

Matthew 22:15-22
October 16, '11

"WHO GETS WHAT?"

I WAS AT A CHRISTMAS PARTY – ONE OF THOSE WHERE THEY DO THE WHITE ELEPHANT GIFT EXCHANGE WITH SOME REALLY BAD GIFTS BEING GIVEN.

A MAN OPENED HIS PRESENT, WHICH WAS THE MOST HIDEOUS TIE YOU'VE EVER SEEN.

EVERY COLOR IMAGINABLE WAS THERE – ALL SO BOLD & BRIGHT THAT YOU NEARLY HAD TO SQUINT WHEN LOOKING AT IT.

AMID GALES OF LAUGHTER, SOMEONE PIPED UP WITH, "LET'S ALL SING 'BLEST BE THE TIE THAT BLINDS.'"

THAT KIND OF QUICK WIT HAS ALWAYS AMAZED ME.

I MUST CONFESS THAT I'M ALSO SOMEWHAT ENVIOUS OF THOSE WHO POSSESS SUCH A WIT.

I THINK I CAN COUNT ON ONE HAND – MAYBE EVEN A COUPLE FINGERS OF ONE HAND – THE NUMBER OF TIMES IN MY ENTIRE LIFE WHEN I HAVE EVER OFFERED A QUICK-WITTED COMMENT!

IT'S NOT THAT I'M UNABLE TO OFFER A BIT OF WIT.

GIVE ME A WHILE – LIKE THREE OR FOUR DAYS – AND I CAN THINK OF SOME WITTY REMARK TO MAKE IN A GIVEN SITUATION.

BUT *QUICK* WIT IS NOT MY THING.

I THINK THAT'S WHY I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN ASTOUNDED AT THE QUICK WIT OF JESUS IN VIRTUALLY ANY SITUATION.

THAT QUICK WIT IS ON DISPLAY TO PERFECTION IN THIS PASSAGE WE'VE READ THIS MORNING.

IN THIS EXCHANGE, HE AVOIDS A TRAP THAT HAS BEEN LAID FOR HIM BY HIS ENEMIES & IN THE PROCESS, ASTOUNDS & CONFOUNDS BOTH HIS LISTENERS AS WELL AS ALL THOSE WHO HAVE READ THESE WORDS EVER SINCE.

BUT WHEN YOU HEAR THESE WORDS THAT ARE SO FAMILIAR TO US – "*RENDER TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S & RENDER TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S*" – WHAT DOES HE MEAN?

I DON'T KNOW.

SOMEONE HAS SUGGESTED THAT THESE WORDS – "I DON'T KNOW" - ARE THE THREE MOST POWERFUL WORDS IN THE WORLD.

NOW THAT MAY SOUND A BIT BIZARRE, BUT HERE'S THE RATIONALE BEHIND THAT STATEMENT.

TELLING ANOTHER PERSON 'I DON'T KNOW,' OFFERS AN INVITATION TO THEM TO SHARE WHAT *THEY* KNOW OR, SOMETIMES EVEN BETTER, TO JOIN YOU IN *TOGETHER* FIGURING SOMETHING OUT.

SO WHEN JESUS OFFERS THIS CRYPTIC SAYING, I DON'T KNOW WHAT HE MEANS BY IT.

I THINK I KNOW SOMETHING HE *DOESN'T* MEAN BY IT – SOMETHING THAT IS COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD TO BE HIS POINT – AND I THINK I MAY KNOW ONE THING THAT HE *MAY* BE ATTEMPTING TO CONVEY WITH THESE WORDS – BUT I REALLY DON'T KNOW FOR SURE WHAT HE'S TRYING TO TELL US.

LET'S LOOK AT THE SITUATION TOGETHER & SEE IF WE CAN COME TO SOME GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF IT.

THIS EVENT TAKES PLACE DURING HOLY WEEK – THE DAYS JUST PRIOR TO THE CRUCIFIXION.

JESUS IS BEING CHALLENGED AT EVERY TURN.

IN THIS PASSAGE, YOU'VE GOT AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE.

HERODIANS & PHARISEES MADE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS BUT THEY WERE UNITED IN THEIR DESIRE TO BRING CHARGES AGAINST JESUS.

THE HERODIANS SUPPORTED THE CONTINUED RULE OF PALESTINE BY THOSE WHO DESCENDED FROM HEROD & THEREFORE BACKED THE ROMANS.

THE PHARISEES, ON THE OTHER HAND, WERE OBSERVANT JEWS AND WERE OFFENDED AT THE THOUGHT OF PAYING TAXES TO A FOREIGN GOVERNMENT.

BUT BECAUSE THEY BOTH WANTED TO GET RID OF JESUS, THEY JOINED FORCES.

THE THEORY OF "*THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY IS MY FRIEND*" IS AT WORK HERE.

SO THEY SEEM TO HAVE PLACED JESUS IN A "NO-WIN" POSITION.

