

“Love and Taxes”
Matthew 22:15-22

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Our church follows a calendar called the lectionary that rotates through different scripture passages each week. This calendar was created with no thought to American holidays or events, and yet, there are occasionally coincidences that just seem too good to be coincidence. The appearance of the Gospel story we heard today is my favorite example. Every three years, just two weeks before Election Day, whether it’s a presidential election or a local election, we study the story where Jesus is questioned about whether paying your taxes or honoring God is more important. And without fail, two weeks before any election someone somewhere is having a debate about paying taxes - who should be taxed, what should be taxed, what taxes should be used for, and what politician has been caught evading their taxes.

Thinking about the role of taxes is what draws me into this story, but the question runs much deeper than that. The Pharisees, representing the religious authorities, and the Herodians, representing the government authorities, come to Jesus with a loaded question: if you love God so much and teach people to follow God before anything else, is it lawful to pay taxes to the government or not? Or rather: can you be dutiful to God while following civic duties?

This might be the original recorded political argument that is grounded in a false equivalency. False Equivalencies are what happens when we take two things that share one thing in common and make the leap to decide they are exactly the same. It’s why we have the phrase “comparing apples to oranges” - a false equivalency determines that because they are both fruit, they must taste the same.

A popular false equivalency we hear today is that many scientists believe Climate Change is happening and is caused by humans, but there are people who disagree and think it is a hoax, so we can't really know and it's reasonable to believe either way.....No. That is a false equivalency.

Likewise, comparing paying taxes to following God is a false equivalency. Instead of Jesus saying this outright, he gives a masterful response. He asks the Pharisees to give him a coin. What you need to know is that this conversation is happening in the temple. It is part of a larger story that begins by Jesus going into the temple and overturning the tables of all the people who are dealing with money. He does this to show that prayer is not about profit and it is wrong to make money off of people coming to connect with God.

The Pharisees, in theory, being religious leaders, should agree with Jesus on this point. But by pulling out a coin from their pockets, they are symbolically demonstrating that they too profited off of people coming to pray, they were no better than the money changers. Jesus doesn't have to say this directly, by asking them to show him a coin, they would have realized their own hypocrisy.

In effect, Jesus says, "Why are you asking me about something you yourself are doing? I'm not holier than thou, and neither are you." This realization makes it more powerful when Jesus does say, "If it belongs to the emperor, give it back to the emperor, but what belongs to God, give it back to God." This satisfies the government authorities who couldn't say that Jesus was evading his taxes, but it is also a deeply spiritual answer that reminds the Pharisees and anyone else listening that what we owe to God is much bigger than owing taxes. There is a tax system that says, "if you do this or receive that or make this much money, here is what you have

to give back.” It’s about earning our place in society, following rules that in theory equally apply to everyone, and creating a balance where we all pay in what is due.

But what do we owe to God? What is the tax on God’s love and care? What can we pay back to the one who has created everything we see and continues to create life beyond our imagination? The short answer that is answered hundreds of times in every story in scripture is this: nothing. We owe nothing to God. And, we owe everything to God. We could never possibly repay the life and love that has been given to us. There is not a payback system that guarantees us more love or more life or better health. It is given freely by our Creator and it is up to us what we do with it. We might do nothing, and we would still be loved. We might do everything, and we still be loved.

Following God is not about repayment or owing something to someone. It is a choice we make because we understand, deep within us, what it means to be loved without limit. We turn that love back out into the world because we want others to experience it. We work for justice and peace because we have seen the goodness that emerges when a community is safe for all people, the wonders that happen when needs are provided and we can move past surviving into thriving. God keeps showing up in the world even when we are short on love or take too long to enact justice.

Comparing following God to paying taxes is a false equivalency. And is not where today we should be focusing on our questions, on our elected leaders, our political candidates, or ourselves. It’s not about who pays taxes fairly or how much we pay. The questions before us in this season is:

How do we live out our love for God in everything we do? What does service to God look like at our jobs, at home, and in our communities? How do we amplify God’s love in the

world and how do we work for God's justice? If our answers to those questions point back to our taxes, so be it. But it should start with God. It should start with living out the convictions of our faith in every season, every day, and every opportunity we are given. May it be so. Amen.