Sunday, October 16, 2005
GOD, TAXES AND CHILDREN
Matthew 22:15-22

Mixing God, taxes, and children into one sermon could be as dangerous as talking about sex, God, and politics in the same sermon. But I like to live dangerously, so let's plunge ahead.

I am comforted by the fact that one day the opponents of Jesus attempted to get him into trouble by asking him a question that included taxes, religion, and politics, and he was not afraid to live dangerously. They asked, "Should we Jews pay taxes to the Romans who occupy our country and rule over us?" In other words, should we be supporting an enemy government?

It was not only a question about taxation; it was also a religious question. Is it proper for religious people who claim God as their ultimate authority to also support an earthly government or emperor, especially emperors who claim to be equal with God? The first commandment of the ten is: "You shall have no other gods before me."

It was an especially explosive issue in Jesus' day. Some of his followers had strong nationalistic hopes, and any cooperation with the Romans could be seen as disloyal to his own people. On the other hand, if Jesus answered, "Do not pay taxes," he could be arrested for inciting rebellion and charged with treason.

In addition, the question of how much tax should be paid, to whom it should be paid, and what should be taxed at what rate is always controversial. Since tax money is mostly used to support and operate various levels and branches of government, the question of taxation leads to a more fundamental issue: what should be the attitude of Christians toward government and the nation of which you are a citizen?

Jesus' response gives some guidance. The question they posed to him was: "Is it lawful (that is, according to our Jewish religious rules) to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" He knew they were trying to trick him, so he asked to see a coin used for tax payments. They gave him a Roman coin. He asked them, "Whose head is on this and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." His reply: "Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Note first, he said, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's." He was saying there are many practical issues in day-to-day living that have to do with civil government and the need for an orderly society. Some kind of civil governing authority is always necessary.

Of course, some forms of government are better than others. Governing authorities can be unjust and oppressive. Even in countries with a representative form of government where officials are elected, there is always debate about the proper role of government. That discussion will always be necessary because times change and new issues arise.

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

Without governing authorities, even bad ones, society falls into chaos and anarchy. The warning against anarchy due to the unruliness and greed of human beings is one of the most persistent themes in the Bible.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s.” There is always a need in human affairs for rules, laws, and orderly ways of settling disputes. Referees are needed. Police officers, firefighters, legislatures, courts of law, and other authorities are essential. Can you imagine trying to live in Lincoln or any other community without any kind of civil authority?

Imagine a football game in Memorial Stadium without any officials to interpret and enforce the rules. You might think that if all the players and both teams were devout Christians, they would call their own penalties. Would that work? It would be chaos.

So when Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,” it was his way of stating that some form of government, some kind of civil authority, is indispensable for keeping peace.

In a representative form of government, this places a special responsibility on all citizens because, in the deepest sense, you are the government. All too often people talk about the government in this country as “they” or as if the government is the enemy. But in a representative form of government, you are the governors and the governed. By electing people to represent you, you turn over certain powers to them, but those elected can be voted out, and laws can be changed. City charters, state constitutions, and the United States Constitution can be amended.

Reinhold Niebuhr once had this to say about representative forms of government: “The human capacity for justice makes democracy possible. The human capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary.”

In a representative form of government, you are “giving to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s” when you actively participate in the governing process, and part of that is paying taxes. It also means voting and taking interest and leadership in government activities. According to Jesus, it’s part of your Christian responsibility.

I’m proud of the fact that there are many members of this congregation who are active in our two major political parties, and there are a number of people who serve in elected and appointed government positions. You are carrying on an important and vital ministry. From a Christian point of view, being active in politics and being a politician, in the best sense of the word, is a high calling.

Jesus also said, “Give to God the things that are God’s.” It’s easy to forget that part of his answer. It’s always a temptation to give to the emperor the things that belong to God. For example, one of the most tempting idols for people is the worship of one’s nation. This was true in the Old Testament, and it’s been true in every time and place. You can be patriotic without making your political party or your nation your god. In this country, there are some sincere Christians who believe it is not right for them to “pledge allegiance to the flag.” They see it as putting the flag and the nation first before God. Although when I recite the “Pledge of Allegiance,” I do not understand it as worshiping the flag and the United States in place of God, I respect and support their right to be silent.

It's also important to remember that it's possible to deeply love one's country and at the same time be critical of some of its policies and practices. If you have children, you can love them and at the same time be critical of their behavior. The reverse is also true — children can love and honor their parents and not agree with them all the time.

Jesus was warning his followers 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 nations have claimed to be the source of all truth, the only determiner of the purposes of life, and the judge of all culture. Anytime a political movement, religious or secular, is convinced that it has the final solution for humanity's problems, it has a rationalization for ruthless and tyrannical shortcuts in order to gain and maintain absolute power. This is the tragedy of communism and any other kind of 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. Those who torment you for your own good will torment you without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience."

"Give to God the things that are God's." A related temptation in making the nation equal to God can be seen when 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 followers of Jesus, especially in representative forms of government, it is crucial that the nation or state, or any of its subdivisions, be neutral among religions. It's so important that it is part of the first amendment to the United States Constitution.

Of all the presidents, 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 this pluralistic country.

"Give to God the things that are God's." Only God is ultimately sacred. Only God is to be worshiped.

Having said this, Jesus was aware that this statement will never completely settle the issue because there's a related question: how do you distinguish between the things that belong to the emperor and the things that belong to God? Sometimes religious practices will be illegal according to state or federal laws. How are these disputes to be settled? For example, your religious tradition and practice support polygamy, but state law forbids having more than one spouse at the same time. Your religious tradition and practice might be to use drugs that are illegal according to state or federal laws. What then belongs to the emperor, 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 eventually found to be unconstitutional.

There were states that had laws prohibiting the use of artificial means of birth control and which would not allow physicians to prescribe birth control pills because the majority of people in the state legislatures were Roman Catholic, and this was official Roman Catholic doctrine that was written into civil law. These laws were challenged in the courts and declared unconstitutional.

How then does all of this relate to our Children's Sabbath theme—"Changing the World Through Our Children?" First of all, it's important for civil government to protect the rights of children. There are laws against child abuse and neglect. Tax money is used to support foster care when necessary.

Tax money is also used to provide public education for children. Young people are required by law to attend school until age 16. One of the most important ways we can change the world and make it a better place through our children is by helping them obtain the best education possible. The main reason for the founding of public schools in this country was to educate young people because early on it was realized that representative forms of government cannot survive without an educated citizenry. Furthermore, because of our increasingly technological world, education is crucial for employment.

So there you have it. When Jesus said, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," he was implying that God, taxes, and children are all related. They are connected and yet need to be separated. Amen.