

Year A Proper 29 Pay taxes to the Emperor? Matt 22 15-22

Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not? The angry religious leaders – threatened by Jesus’ radical teachings, worried about his growing popularity with the crowds who call him their Messiah and want him to be king – those religious leaders thought they had him this time.

Should we pay taxes to the emperor – yes or no? No matter which way Jesus answered, they had him. It was a “lose/lose” situation for this upstart named Jesus of Nazareth. They finally had him cornered...or so they thought.

This tax was very unpopular with the Jewish people. For starters, the coin used to pay the tax was carved with a picture of the emperor on one side. This broke God’s law that the Jewish people followed about not making graven images. The coin also called Tiberius Caesar “the son of the divine Augustus, the most high priest” which was really offensive to the Jewish people who worshipped one God and God alone. This tax had been imposed by Rome when they had conquered Israel. It was the equivalent of a day’s pay and had to be paid in Roman coin not Jewish coin. It was a reminder to the Jewish people that they were a conquered nation – an oppressed people. But, it was the law and, like it or not, they had to pay it.

If Jesus said, “Yes – pay taxes to the emperor”, that would really upset the adoring crowds following him around. “Pay taxes to the emperor? No, no, no, Jesus. You’re not supposed to be talking like that. You’re our Messiah – the one who is going to overthrow the emperor, the one who will lead Israel to victory over our Roman oppressors, be our king, and rule over God’s kingdom that you’re always telling us about.” No, the crowd would not be happy with that answer.

Pay taxes to the emperor? Jesus would be letting them down, crushing their hope that he was the Messiah.

If the crowd was unhappy with Jesus and turned away from him that would give the religious leaders the chance they'd been waiting for to finally get their hands on Jesus and have him thrown into jail.

And if Jesus said, "No – don't pay taxes to the emperor", well, that would be even better as far as the religious leaders were concerned. That would be treason. Not only could they have Jesus arrested, they could probably have him executed as well.

Lose/lose, right? Well, the first thing Jesus does is make an important point. He digs into his pockets for a coin...and comes up empty. So, the religious leaders get out their coin purses and, what do you know? They had Roman money on them.

Jesus gets the religious leaders to say that there is the name and image of the emperor on the coin so Jesus says, "Well then, give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor."

But, before the crowd has a chance to get upset and before the religious leaders can triumphantly say, "Aha", Jesus continues on with, "And give to God what is God's."

"Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what is God's." With this answer, Jesus acknowledges that God's law will allow what is imprinted with the emperor's image to be given back to the emperor but, importantly, that is done at the same time that we give what is imprinted with

God's image back to God. And that is us. You and I were created in God's image (Gen.1:26-27). Jesus calls us to give to God all that we are and all that we have been given. So, sure, give the emperor one coin – one day's pay that he's owed as tax – but that's all he's owed. We, and all the rest of creation, are God's.

Jesus' story puts things in perspective for us. We live in this world – and by "world" I mean the systems and structures that have been put into place...where some people have power and others do not...and that power usually takes the form of position, pocketbook, and property – the more you have, the more important you must be. We function in this world but we are not to be swayed by its idea of power – we belong to God.

When we are baptized, we are marked as Christ's own forever...Christ -who willingly bore the burden of the sin of the world; Christ who defeated death and rose to new life so that we may do the same. In baptism, as we are signed with the cross and as the water washes over us, it reveals the image of Christ that is our gift from God.

That image of Christ can be seen by others. When a compassionate hand reaches out and bathes a fevered forehead with a cooling cloth...that is the image of Christ. When a hot bowl of soup is offered to a shivering girl gripping her mother's leg...that is the image of Christ. When a lonely old man is embraced by caring stranger, welcoming him into his circle...that is the image of Christ. When children in the school choir sing Christmas carols at the local nursing home...that is the image of Christ.

Each time we give and forgive, each time we love...that is the image of Christ.

And when you keep reaching out to others in love, you may find something amazing happens.

I grew up in a little town called South Porcupine. There were no homeless people in South Porcupine. There was nobody sitting on street corners asking for money. But then I went to Sudbury as an adult one year to do some Christmas shopping. As I was walking up to the doors of a Zellers store, I saw a grubby looking man sitting on the cold pavement right outside the doors, holding out a dirty cap to people walking past and I saw a couple of people drop some coins in. I fished my wallet out of my purse – I was feeling nervous about walking past this man and I wanted to be ready before I got to him. I didn't have any coins but I had a five dollar bill. "Oh well, he can have it," I thought. "No big deal." So, as I passed this man, I handed him the five...and his face lit up. His dirty face cracked into a smile that showed off unbrushed, crooked teeth. "Thank you!" he said to me. "I'll use this to buy something good." I felt myself smiling back at him and, you know, for a moment, I could've sworn I saw the face of Christ.

Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what is God's.