Book 38

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 is 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 and 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 is its proper role. 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 over-all, 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 referrees in our common life together. We need police officers, fire fighters, legislatures, courts of law and others 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 the 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 which 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 previously 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 politican 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 not 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-barrons 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 which are 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 which could be divisive in our pluralistic society. Personally, Lincoln humbled himself before the sovereignty of God as the transcendant 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 ultimatey sacred. Only God is to be worshipped.

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 thing 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 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.