



“Tax Revolt”

Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, October 16, 2011

Clear communication is tricky business. People do not always hear the message we intend to convey. No one knows this better than pastors. Every pastor has had the experience of preaching a sermon and then having a listener say, “I really liked it when you said, ‘such and such’” but you said nothing of the sort. It is especially painful when the person believes you said the exact opposite of what you intended to communicate.

Last summer, during our Vacation Bible School, I told the children about the Jewish Passover meal and its focus on the Hebrew people’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. I talked about Jesus eating the Passover meal with his disciples in the final week of his life and how he gave the meal a new meaning for Christians. This is now our celebration of the Lord’s Supper when we talk about the body and blood of Christ.

That afternoon, the mother of one of the little girls asked her daughter what she had learned in Vacation Bible School that day. The sweet thing pondered my talk about the Lord’s Supper and then declared, “Jesus said if you drink too much wine, you are going to die!”

This morning’s passage is the well-known statement Jesus made about paying taxes in which some heard one thing while others heard something entirely different. That’s because it was communication on two levels. On the surface, Jesus’ words were innocuous. But on a deeper level, what he said was treasonous.

Relating this encounter, Matthew is careful to provide the details his readers need to understand this was no casual conversation. It was a tense face to face between Jesus and those devising a scheme to eliminate him.

At this point in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has already had confrontations with the Pharisees and they have begun to think about ways to have Jesus arrested. Matthew begins today’s reading by informing us that the Pharisees were plotting to entrap Jesus with a provocative question.

We also read that the Pharisees do not come to Jesus alone. They bring along their pals; the Herodians. The Herodians were staunch defenders of King Herod; that is, supporters of the Roman occupation. They supported the foreign troops on their native soil because they were given privileged positions in exchange for their loyalty. The Pharisees wanted the Herodians to come along, so they could hear first hand, Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ question.

At the moment of encounter, the Pharisees begin by reminding Jesus and all those within earshot, that they know he is a person of integrity. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach God’s truth, and you pander to know one. Tell us, then, what you think about this.” And they spring their trick question, so they can force Jesus to state for the record, and in the presence of the Herodians, his view on paying taxes to the Roman occupiers.

In Jesus’ time the Jewish people paid a hefty Temple tax. They also paid custom taxes and a land tax. On top of these taxes, they paid an annual tribute to Rome. The Pharisees and Herodians were among the elites who could afford these taxes, but more than 90% of the population was poor and the tax further drained their meager resources. The tax to Rome not only reduced their standard of living, but their money enriched the lives of Romans and supported the very army that occupied their land. As if that weren’t enough, the Jews were required to pay this tax with a silver coin that had the emperor’s head engraved on it.

The Romans had minted other coins for the Jews to use as currency within Palestine without the imperial inscription. However, the Jews were required to pay the tax to Rome with the coin bearing the image of the emperor. It was the Romans’ way of saying, “This is who your true lord is – the Roman emperor.”

So the Pharisees approached Jesus with a question that they believed would land Jesus in an impossible dilemma. “Tell us, Jesus. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

The Herodians, big guys who pumped weights, step forward and swell their chests. They are eager for Jesus to say, “We refuse to pay the tax.” They will put him in a stranglehold and drag him to King Herod in an instant.

As soon as the Pharisees popped their question, the followers of Jesus must have felt they had been kicked in the stomach. The last thing they wanted to hear from the lips of Jesus was that they should pay the tax to Rome. It would be tantamount to capitulating. Word would spread that Jesus was collaborating with the emperor. But what choice did he have? He could make a defiant statement that the masses would love, but it would also be his final public statement.

It appeared that the Pharisees had him in an inescapable position. But in a Houdini-like move, Jesus slipped from their grasp and landed in a position even stronger than before. Jesus responded with precise wording that thwarted his adversaries while elevating his popular support. “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The Herodians slumped. The big brutes had hoped Jesus would say, “Do not pay the tax.” But they clearly heard him say, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperors.” They thought that meant he was supporting the Roman tax.

His followers knew better. The smile of satisfaction stretched across their faces while the Pharisees cringed. Both his followers and the Pharisees heard Jesus say, “Give to God the things that are God’s,” and both groups knew that *everything* belongs to God. God is the Creator of heaven and earth. They could quote the 24th Psalm: “The earth is the Lord’s and *all* that is in it.

Some of Jesus’ followers may have even said to the Herodians, “You can count on us to give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor,” because they knew nothing belonged to him.

The Pharisees felt as if their carefully planned trap had turned out to be the trick cigar that exploded in their faces. They quickly shuffled away before Jesus humiliated them any further.

While the followers of Jesus were grateful that Jesus had foiled his adversaries, they also realized that Jesus had given all who follow him, a hefty command. Give to God the things that are God's. In other words, give all you have and all you are to God.

What does it mean for you to give yourself – mind, body and soul – to God? It means you recognize that your life and all you have comes from God. It is to be continuously grateful for your health, for people who care about you, for work to do, for beauty, for God's commands and the teachings of Jesus.

What does it mean for you to give yourself to God? It means to follow the path that Christ has shown us: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

What does it mean for you to give yourself to God? It means to forgive yourself, to forgive others and to move on with the life God wants you to live.

What does it mean for you to give yourself to God? It means: to reject greed and to become generous, to avoid arrogance and to strive for humility, to spurn selfishness and to adopt servanthood, to renounce inequity and to strive for justice, to refuse deception and to embrace truth, to avoid apathy and to choose compassion.

The story is told of a father who had two sons. He took his boys to the fields as soon as they could walk and taught them all he knew about farming. Over the years, the boys learned every lesson and produced hefty harvests. When the father died, the brothers continued to work together in partnership and divided each harvest equally.

As years passed, one of the brothers married and had five children, but the other brother never married. One night, after gathering produce from their field, the bachelor brother thought to himself, "My brother needs enough food to feed himself, his wife and five children. I only need enough food to feed myself. He needs more of this harvest than I do. However, I know him well and he will insist that we split it 50/50. Then a plan formed in his mind. He decided to go out late at night and take some of the harvest from his barn and put it in his brother's barn.

That very same night, the married brother thought to himself, "I have been blessed with a family. When I am old, I will have children to take care of me, but my brother will have no one. He needs more of this harvest so that he can build up a nest egg for the future. However, I know him well and he will insist that we split it 50/50.

Late that night, as each of the men was attempting to sneak more of the harvest into his brother's barn, they ran into each other and immediately realized what the other was doing. And as they fell into each other's arms a gentle rain began to fall. It was God weeping tears of joy at the sight of such love. This is the sort of thing that happens when you give yourself to God.