IF HE SAYS, "*YES, YOU SHOULD PAY THE TAX THAT IS REQUIRED,*" HE'LL BE IN CONFLICT WITH THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES & THE GENERAL POPULATION WHO OPPOSE THE TAXATION THAT ROME HAS IMPOSED UPON THEM.

ON THE OTHER HAND, IF HE SAYS "*NO, YOU SHOULDN'T PAY THE TAX,*" HE'LL BE SEEN AS A POLITICAL REVOLUTIONARY & ARRESTED AS SUCH.

HE DOES, INDEED, SEEM TO BE TRAPPED BY THE QUESTION HE IS ASKED.

THESE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAVE BEEN INCREDIBLY CLEVER IN THEIR CONNIVING COLLABORATION!

AH, BUT NOT AS CLEVER AS JESUS BECAUSE HIS RESPONSE COMPLETELY TURNS THINGS AROUND.

HE ASKS THEM TO PRODUCE THE COIN THAT IS USED FOR THE TAX & IN DOING SO, THEY HAVE ALREADY LET HIM GET OUT OF THE TRAP.

THERE, IN THE SACRED SPACE OF THE TEMPLE, THESE RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE IN POSSESSION OF THE BLASPHEMOUS & IDOLATROUS OBJECT IN QUESTION.

THE REASON ONE OF THOSE COINS WOULD BE SO OFFENSIVE TO A FAITHFUL JEW IS BECAUSE, NOT ONLY DID IT BEAR THE IMAGE OF THE EMPEROR, BUT IT ALSO HAD THE TITLE "*SON OF GOD!*"

MERELY BY CARRYING IT IN THEIR POCKET THEY WERE IN VIOLATION OF THE FIRST TWO COMMANDMENTS!

SO, IN ESSENCE, JESUS HAS ALREADY WON THE ARGUMENT.

HE DOESN'T HAVE TO SAY ANOTHER WORD.

BUT HE DOES.

AND WE RETURN AGAIN TO THOSE WORDS THAT ARE SO WELL-KNOWN TO US – WORDS THAT I SAID I DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF: *“RENDER TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S & RENDER TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S.”*

THAT'S SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT FROM WHAT YOU HEARD ME READ IN THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION BUT I THINK “RENDER” IS PROBABLY MORE ACCURATE THAN “GIVE” BECAUSE THE REAL MEANING OF THE WORD THAT IS USED IS “GIVE BACK.”

“GIVE BACK TO CAESAR” AND “GIVE BACK TO GOD.”

IS JESUS TALKING ABOUT FINANCES HERE?

SURELY THIS PASSAGE IS OFTEN USED IN STEWARDSHIP SERMONS & I'VE PROBABLY USED IT MYSELF IN THAT FASHION.

I DON'T THINK THAT'S THE MAIN LESSON HERE - BUT I DON'T KNOW. MAYBE IT IS.

THERE'S ONE THING, THOUGH, THAT I'M QUITE CERTAIN JESUS *ISN'T* TALKING ABOUT HERE.

HE'S NOT TALKING ABOUT OUR MODERN IDEA OF THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE BECAUSE, FRANKLY, THAT'S WHAT THAT IS – MODERN.

NO SUCH THOUGHT WOULD HAVE EXISTED AT THE TIME & JESUS *ISN'T* IN ANY WAY TALKING ABOUT SUCH A THING HERE.

IN FACT, HE MAY BE SAYING SOMETHING THAT IS ALMOST THE OPPOSITE.

I REALLY DON'T KNOW, BUT I THINK THE PUNCH LINE IN THIS ENCOUNTER – THE REAL HEART OF WHAT JESUS IS TRYING TO CONVEY – MAY BE FOUND IN THAT CLOSING LINE – *“RENDER TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S.”*

THINK OF IT THIS WAY: HE TELLS THE PEOPLE THAT THEY SHOULD GIVE BACK TO CAESAR THAT WHICH ALREADY BELONGS TO HIM – THE COIN THAT IS MADE IN HIS IMAGE.

DO YOU SEE WHERE THIS IS LEADING US?

IF CAESAR IS TO GET THAT WHICH IS MADE IN CAESAR'S IMAGE & GOD IS TO GET THAT WHICH IS MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE, WHAT DOES GOD GET?

IT TAKES YOU BACK TO THE BEGINNING, DOESN'T IT – *ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE BEGINNING.*

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER OF GENESIS, IT SAYS, *“THEN GOD SAID, ‘LET US MAKE HUMANKIND IN OUR IMAGE...SO GOD CREATED HUMANKIND IN HIS IMAGE, IN THE IMAGE OF GOD HE CREATED THEM.’”*

IN THE 5TH CHAPTER – *“WHEN GOD CREATED HUMANKIND, HE MADE THEM IN THE LIKENESS OF GOD.”*

IN THE 9TH CHAPTER – *“...FOR IN HIS OWN IMAGE, GOD CREATED HUMANKIND.”*

SO THEN, MAYBE JESUS IS TELLING US TO GIVE BACK TO GOD THAT WHICH IS MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE – AND THAT WOULD BE YOU.

