

Exodus 33:12-23  
Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Matthew 22:15-22

There is something deep inside most of us that cringes at the suggestion that what we have doesn't belong to us. If I work for it, I want control of it, and I don't trust other folks to know how to best spend it. One of the foundational irritants that lead to the American Revolutionary War was "taxation without representation." Being taxed without getting a say-so. Today people continue to cry about taxes when we have taxation with representation. So many believe that all the government does with our taxes is waste it.

If you don't like paying taxes, meet the residents of Jerusalem during Jesus' time. Israel was an occupied territory, a Roman province. The Romans allowed the Jews to have their temple worship, but were taxed unfairly to support the Romans, and they enjoyed very few rights, as they were not Roman citizens. There were revolts by the Jews against these taxes. The Jews had to pay both the Roman tax and a Temple tax. The total taxes the Jews had to pay could have been as much as 50%. Additionally, the Roman coin was an issue of idolatry, for the Roman coin had an inscription assigning divinity to the emperor. The coin was an affront to the Jewish religion!

There was controversy about paying the taxes in Jesus day. The Pharisees were determined to overthrow the pagan Roman overlord. On the other side of the aisle were the Herodians, those who benefited rather nicely from the Roman occupation. The Pharisees and the Herodians did not see eye-to-eye. The only thing the two share was that this Jesus must go. This partnership between the Herodians and Pharisees was as unlikely as a Hillary Clinton and the Tea Party teaming up together.

They come up with a question that they hope will trap Jesus: is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? If Jesus says no, then Jesus will get into trouble with the

Roman officials for being an instigator. Whenever the Roman government felt someone was causing trouble, they dealt with it quickly and violently. The Pharisees believed it was not lawful to pay the taxes, but they were always afraid of saying so. If Jesus would have declared that it was lawful to pay the taxes, the religious zealots in the crowd would stone him for going against God's word. It was a no win situation for Jesus.

Jesus answers with another question. He asks for a Roman coin, "show me the money." They hand him a coin, and he asks, Who is this on the coin? Whose image is on the coin? Well, duh, the emperor's! Without any further explanation, Jesus simply responds, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God's." His opponents were amazed at this simple answer, and they walked away.

This passage is not about taxes, but it is a subject as unpopular as taxes. The literal translation of Jesus' answer is, "Pay back Caesar what belongs to him, and pay back God what belongs to God." Give to Caesar his little coin. Caesar can have his little coins. The Greek word "render" means to "give what is due by obligation." This is a question about our loyalties.

The people of God, you and I, must decide today whom we will serve. We belong to God. We have God's image on us for we were created in the image of God. Our baptism identifies us as belonging to God. What we have, what we are, what we do, what we think, all belongs to God. How loyal are we to God? The use of our coins, indicates the depth of our loyalty. Jesus asks us, "Show me the money."

You may remember the 1996 movie *Jerry Maguire* that starred Tom Cruise. In that movie are two quotes that are among the 100 top movie quotes: They are "You had

me at ‘hello,’” and “Show me the money.” They both have become iconic phrases. When people say “Show me the money,” they either want to know how much they will be paid for something or want to see evidence that something is valuable or worthy paying for. If Jesus would ask us “Show me the money,” what would it reveal about our loyalty? Our wallets express what to what are we the most loyal. Jesus did not say, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be.” No, he said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Our wallets are perhaps the best barometer of our faith. “Show me the money” will reveal our loyalties.

As Christians, we are not owners of our wealth. We are simply stewards of what God has given us. When we die, it is no longer ours. We cannot take it with us. You have never seen a hearse towing a U-Haul! A miserly old man demanded that his three sons take their share of his estate, cash them in, and put the money in his casket. Before the funeral, one brother informed his brothers that he did as his Dad asked. The second brother said he put his money in the casket. When the two brothers looked at the third brother, he responded, “I cashed in my share of Dad’s estate, deposited it the bank, wrote a check, and put it in his casket.” We are stewards of what God has given us. Even our wills and estate planning are an act of stewardship, for when we die, the money goes to our estates to be divided as we have instructed.

We are not owners. We are stewards. As I mentioned in the beginning, there is something deep inside most of us that cringes at the suggestion that what we have doesn’t belong to us. Thus, when the church declares that all that we have is a gift from God, it may grate on our nerves a bit. We may object. “Oh, no it isn’t. I worked hard for my money. I worked hard for it so I can control it the way I want.” We need to ask: Who

gave you life? Who gave you the gifts so that you can learn, enables you to work, to be able to manage your money, to be able to invest well? To be able to care for those who need help. It is interesting that Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, admonished thieves to give up stealing, so that they can work honestly. The reason they are to work? So as to have something to share with the needy! Those of us who are able bodied, those of us who have God-given abilities to work and earn money, we are to care for others. Our God-given gifts are not just for us! We are not sole owners.

We are stewards of God's generosity. On our coins we read, "In God we trust." To believe in that is to trust in a God of generosity, a God of abundance. To trust in God is to trust in God's abundance. Our God is not a God of scarcity. Most of us are living our lives as though there is scarcity. Our God is a God of abundance, thus we too can be generous.

There may very well be something deep down inside us that cringes at the suggestion that we do not own what we have, that we are not owners, but managers of what God has given us for our short time. Let us remember that our God is a generous God, a God of abundance. God has indeed been generous to us. Ask yourself, "What belongs to God?" Then find a way to put it back in God's hands. It will not be easy. But we can start on becoming managers of God's generosity.

Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.