

Mathew 22: 15-22: Give to Cesar the things that are Cesar's,  
and give to God the things that are God's  
What does belong to God?

What do we do when we are threatened? We usually fight back!  
And that is exactly what the Pharisees wanted to do. The Pharisees  
were so threatened by Jesus and His teaching that they sent not only a  
group of their own disciples, but also a few Herodians to try to entrap  
Jesus. Now Herodians were interested in maintaining the power and  
authority of the Herodian Dynasty of rulers; they were more of a  
political group of individuals rather than religious. The tax in question  
was the annual tribute tax to Rome. Jews were divided about this tax.  
The Temple authorities, including Temple scribes, collaborated with  
Roman rule and endorsed the tax. But Jews sympathetic to the  
resistance to Roman authority rejected it. Such refusal was the  
equivalent of sedition. Therefore the question put to Jesus was a trap.  
Either a yes or no answer would have gotten Jesus in trouble. "Yes"  
would have discredited him with those who found the imperial  
domination system reprehensible and unacceptable. "No" would have  
made Him subject to arrest for treason.

The men sent to do this deed decided the best way to set this trap was by starting off with flattery! “Teacher, we know you are sincere, you teach the truth, and you are fair.”

Now, there are four kids in our family...and every one of them at some point or another poured out the flattery when they wanted something or were trying to get away with something. “Ma, you are the best mother in the world...Ma, no one cooks like you! Whenever I heard that kind of flattery just oozing out of their mouths I knew something was brewing.

Even though in the gospel story Jesus is being set up, I think it is reasonable to say that this question or some form of it has been on the minds of workers since the beginning of any kind of taxation. Is it lawful to pay taxes? Today we have tweaked that question a little and ask, “How much tax is a fair amount to pay?” Because it is an election year, this question is on everyone’s mind more than usual.

I, however, want to focus on the second half of Jesus’ answer: Give to God the things that are God’s. We are so centered on the first part of this answer that we often do not give any thought to the second part which is much more important.

What most people do not realize about the Pharisees is they believed they **were** doing the will of God. They were men who devoted their entire lives to interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. They followed all the rules laid down by Moses including many types of sacrifices. They believed they **were** giving to God what was owed Him. Then Jesus comes along and tells them that their interpretation of Scripture was wrong and that only two laws mattered...love God and love your neighbor. And we don't even have to figure out who is a neighbor because everybody is our neighbor.

But how **do** we pay God back? How do we thank our Creator for all that has been bestowed on us? The way I see it we owe God for everything that we have. Throughout the centuries humankind has sacrificed all sorts of things in order to praise God. But God does not want sacrifices, what this astonishing, loving, spiritual Being wants is to be in relationship with us. God wants to be involved in every aspect of our lives. And how does that happen? By loving our neighbor as ourselves. A relationship with God entails more than just coming to service on Sunday.

Love your neighbor as your heavenly father loves you. That, my brother and sisters, is not always easy. But I do not remember reading it anywhere in the bible where it said that being a Christian was going to be easy. Now, what are we willing to do? Well there are the big things. We must demand justice for anyone who is unfairly persecuted; we must give our support to efforts that offer relief to the poor and homeless. And there are countless organizations that we can connect with.

However, we need to recognize those small gestures that may seem insignificant and yet mean the world to someone else. Everyone knows someone who thinks nothing of visiting a lonely neighbor, someone who, whether they are for or against the war, takes the time to write a letter to a soldier who is far from home and in danger's way. Every person who cares for someone else is the hand of Jesus Christ on Earth. They are building the City of God.

But I come to Church on Sunday! Coming to Church on Sunday should be much more than an obligation, more than an hour of payback, it should be a celebration that our God wants to be in a relationship with each and every one of us. During every Eucharist we

celebrate the presence of the Almighty; we are reminded of His justice, but we should always be acutely aware that it is also a celebration of forgiveness. We should be proclaiming this to our family and friends who do not come to celebrate at the table. **We owe God that much.**

Some of us do not realize how fortunate we are to be able to celebrate at God's table. While attending seminary I had the privilege of studying with several international students who knew that when they return to their homeland they would be literally putting their lives in jeopardy when they preach the gospel and celebrate Eucharist. They know they owe God that and they are willing to pay the price.

More often than you would think, I assume it is because they see my collar, people come up to me and tell me why they **don't** go to church. The most common reason they do not get anything out of it. I ask them, what have they put into it? Sunday service is not a variety show. David and I did not go to seminary to be entertainers. We went to seminary to learn how better to proclaim the Good News. If you want to get to learn more about your faith, about your church family, to really develop a relationship with the Divine, you must give of yourself. That does not mean spending hours on end or every weekend

at St. Johns. But it does mean helping out with fellowship, working with religious education, or raking a couple of leaves. Spending time together is how we get to know each other and that is how we begin to love each other. It is only when we work and laugh together that a relationship is formed. And when heartache comes, which it does for all of us, a trust has been developed that allows us to grieve with each other. Because we are a church family we realize that God is present in every situation whether it is happy or sad. We need to teach our children that. And all of us need to realize that it does not matter what you do, what matter is **that you do. We owe God that.**

I do understand that most of us are overloaded with many, many obligations. But I believe we owe it to God and to ourselves to carefully review our schedules. If we do not even have time to sit and talk to God, just for a few minutes, about our day, something is wrong. We need to ask ourselves what things in our lives are necessary and which are not. What is helping us build the kingdom of God and what is systematically wearing the kingdom down?

Is it lawful to pay taxes? Yes, and don't worry about how much, our government will let us know what we owe. But when it comes to

decide what is fairly God's due we are on our own. First we should earnestly thank our loving creator for all that we have been blessed with and secondly please be an active member of God's earthly family. Whether that means running church program, volunteering an hour a week, or simply taking the time to say a prayer for people who have no one to pray for them. And always remember Jesus Christ in everything that you do. **Honestly, we definitely owe God that.**

Amen.