YOU ARE TO GIVE GOD YOURSELF – YOUR *WHOLE* SELF.

MARK ALLAN POWELL TELLS A GREAT STORY ABOUT THE BAPTISM OF THE GAULS THAT CONVEYS THIS MESSAGE.

MANY YEARS AGO, THE GAULS WERE A WARLIKE PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN WHAT IS NOW FRANCE & BELGIUM.

THEY SPOKE A CELTIC LANGUAGE & THEIR RELIGION WAS THAT OF THE DRUIDS.

BY THE TIME CHRISTIANITY HAD REACHED THE AREA, THE GAULS HAD BEEN CONQUERED BY ROME & WERE SUPPOSEDLY UNDER ROMAN RULE.

THEY DIDN'T TAKE KINDLY TO IT, THOUGH, AND THERE WERE CONSTANT UPRISINGS.

A NUMBER OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES VENTURED INTO GALLIC TERRITORY AND, OVER TIME, MANY OF THE GAULS BECAME CHRISTIANS.

AS THE STORY GOES, WHEN A CONVERTED WARRIOR WAS BAPTIZED IN A RIVER OR STREAM, HE WOULD HOLD ONE ARM HIGH IN THE AIR AS THE MISSIONARY DUNKED HIM UNDER THE WATER.

THIS SEEMED TO BE A RATHER PECULIAR CUSTOM, BUT THE MISSIONARIES SOON LEARNED THE REASON FOR IT.

WHEN THE NEXT BATTLE OR SKIRMISH BROKE OUT, THE GALLIC WARRIOR COULD PROCLAIM, "*THIS ARM IS NOT BAPTIZED!*," AND THEN GRAB HIS CLUB OR HIS SWORD OR HIS AX & RIDE OFF TO DESTROY THE ENEMY IN A MOST UNCHRISTIAN-LIKE MANNER!

NOW, THIS MAY BE WHAT WE CALL TODAY AN "URBAN LEGEND" AND YET IT PAINTS A VERY IMPORTANT PICTURE.

IT PAINTS A PICTURE OF SOMEONE – ANYONE – IN ANY TIME IN HISTORY & IN ANY LAND – TRYING TO KEEP ONE PART OF THEIR BODY, ONE ASPECT OF THEIR IDENTITY, ONE SECTION OF THEIR LIFE FREE FROM THE INFLUENCE OF BAPTISM AND THE CLAIM OF GOD UPON THEIR ENTIRE BEING!

WE ARE CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD – EVERY SINGLE PART OF US.

THAT MEANS THAT EVERYTHING ABOUT US BELONGS TO HIM.

YOU CAN'T TAKE YOUR WALLET - OR YOUR SATURDAY NIGHTS OR YOUR LANGUAGE OR YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOME PEOPLE OR YOUR BUSINESS DEALINGS – YOU CAN'T TAKE CERTAIN THINGS & HOLD THEM OUT OF THE WATER & SAY, "*EVERYTHING BUT THIS, LORD. YOU GET EVERYTHING BUT THIS!*"

GOD OWNS ALL OF US – EVERY ASPECT OF OUR LIVES.

NOW THAT DOESN'T MEAN WE HAVE TO SIGN OUR PAYCHECK OVER TO THE CHURCH, WALK AROUND WITH OUR EYES TO THE HEAVENS, A BIBLE IN OUR HANDS & HUMMING CHURCH HYMNS.

IT *DOES* MEAN THAT OUR COMMITMENT TO CHRIST PERMEATES EVERY ASPECT OF OUR BEING & EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES.

WHEN I OPEN UP A MAGAZINE – TIME, THE WEEK OR NEWSWEEK – WHEN I OPEN GOOGLE NEWS ON MY COMPUTER – I CAN SEARCH FOR CERTAIN AREAS.

I CAN LOOK AT NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL NEWS.

I CAN LOOK AT BUSINESS OR TECHNOLOGY OR SPORTS OR THE ARTS OR RELIGION.

A MAGAZINE OR A WEBSITE CAN SEPARATE WHAT IT HAS TO OFFER INTO DIFFERENT COMPARTMENTS.

WE CAN'T DO THAT WITH OUR LIVES.

EVERYTHING...ALL OF OUR THOUGHTS, ALL OF OUR ACTIONS, ALL OF OUR WORDS – EVERYTHING BELONGS TO GOD BECAUSE WE ARE MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE & JESUS COMMANDS US TO GIVE TO GOD THAT WHICH IS GOD'S.

WE ARE HIS.

WE DON'T BELONG TO ANYONE ELSE – EVEN OURSELVES!

WE BELONG TO GOD WITH EVERYTHING WE HAVE – OUR TALENTS, OUR INTERESTS, OUR TIME & OUR WEALTH.

“RENDER TO GOD THAT WHICH IS GOD'S.”

IS THAT WHAT JESUS MEANS WITH THIS CRYPTIC REMARK?

I DON'T KNOW. SERIOUSLY. I DON'T KNOW.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? AMEN.

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