

## **Exodus 33**

12 Moses said to the Lord, "Look, you've been telling me, 'Lead these people forward.' But you haven't told me whom you will send with me. Yet you've assured me, 'I know you by name and think highly of you.' 13 Now if you do think highly of me, show me your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me. Remember too that this nation is your people."

14 The Lord replied, "I'll go myself, and I'll help you."

15 Moses replied, "If you won't go yourself, don't make us leave here. 16 Because how will anyone know that we have your special approval, both I and your people, unless you go with us? Only that distinguishes us, me and your people, from every other people on the earth."

17 The Lord said to Moses, "I'll do exactly what you've asked because you have my special approval, and I know you by name."

18 Moses said, "Please show me your glorious presence."

19 The Lord said, "I'll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I'll proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord.' I will be kind to whomever I wish to be kind, and I will have compassion to whomever I wish to be compassionate. 20 But," the Lord said, "you can't see my face because no one can see me and live." 21 The Lord said, "Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. 22 As my glorious presence passes by, I'll set you in a gap in the rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by. 23 Then I'll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won't be visible."

## **Matthew 22**

15 Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. 16 They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are genuine and that you teach God's way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people's opinions, because you don't show favoritism. 17 So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" 18 Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used to pay the tax." And they brought him a denarion. 20 "Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked. 21 "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." 22 When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

## **Sermon**

Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.

Lord open our hearts and our lives will sing out your name: Amen.

In one way, Jesus's saying, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's," isn't primarily about money. The Pharisees bring Jesus a question about taxes and he turns it into a declaration about images and purpose. Caesar's image is on coins, so of course it belongs to Caesar in some way. The government prints the money you use and requires a portion of it to do things like pave roads, build bridges, protect the citizens, and the like, so of course you should pay your taxes. God printed the divine image on humankind, so of course we people, all people, belong to God. God gave us our lives and everything good that exists. If we give a portion of what has Caesar's image on it back to Caesar, then shouldn't we give a portion of ourselves to God's purposes rather than selfish plans?

It's important to understand why the Pharisees ask this question. Some of the more radical Jewish groups in the 1st century, Zealots chief among them, argued that God's sole lordship meant that we owe nothing to governmental authorities. In other words, paying taxes not only was unnecessary but it funded God's opposition, so we should avoid it if at all possible. Also remember that Jesus gets lots of support from these crowds of people unhappy with Roman rule, who see the Zealots as their best last hope for liberation from empire. When he rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, it's a crowd of Zealots cheering him on. If Jesus simply said "pay your taxes," then all the support he received from these revolutionaries would erode almost immediately. But if Jesus says, "don't pay your taxes," then the Roman guards would have immediate reason to arrest him. That's why it's so important that the Pharisees and Herodians are

together. They represent the establishment religious and political authorities who want Jesus censured, punished, and yes, killed.

Of course, remember that Jesus picked a zealot - Judas - and a tax collector - Matthew - as disciples. As Christians we should see already that Christ's allegiances supercede our simple divisions of people and purpose. Jesus isn't concerned with our political parties first, whether Zealots vs Herodians or Republicans vs. Democrats. Whatever percentage of our cash that the government wants, we can live without, as long as we're fully committed to God. Paying taxes is of little consequence when compared to living a life fully devoted to God. It's all about perspective and priorities.

So let's be clear about the ramifications of this teaching: paying your taxes is fine, but it's not the first place where your money should go. If we're giving to God what belongs to God, then the first fruits of our entire lives should be going to God.

Jesus's concern is much bigger than money, for God's created our entire lives and blessed us with all the good gifts we enjoy: family, work, love, skill, art, sport, nature, and yes, money. The first thing we should do with our money isn't pay taxes or tuition, buy groceries or games. The first thing we should do with our money is give back to God. The same logic is true of our time. Our priorities are primarily revealed by two things: our calendars and our wallets. If you opened your bank account or your daily planner, what would you find most prioritized? Giving to God what is God's is a matter of how we choose to prioritize our lives.

How many of us, myself included, have said, "I wish I had more time for this" or "I wish I could give more to that"? I'm guessing all of us have said this, or at least that I've said it enough for all of us. Perhaps the better question is, how frequently do we each say this? We often lament the demands of the job we have or our kids' activity schedules because they keep

us from doing things that we want to do. But here's the thing: If you've prioritized correctly, there's nothing to lament. If your job isn't allowing you to live the life that you want, that God is calling you to live, then it's time for a change in occupation. I would suggest finding a new job before quitting your old one, but don't feel stuck because you're in a certain line of work. Make choices that reflect the priorities that you want. If you want to have more time as a family or more time with your church, kids don't need to be in every potential after school activity. I'm not saying prevent them from doing everything, but none of us can do everything, so why do we lay that burden on our children's shoulders?

This is where the Amish get it right. Do you know they developed their community work restrictions long before the advent of electricity? Their reasoning was simple: any job that didn't allow you to parent your child, as a father or mother, negatively impacted your ability to have a beneficial relationship

with them. Farming, carpentry, weaving, cooking, basic store management are all things that can be done by hand and allow you to communicate with one another across ages and abilities. They allow for teaching and constant engagement rather than isolation from family. That's how they give to God what is God's in the face of a culture that focuses on the coin that Caesar constantly puts in our hands. How can we, as CLC, make this kind of radical reprioritization in order to more fully live the good life to which God calls us?

That's the inversion that Jesus brings to the PHarisees and the Herodians. They bring a focus on what to do with our money. Jesus is concerned with what we do with our entire lives, which includes our money, but is so much bigger than money. Where are the first fruits of your time? Where are the first fruits of your relationships? Where are the first fruits of your work? Where are

the first fruits of your rest? As you are an image of God, are they where they belong, with the God in whose image you are made?

Since the Pharisees and Herodians bring the example of taxes, let's consider the power of money. One of the powerful spiritual opportunities of tithing, of giving generously to God's mission in the world, is that you take something with Caesar's image on it and you refuse to let Caesar control it. Jesus doesn't mind paying a portion of our money into the government's hands, but the revolutionary act is doing that only after we've committed the entirety of our wallets and calendars and skillset to God.

When we prioritize our spending to give God what is God's, we don't sneer at giving the image of Caesar to an image of God begging along the roadside. We know that, instead, generosity and the intent, the hope, to alleviate suffering in the world is Jesus's heart, so we give to those who ask. When we prioritize our time, we don't mind seeming weird by prioritizing the mission

of our home congregation, our national denomination, or the universal Body of Christ over all of the other voices that call for our time. This doesn't mean that hobbies and lessons and vacations and work aren't God-given things, but if we don't keep them in perspective, in God's perspective, then we'll worship them as idols like coins rather than see them as gifts from Jesus, image of the invisible God. The things we love to do will subtly and inevitably become our not so benevolent overlords.

As I imagine the future of CLC, one thing that I know for sure is that there's always going to be a temptation to give to Caesar first. If you serve Caesar first, then you've chosen your God, and it isn't Jesus. With the decisions to be made in the coming months: What are our priorities? What do we need from a pastor? What can we afford? Who might we partner with? How must we change? Those are important questions, and for each of them, the answer begins in God. We won't find our future as a church

unless we embrace our present in Christ. Our service, our salaries, and ourselves don't belong to Caesar. Not first. At the first, and the last, we belong to God. Amen.