

Jesus' Cutting Edge One Liner
by Rev. Durrell Watkins, MA, MDiv
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Matthew 22.15-22

When I was a kid in Arkansas, I once asked my great-aunt Gladys to explain time zones to me. She paused for a moment and said, "Think of it this way. When it's noon in New York, it's still 1955 in Arkansas."

I was looking through old photographs one day and saw one of Aunt Gladys and Uncle Arthur standing in front of a man in a black robe. I said, "What's this?" She said, "That was our wedding day. We were married by a judge; I should have asked for a jury."

Aunt Gladys was quick with the one-liners, but she came from a one-liner generation. She grew up being entertained by such people as Gypsy Rose Lee who once said, "God is love; but get it in writing."

Today's gospel reading offers us one of the best known one-liners in the bible: "Give Caesar what it is Caesar's; and give God what is God's."

This is actually a daunting passage for a preacher to tackle because it is a phrase that has so often been misrepresented to congregations. It has time and again been used to support the status quo, and nothing could be less faithful to the gospel.

I seem to remember as a child hearing homilists use this text to promote patriotism, or generosity, or a dualism that says be supportive of both one thing and another. Pay your taxes, pay your tithes...that's what good people do. If you believe in your country, then support it financially; and if you believe in your church, support it financially.

I don't disagree with that sentiment. I believe in supporting what is important to us. If you hope to draw Social Security, or if you benefited from college grants, or if you want firefighters, police officers, and military personnel to keep you safe, that money has to come from somewhere. I don't mind paying taxes; I simply want my taxes to pay for good things, like education and health care and environmental protection.

And as someone who promotes religion every day of my life, I certainly want people to support their church. As we give to our church, our church is then able to give to the world. We offer hope and encouragement and empowerment to people. We offer a spiritual home to people. We offer almost 40 different services at no charge to our community and beyond, and even more services at remarkably low costs. To do all that we do and all that we hope to do, the church must be funded.

Those who practice the discipline of giving a percentage of their income faithfully to the place where they are spiritually nourished experience a deep level of blessing in their lives. I give to the church, to political causes, to various charities, and I pay taxes. I consider such giving participating in the circulation of divine supply.

And though I encourage generosity and believe it to be a core spiritual principle, I must confess that as good as that message is, it is NOT the message of today's gospel reading.

So, I am faced with the challenge of not going with the easy task of saying "fill out a pledge card and fill out a tax form," but with really unpacking what today's passage says. I hope every member of this church will pledge next year. And I hope every person in this room will file your taxes, if for no other reason than to stay out of trouble with the IRS. And the day will come when our primary sermon focus will be on the spiritual discipline of joyful giving; but today's gospel message is frankly about something else.

The tension continues to build as we near the end of Matthew's gospel. Today's encounter between Jesus and religious leaders is in the context of on-going confrontations. We've been hearing about them for a few weeks now. So right off the bat, we see Jesus' one-liner isn't a simple little aphorism; this is a strategic response to a calculated plot in the midst of an on-going struggle. We've sanitized it by making it simply about paying tithes and taxes, and in sanitizing it we've lost the danger and the power of the message.

A group of religious lay scholars send their students to butt heads with Jesus, but along with these students are also members of the Herodian Party...yes, it's a political alliance. Herodians supported the policies and the descendants of Herod, a puppet king of the Roman Emperor. The religious lay scholars sometimes encouraged people to not pay taxes as a form of civil disobedience. *The Empire has possessed our country, stolen our resources, limited our freedoms, and "allowed us to practice our religion but we are aware they can disallow such open and unfettered practice at any time.* So the common people not only viewed the Empire as their oppressors but hated paying taxes to support their own oppression. The lay scholars were no fan of the imperial taxes...so, if Jesus says "pay your taxes," they've got him. He's a traitor to his people and his religion.

However, the Herodians have their authority and privilege because they are integrated into the Empire. They are part of it! They enforce the tax code and by doing so they protect their power and privilege. If Jesus says, "It is our moral obligation to refuse to pay taxes," then they've got him. They can arrest him on the spot for tax evasion; or more likely, for treason or sedition.

By sending the religious students and the Herodian politicians, Jesus' enemies have painted him into a corner. He can't win. If he answers one way, he'll be shunned, maybe even stoned by his own people; if he answers another way, he'll be incarcerated, maybe even killed by the government.

Jesus has been preaching about the Kingdom of God...but Caesar is in charge of this empire...there will be no king and no kingdom in this empire that Caesar doesn't personally prop up. Kingdom of God, indeed!

Jesus, when he entered Jerusalem, stormed into the Temple, noticed exploitation, and responded with vehement opposition. He has offended the priestly class, the lay scholars, and the government. That's a lot of enemies to have been made so quickly, and they are now working together to see which group will do him in. That's the context of today's confrontation. And in that context, Jesus fights back with a one liner. Yes, this is a fight for his life...not a gentle nudge for others to support good causes; this is a fight and to lose it will mean losing his liberty and probably his life.

Jesus' enemies say, sarcastically, "We know you are a person of integrity; you'll do only what you believe is right. So answer this question: Should we pay our taxes or not?"

Jesus pauses for a moment, and says, "Do you have a coin?" And someone quickly hands him a coin. This coin has an image on it; Caesar's image. Caesar, the divine son, the Lord of the empire. Here is a graven image of what Jesus' community would have thought to be not only an oppressor but also a false deity. Such a coin could only be used by Jesus' community for paying the hated taxes. One shouldn't be allowed to bring such an odious thing into the Temple. On the contrary, one should stop at the money changers table and exchange any such filthy lucre for more appropriate, non-idolatrous coinage.

So why does this religious leader have this coin with Caesar's image on his person? The moment he forks over the coin to Jesus, Jesus has exposed his enemies for the hypocrites they are. Matthew's readers would have gasped when the coin is produced. But Jesus continues by saying, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar, and to God what is God's."

But guess what? EVERYTHING is God's. Caesar can't take his wealth with him. The imperial treasury can't keep its money...it has to pay soldiers and build roads. Caesar can't keep his money; he'll die and leave his money behind. In the world of impermanence, only Ultimate Reality, only what is divine, only God really has anything because everything that really exists comes from God, is made out of God, and we experience it because of divine grace. A Course in Miracles teaches, "Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God." That's another way of saying, "it's All God's."

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's? That means nothing.
Give to God what is God? That means everything.

When Jesus stands by his principles even in the face of death, he is giving everything. When he says, in effect, give Caesar what is really Caesar's, which is nothing, Jesus is risking his life on the spot. He's giving everything for what he truly believes.

In the history of this country, in opposition to imperial taxes, there was a revolt. Lives were risked, given, lost in a struggle for independence. Today's gospel reading is also about resisting oppression, and taking great risks for sake of justice. This world is part of a divine process, that is, it's all God's and so we may as well give God everything. As we often sing, "We give thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be; all that we have is thine alone; a trust O God from thee."

We aren't challenged today to simply not cheat on our taxes or to give an extra few bucks to the church. We are challenged to live our values; to be fully committed to a life of hope, justice, compassion, and generosity. We are challenged to give our best, all the time, as if our very lives were God's. We are challenged to worship, to work, to play, to share consistently as if all that we are doing we are doing for, to, with, and as God! And once we can trust God with our whole selves, we find in our experience of life that there is not a spot where God is not. And THIS, is the good news! Amen.

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God is everywhere present!
All that is real comes from God.
I will live as if my life is God's.
I am happy and hopeful.
I am expressing God's goodness in my life.
In God I am peaceful, whole, and free.
Amen.

"Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God." *A Course in Miracles*