

November 2023

Sermon: "Things of God"

Scripture reading: Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16So 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. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21They 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." 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." It's still a long time until April 15th and I don't mean to remind you of that prematurely but did you know that April 15th is not only income tax day, it is also the day the Titanic sunk and the day Lincoln was shot. You see, it is just a bad day all the way around. Someone said once, "You may not agree with every department of the government, but you really have to hand it to the IRS." Another cynic has said, "Death and taxes may always be with us, but at least death doesn't get worse every time congress meets." Arthur Godfrey once said, "I feel honored to pay taxes in America. The thing is, I could probably feel just as honored for about half the price." Someone also once said that the Eiffel Tower is the Empire State Building after taxes. Most people don't enjoy paying taxes. We just do it. Well, the people had to pay taxes in Jesus' time, too. Even worse, they had to pay them to a government they despised. Rome. You see, Rome was occupying their land. A portion of their income ended up in Caesar's pocket and this made the Jews very unhappy. They were a proud people and resented this Roman domination. Thus, Jesus' dilemma when they asked him the loaded question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Would Jesus offend the Jews by siding with the despised Romans or would he risk the wrath of the Romans by siding with Jewish sentiment? Well, Jesus did neither. "Whose likeness and inscription is this on the coin?" he asked. "Caesar's." they answered. "Render, then," he said, "to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's". A classic answer. An irrefutable answer. And it raises an important question for us even today. What are the things of Caesar and what are the things of God? Actually, most of us don't have too many problems rendering to Caesar. The truth is that we have very little choice in the matter. There was a trial of the son of a U.S. Congressman. The son had been charged with tax evasion. The judge showed little mercy. "Our tax system depends upon voluntary compliance," he said. "Therefore we must send a signal to other tax cheaters." The son of the congressman went to jail. You may be surprised to learn that we have a voluntary tax system. Tell that to the IRS the next time you get audited. Rendering to Caesar is no problem. If the government needs your house moved to make way for a highway, you might as well start looking for a new one. If Congress reinstates the draft, start packing the old duffel bag. What Caesar wants,

Caesar gets. And most of us don't have a problem with that. Our government certainly isn't perfect but it is better than anything else in the world right now, and taxes is the price we have to pay to live in America. One of my biggest concerns about our government is the tremendous waste and squandering of tax money. I wish we had more presidents like Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge, I understand, frustrated with the idea of paying \$25,000 for a whole squadron of Aircraft, is said to have asked, "Why can't we just buy one airplane and let the aviators take turns flying it?" That's my kind of politician! Yes, we joke about our government and it certainly could be better, but I don't think we'd trade it for any other at this point. No, rendering unto Caesar is not a problem for most of us. But for many, rendering unto God is a tremendous spiritual problem. A recent survey of members of a leading denomination showed that among members who had dropped out of church, the number one complaint was that the church talked about money too much. Now, some of that was rationalization, to be sure. But it is true that giving to God and the work of Christ in the world is a pretty low priority for many. And I think that's true for two reasons. First, as a culture we are becoming increasingly more materialistic. It's difficult to make payments on all the playthings people must have these days and still give 10% to God. We're like the little boy who was given two quarters - one for Sunday School and one for an ice cream cone. Walking along the street one of the coins slipped out of his hand and fell through some grillwork into the drain below. The little boy raised his face toward Heaven and said with genuine sorrow, "Well, God, there goes your quarter." Think about it. We are increasingly materialistic. In the second place, there is something intrinsically seductive about money. The more we have, the harder it is for us to give. Jesus said, "you cannot worship both God and money..." Money is like a drug. It enslaves as surely as any drug. That's why Jesus devoted more of his teachings to warning about the perils of great wealth than to any other subject. He was not saying that it is bad to own things, but he was warning us to be careful lest we get to a point where the things own us! The worship of money is probably the most widely practiced religion in our country today. Even prominent religious leaders have fallen down and worshipped this ever popular idol called money. That was a lesson learned by John D. Rockefeller, Sr. He drove himself hard to be a success. He became a millionaire by this age of twenty-three and by the age of fifty was the richest man on earth. Then at fifty-three years of age, Rockefeller developed a serious illness which caused the hair on his head, his eyebrows, and eyelashes to drop off. Even though he was the world's only billionaire and could have almost anything on earth he wanted, he could only digest milk and crackers. He became shrunken like a mummy. He could not sleep, would not smile, and nothing in life meant much to him at all. Doctors predicted that within a year he would be dead. One night, however, as Rockefeller struggled to fall asleep he came to grips with his life. He realized that he could take nothing with him into the next world. The next day he embarked on a new way of living. Rather than hoarding his money and possessions, he began to give them away to persons in need. Establishing the Rockefeller Foundation, he channeled his fortune into hospitals, research, and mission work. His contributions eventually led to the discovery of penicillin as well as cures for malaria, tuberculosis, and

diphtheria. At age 53, Rockefeller was given a year to live. By learning to live by the principle of giving rather than getting, he altered his life so dramatically that he eventually lived to the ripe old age of ninety-eight. For many people the worship of money and possessions is a profound and deadly spiritual problem. The more we have, the less we seem able to give. The more things we own, the greater the temptation to allow things to own us. Please don't misunderstand. As you know, the Scriptures do not say that money is the root of all evil. And it isn't. We can agree with Joe Louis' famous words. "I don't like money, actually," he said, "but it quiets my nerves." It is the love of money that is the root of all evil. It is the worship of money that puts it into competition with God. No, we don't have any trouble rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's but how can we become more willing and able to render to God the things that are God's? The first thing we need to realize is that everything we have, everything we are, and everything we hope to be is first and foremost a gift from God. When we understand the magnitude of this reality, our hearts become captivated by the love and grace that God has lavished upon us. We then soon discover our bodies, our minds, and most importantly of all, our hearts truly belong to God. It's when God takes possession of our hearts and sends the spirit to live there that we find it not only easier to render to God the things that are God's, but it becomes a great privilege and joy to do so. When we say to someone, "I love you with all my heart," what do we mean? We are saying, "I am committed to you. All that I have is yours. I trust you enough that I am willing to share with you everything I have, everything I am, and everything I hope to be." That kind of commitment is what God asks of us. Truly it's all God's in the first place. Render to God the things that are God's. There's a silly story that makes a powerful point about where many people are with this. According to the story, a much loved king was in need of a heart transplant. There was a great concern throughout his kingdom. Everyone gathered outside the royal castle screaming and waving their hands. "Take my heart, King, take my heart!" Well, the king didn't know what to do, but an idea popped into his head. He asked everyone to please be quiet for a few minutes and he told them his plan. He would throw down a feather and whoever the feather landed on, the king would take their heart for the transplant. The beloved king then threw the feather out over the people and watched it drift back and forth. Everyone was still screaming and waving their hands, "Take my heart, King," but with one difference: they were leaning their heads back and blowing the feather back into the air. "Take my heart, King (blow), Take my heart (blow). We really don't have much choice when it comes to paying taxes. Maybe that's why we don't have much trouble with it. And we may be willing to give a few tokens to God. But our bodies? Our minds? Our hearts? "Take my heart, Lord." (blow). Save the tokens for the IRS. God wants and deserves our first and our best. And when the Holy Spirit truly lives in our hearts, we will find rendering to God easier, more important, and certainly more enjoyable than rendering to Caesar. Amen.

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