just slog along doing the right thing, paying their taxes and getting reliable, useful services in return. Health care. Good to have. Decent roads. Indispensable for economic growth. Ontario Works and ODSP – because really, we want everyone to have a fair chance at life. Our tax dollars at work.

The problems that we law-abiding citizens in a fair democracy have with taxes bear no resemblance at all to the problems that citizens in other places have. Where the governments are corrupt. Where money goes to an army and to weapons used to oppress the people. Where officials line their pockets with untold riches from the public coffer, while the people starve in the streets. Who wants to pay taxes under those circumstances? When your hard-earned money is being used to harm you? Taxes suddenly seem like a bad idea, under circumstances like that.

Some of that was true in Jesus’ day – the corruption, and the brutality of the military, but actually, Rome had a pretty good reputation for fair governance, even in unimportant and marginal places like Jerusalem. Rogue dictators were punished, and brutality was brutally stopped. It’s true that some officials – like Zaccheus the height-challenged tax-collector – used their small measure of power to improve their lot, but they didn’t actually have much leeway. They had strict rules to follow as well.

The problem with taxes in this text from Matthew is not about the burden of them, or the justice of them. It’s actually about the theology of them. It is a religious issue, and that’s the part that we often don’t get – because we just don’t see it.

**THEN THE PHARISEES WENT AND PLOTTED TO ENTRAP HIM IN WHAT HE SAID SO THEY SENT THEIR DISCIPLES TO HIM, ALONG WITH THE HERODIANS...** The Pharisees are a group of religious leaders and they are trying to figure out if Jesus is with them or against them– even here at the end of Matthew’s gospel, chapter 22. He’s clearly a man on the fence, or maybe he’s neither with them nor against them. But they want to trap him. So they invite their enemies, the Herodians, along to set the trap.

IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR OR NOT? Dumb question, say all of us nice Canadians – if it's the law of the land then it's lawful. Wrong! Of course it's the law of the land – it's civilly or politically lawful to pay your taxes.

But within the context of the other set of laws that Jews of the day observed it was more complex. These were people who followed the laws of two kingdoms: Caesar's kingdom and God's kingdom. Their citizenship marked them as Caesar's. Their circumcision marked them as God's. Their civil engagement marked them as Caesar's. Their dietary restrictions marked them as God's. Sometimes it was very difficult to navigate between the two imperatives – especially when they conflicted with each other.

As they do in this case – which was the nature of the trap that they set for Jesus. They thought they had him nailed with a binary opposite. Either/or. IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR OR NOT? If he chose Yes, it is lawful then he shows himself to be a supporter of Rome, and he loses the wide base of support in the anti-Roman population which the Pharisees represented. If he chose No, it is not lawful then Jesus would be speaking treason, and the Herodians would denounce him to the king and he could be hauled off to jail. It's a good trap – yes or no, either way Jesus is in trouble.

Like most good traps, this one seems airtight. Four walls. No windows. No doors. How is Jesus going to get out of it? We all know that he does – most of us have known since we were children in Sunday School how it ends: GIVE TO THE EMPEROR THE THINGS THAT ARE THE EMPEROR'S AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S. And we have watched in delight in the last verse as the Pharisees and Herodians WERE AMAZED; AND THEY LEFT HIM AND WENT AWAY. It's such a humiliating defeat, with the snakes going back to the pit.

The only problem – for me, anyway, is that when I am completely honest about it, I never really understood what happened. How did Jesus get the best of them? They showed him a coin – he shows them the head on it – and suddenly they are defeated. Like some sleight of hand trick that I can't quite see, I have never been clear on how he pulls the rabbit out of the hat. How does he end up on the roof of that windowless and doorless trap they set with the laws? Obviously it has something to do with Caesar's image on the coin... but what?

It took a biblical scholar to tease this all apart for me this week. I turned to Clayton Schmit of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. (1) He drew my attention to one little detail I have always overlooked, and he gave me one fact I didn't know.

The little detail is in verse 19 where Jesus says, SHOW ME THE COIN USED FOR THE TAX. AND THEY BROUGHT HIM A DENARIUS. If you hunt backwards in the text 20 or 30 verses into chapter 21 – the sort of thing that biblical scholars love to do - you discover that this whole scene is being played out in the temple courtyard. The Pharisees, the Herodians, the disciples, the crowd – all are gathered in the most sacred place for the community, like being here in our sanctuary. The place where all are on their best behaviour, right?

Here's the fact you need to know: a denarius was a small silver coin authorized by the emperor in power and stamped with his image on one side – in Greek, his *ikon* – and on the other the

words *hieros theou*, son of God. Whether or not the Romans really believed that their emperor was the son of God or not is beside the point – their coins proclaimed that fact, and in some way functioned as icons of him. The Pharisees therefore, refused to carry them because the coins were blasphemous idols. As religious leaders, as circumcised men, who bore the mark of the true God on their bodies, and in the fringes of their clothing, and the length of their ritually uncut hair, and the food they would or would not eat they made a very public point of belonging to God's kingdom, not Caesar's.

The little detail I have always overlooked is that the Pharisees produce a coin. There should have been no coin. Jesus wasn't carrying any coins. No one should have had that ikon on their person, and certainly not in that holy sanctuary. Jesus disarms the trap they had tried to set for him by showing the hypocrisy of the people who laid it for him. He doesn't answer the question – he blows it out of the water. He makes a mockery of his adversaries, and the trap falls apart.

I always thought that he somehow outwitted them, but his victory over them is more than just intellectual, more than just a triumph of wits. It is a moral victory. He makes their question of paying taxes irrelevant because he makes them irrelevant, by showing them to be hypocrites. There is no trap if no one respects the people who laid the trap. But he's made some powerful enemies. It's no wonder, then, that in Matthew's gospel, anyway, these same people go off at this point and within four chapters begin to plot to have him killed.

Where does that leave us, then? Just like the crowds in the temple on that day over two thousand years ago, we've been watching a pretty exciting contest between the religious authorities and Jesus, the true ikon and son of God. And it's been fun to watch the Pharisees storm off in a huff, with their tales between their legs – again, as they always do in Matthew 22.

But we're left with the same inscrutable challenge that Jesus posed to our ancestors in the faith: GIVE THEREFORE TO THE EMPEROR'S THE THINGS THAT ARE THE EMPEROR'S AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S. What does that mean? What does it really mean? I tell you, it's been a puzzle for us Christians since early days. And I don't suppose that there is just one answer. Each of you has an answer – the answer that is right for you.

Here's the answer that works for me today. I don't think that Jesus' words are to be understood as a statement about the importance and necessity of paying taxes through the millennia. I just don't think that's where God's deepest intentions for us lie.

God wants us to have fullness of life. I truly believe that. We each have to give the emperor his due – whether that is our government, or our job or our family. Certain obligations have to be met in order to function in society. But, as Clayton Schmit in California says, “don't mess around with the things that belong to God.”

And at the end of the day, that's you. You belong to God. You belong to God. You were created by love. You are sustained by love. You are surrounded by love. You are part of a loving community. You belong to God. You were marked in your baptism by love. You align your choices with love. You orient your life to love. You belong to God. You are God's child. You are God's beloved. You are God's heir. You belong to God. GIVE TO GOD THE

THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S means give yourself daily, hourly, in each moment, in each breath to God. And God will not forsake you. Amen.

(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St Andrew's United Church, London, Ont.  
[www.fsaunited.com](http://www.fsaunited.com))

(1) on Working Preacher.org, "The Text This Week: Matthew 22:15-22" at  
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx> accessed on Friday, October 14, 2011.