Sunday, October 17, 1999
GOD AND TAXES
Matthew 22:15-22

To discuss God and taxes in the same sermon is almost as dangerous as mixing religion and politics. Ask a politician a religious question, and he or she knows the answer could be troublesome. Ask a religious leader a political question, and he or she also can get into difficulty. That's why Jesus advised his followers to be "as wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

One day, the opponents of Jesus, in an attempt to get him into trouble, asked him a question that included taxes, religion, and politics. "Should we Jews pay taxes to the Romans who occupy and rule us and our country?" In other words, should we, in effect, be supporting an enemy government? Taxes are never very popular, but what could be worse than paying taxes to the enemy?

It was not only a question about taxation and politics, but it was also a religious question. Is it right for religious people who claim God as our ultimate authority to also support an earthly government or emperor?

It was an especially explosive issue. Some of his followers had strong nationalistic hopes, and any cooperation with the Romans could be seen as being disloyal to his own people. On the other hand, if Jesus answered, "Do not pay taxes to Rome," he could land in the hands of Rome on the charge of treason.

Furthermore, as we all know, the question of how much tax should be paid, to whom it should be paid, and what should be taxed and at what rate is always a controversial question. Since tax money is mostly used to support and run the various levels and branches of government and the services that the government agencies and subdivisions provide, the question of taxation leads to an even more fundamental issue, namely, what should be the attitude of Christians toward government and the nation of which we are citizens?

The answer which Jesus gave in this story from Matthew's gospel gives us some guidance.

Note first that Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." He was saying that there are many practical matters in our day-to-day living that have to be taken care of if we are to live in an orderly society. Some kind of government, some kind of civil authority, therefore, is always necessary.

We recognize that some forms of government are better than others. Governments can be unjust and oppressive. In our kind of representative government, it is a continuing debate as to what its proper role should be. That discussion will always be necessary and appropriate because times change and new issues arise.

However, the point that Jesus was making by implication is that, overall, as Christians, we are to have a positive attitude toward the order-creating functions of civil government because in and through such functions, the providence of God is at work preserving essential conditions for human life.

Without government, even bad government, society would fall into chaos and anarchy. The warning against anarchy because of the unruliness and greed of human beings is one of the most persistent themes in the Bible.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Some order, some laws and rules, some government is always necessary. We need referees in our common life together. We need police officers, firefighters, legislatures, courts of law, and other types of regulators for keeping order and settling disputes. For example, would it be possible to live peacefully in the City of Lincoln or any other city without any kind of police force? Just the fact that police officers are on duty causes people to act differently.

Imagine a football game in Memorial Stadium without any officials to interpret and enforce the rules. It would be chaos.

So when Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” it was his way of saying that some form of government, some authority to keep peace and order among us, is always indispensable, and there is a cost involved. Taxes are essential.

In our form of government, this places a special responsibility on all of us, for in the deepest sense, we are the government. All too often, we talk about the government as “they” or as if the government is the enemy. But in these United States, we are the governors and the governed. By electing people to represent us, we turn over certain powers to them, but those elected can be voted out and laws can be changed. Thus, our representative system provides channels for the resolution of our conflicts in peaceable ways, and it also provides ways for changing the rules that govern us. New laws can be passed, and old ones changed or taken off the books. If necessary, state constitutions and the United States Constitution can be amended.

I’ve often used in sermons one of my favorite quotations from Reinhold Niebuhr about our form of government: “Our human capacity for justice makes democracy possible; our human capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary.”

So we “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” when we actively participate in the governing process, and part of that is paying taxes. For us, it also means voting and taking interest and leadership in government activities. According to Jesus, it’s part of our Christian responsibility. I’m proud to say that we have many members of this congregation who are active in our two major political parties, and we have a number of people who serve in elected and appointed government positions.

