

People sometimes say that the church doesn't talk enough about the real world that all of us live in—the world of the work place, of taxes and of getting along with people. Well, if that's how you feel, you may appreciate the gospel today. And then, again, you may not.

No one it seems likes to pay taxes; no one likes to work for the government for x number of months out of the year before being able to keep one's own earnings. Actually, I can't remember a politician who has gotten elected by saying up front that his/her intention was to raise taxes; in fact, it's just the opposite: the battle cry of lower taxes seems to always carry the day. At least our tax money is administered by people who are elected democratically and if we don't like their tax policies, then we can simply vote them out of office. However, not only is the leveling of taxes a sensitive issue, but the use of tax money is as well—this was even more true in Jesus' time than in our own and we'll get to that issue in a moment.

As an aside, Matthew wrote this gospel around 80 AD; in other words, about 10 years after the Romans had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. And yet even after their Temple was destroyed, the Jews were still expected to pay a temple tax, but this tax was directed to the temple of Jupiter in Rome and so Matthew was tapping into the Jews growing resentment against Rome and the tax issue.

Up to this point, Jesus was on the attack against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, but now, they were on the offensive. Actually the Pharisees and Herodians hated each other and held totally different religious views, but their parties had been stung by Jesus' assaults and so they responded; and along these lines, you must realize that in the ancient Mediterranean culture, no question was considered neutral—questions were always intended and perceived as a challenge to one's honor and these folks felt that their honor was being diminished by Jesus and so they go after him.

And so one day a small group of Jesus' enemies approached him in a most solicitous way. They complimented him profusely, but their intentions weren't genuine. They wanted only to soften him up so they could get him in trouble. After they had set the stage, they presented Jesus with a question they hoped would trip him up. They asked: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?

Their plan was simple. The Jewish people were under the control of the Roman Empire, as was most of the western world at that time. Most people hate to be ruled by a foreign power, but the ancient Jews were especially revolted by it. Their religious practices put them at odds with the Roman government in many ways, but most of all by the decree that to be a Roman citizen, you had to acknowledge that the emperor was a god. This didn't bother most non-Jews because they had many gods and so one more or less didn't matter much.

However as we know, the Jews believed that there was only one God and that they should worship no other. To make this situation still more difficult, the coin that had to be used to pay taxes was the silver denarius and on the silver denarius was the image of Tiberius with this inscription: Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus. Thus every time a Jew paid taxes, the very coin employed declared that the emperor was divine.

So here's what Jesus' enemies had in mind: if Jesus answered their question by saying that they should not pay taxes, his enemies would report him to the Roman government and he would be arrested and tried for treason. On the other hand, if he said that yes, they should pay these taxes, his enemies would

tell the crowds following Jesus that he was supporting the government that compelled them to worship Caesar.

On this weekend in October, you and I are just two weeks and two days away from a national, mid-term election. Isn't it interesting that one of the main topics at this election time—first or second or third in most people's minds—is taxes? History does repeat itself, doesn't it? I venture that some people today feel just as passionately about taxes as did the Jews in Jesus' day and probably some would say that religious issues are even involved.

This is because some American citizens have strong convictions about military expenditures; some might ask is; it moral that we spend twice the money on the military than we spend on education and health care combined? While others are concerned about laws that seem to infringe upon their religious liberties; thus, they resent taxes that seem to violate their conscience.

In any event, Jesus was unperturbed by those wishing to attack him. He asked his interrogators if he could see the coin with which they paid their taxes. Most Bible scholars feel that Jesus didn't carry any money. This seems likely because apparently all the money the disciples had was in a common purse, which was entrusted to Judas. It is further interesting to note that when Jesus asked to see a coin, it was only these religious leaders who possessed the coins with the blasphemous assertion that Caesar was a god.

And so Jesus studied the coin for a moment. Then he asked a question: Whose head is this and whose title? Jesus was doing what effective attorneys might do in a courtroom when they ask a witness: Whose picture is this or whose signature is that? It was a powerful way to compel the interrogators to take possession of the answer Jesus was about to give: "The emperor's," they said. Then Jesus answered: Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God, the things that are God's.

That ended the discussion. The people who had intended to embarrass and perhaps destroy him had, instead, embarrassed themselves. Jesus had laid down a principle, dealing with a very important question.

Jesus was saying that those who obey the Lord God has two powers operating in their lives: God and country. For most of the people in the Roman Empire, however, there was just one authority: the Roman Emperor. As people saw it, the emperor was a god so there was no conflict between god and country. Jesus was saying that both exist and that we must decide how we will live with the two citizenships: one belonging to the government and one belonging to God. And since they are not the same, sometimes their areas of authority would be in conflict.

For Christians in the first century, this conflict sometimes meant persecution. For the first three centuries of church history, thousands of Christians were imprisoned and executed because of their faith. This continues to be true today; one Christian watch dog group puts the number of Christians killed for their faith each year at 8000. In many parts of the world, one puts one's life in danger by becoming a Christian because the prevailing government is either atheistic or embraces a non-Christian religion that is synonymous with the government. In those countries, to be a citizen of the country means that one is also an adherent to a certain religion.

Jesus said that we should give the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what belongs to God. But then, what belongs to God? The answer is simple; our human soul belongs to God. You and

I are made in the image of God. The imprint of God is on us as surely as the imprint of the Roman emperor was on the Roman coins.

Our experience in America is different from that in ancient Rome and different from that which exists in some other countries of our present world. After all, America is a democracy and because it is, we have a voice in the laws of the land. Nevertheless, particular laws may sometimes conflict with a Christian conscience; thus Christians have to decide whether they can abide by a particular law of the land. That is, Christians are not like ancient Romans; we do not believe that God and country are one. We believe that our nation deserves our loyalty—in paying taxes, in obeying its laws and in living generally as loyal citizens. But we don't believe that God and America are synonymous.

Therefore sometimes, we may find ourselves having to make a choice between God and country. Recall that ordinary Germans during WWII would state that they were merely obeying the law with regards to the treatment of the Jews. More recently, the Church asks us to focus upon respect for life issues and even though the majority in our country believe that abortions are immoral, that same majority believes that they should be legal, which is evidence of a certain moral inconsistency.

These challenges are likely to increase in the years ahead. In one sense, this is unavoidable. Our world is becoming increasingly complex in financial matters, in business functions, in international affairs and in social conduct. The laws we make in the 21st century may well affect our nation's moral and ethical conduct more than all of the laws enacted since the Magna Carta of the 13th century simply because our society is changing in so many ways.

The primary task of the gospel is that of changing our hearts and the duty of the Christian is to work for a social order which is favorable to the gospel, but this is not always easy to do. Along these lines, Teilhard de Chardin viewed Christianity from an evolutionary perspective, in which the movement is always towards greater complexity, which can be both confusing and unsettling at the same time.

Consequently, we will need to be occasionally reminded that God and country are not synonymous—indeed, that the finest citizen is the one who honors God above and beyond country. That's because such citizens help their country to respect the rights of all human beings, helps to make our country a place in which life is most moral and ethical, a land that is kind and just.

This is a marvelous combination, but it is exceedingly difficult to keep in. After all, warrior kings may accept the role of oppressors of the needy, but we followers of Jesus must be willing to wash the feet of those in need and not be so quick to step upon them... May God help us to keep this balance in our day to day lives...