I personally think it is unfortunate that there is a tendency for too many people in our country to think of politics as a rather dubious field of endeavor. From a Christian point of view, to be active in politics and to be a politician, in the best sense of the word, is a high calling. If you are a citizen and do not participate by voting or paying taxes or in any one of a number of other ways, you are not “rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”

Note second that Jesus also said, “Render to God the things that are God’s.” This is the second part of Jesus’s answer to the question he was asked. We usually forget or gloss over this part of his answer. It’s always a temptation to render to Caesar the things that are God’s.

For example, one of the most tempting idols for people in any time is the worship of one's nation. This was true in Old Testament times, and it's been true in every time and place. To be patriotic does not mean that we make the nation or our political party our god.

For this reason, there are some sincere Christians who believe it is not right for them to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, even though some years ago the phrase "under God" was added. They see it as putting the flag and the nation first, before God. They think it wrong to pledge allegiance to anything except God. It does not mean that they are unpatriotic.

Fortunately, most of us have enough Christian tolerance to allow for their unwillingness to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. We have also made allowances in our laws for "conscientious objectors" in times of war.

We need to remember that it's possible to deeply love one's country and at the same time be critical of some of its policies or practices. Those of us who deeply love our children are at times critical of them, and children who love their parents can be critical of them as well. Mature love is not blind. Mature love seeks to improve that which is loved.

"Render to God the things that are God's." With this statement, Jesus was warning us that there's always the temptation for the state or nation to want to take the role of God and demand absolute loyalty. There have been times when a nation (especially when a dictator rules) has claimed to be the source of all truth, the only determiner of the purposes of society, and the judge of all culture. When a state or nation becomes absolute, it must deny God's existence or seek to make God over in its own image. It will then try to destroy the church or domesticate it for its own purposes.

Anytime a political movement or nation, religious or otherwise, is convinced that it has the final solution for humanity's problems and that, if given power, it can put that solution into effect, it has a rationalization for ruthless and tyrannical shortcuts in order to gain power and maintain power. This very optimism about its social scheme goes with a blindness to its own temptation as a movement to misuse power and a blindness to the realities of its own corruption. This is the tragedy of communism and any totalitarian movement, including those based on religious fanaticism.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber-barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber-baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep; his cupidity at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience."

"Render to God the things that are God's." A related temptation in making the nation equal to God can be seen when any of our candidates, elected officials, or political parties invoke the name of God as an attempt to use God for their own purposes. God's name is frequently taken in vain in this way. As Christians, especially in our form of representative government, we must insist that the nation or state, or any of its subdivisions, be neutral among the various religions present in our midst. That's part of the First Amendment to the Constitution. But we need to remind ourselves at the same time that our religious faith is relevant as we go about our daily lives.

Abraham Lincoln knew how to do this. He often expressed elements of Biblical religion, but he did not use those religious symbols that could be divisive in our pluralistic society. Personally,

Lincoln humbled himself before the sovereignty of God as the transcendent God of righteousness and mercy. His recognition that good and devout people on both sides of the Civil War prayed to the same God and that the will of God was not identical with the purposes of either party or any nation meant, for him, that humility and mercy accompanied commitment to the right as God gave him to see the right.

“Render to God the things that are God’s.” Only God is ultimately sacred. Only God is to be worshiped.

Jesus knew and taught that there is a right way to mix religion and politics. The right way is to remember to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and render to God the things that are God’s.”

Having said this, he also was aware that this statement will never totally settle the question because there’s also another related question: how do we distinguish between the things that belong to Caesar and the things that belong to God?

Sometimes religious practices will be illegal according to state laws. How then is that dispute to be settled? Your religious tradition and practice might be polygamy, but state law forbids having more than one spouse at a time. Your religious tradition and practice might be to use drugs that are, by law, illegal. What then belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? It’s not always easy to determine.

Sometimes there have been religious rules that have been written into secular law. It wasn’t too many years ago when communities had laws against businesses being open on Sunday. These laws were challenged and rightly so.

To “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” means for us today that we can have a mature love of country and at the same time not always agree with its practices. We can have an appreciation for the order-creating role of government and, at the same time, remember that the government and our country are not to take the place of God.

According to the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, we are also to pray regularly for government officials, even those of the opposite political party. Amen.