

“To God the Things that are God’s”

Matthew 22:15–22

Proper 24A, October 19, 2008

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

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Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Prayer.

I am always looking for ways for the Word of God to teach me.

Off hand, I see four lessons to be learned from the narrative:

1) Do not put the Lord, Jesus Christ to a test.

Jesus told the devil not to put the Lord your God to the test, when tempted in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. (Matthew 4:7) He is simply citing Law from Deuteronomy 6:16. Apparently these emissaries of the Jewish authorities hadn’t come across Deuteronomy 6 in their studies. Neither had they heard the story of his temptation in the wilderness.

Ignorance is no defense under the Law. It isn’t today, and neither was it in the time of Jesus.

I don’t care how smart you think you are, there isn’t one of us who can stand up to the creator of the universe, the author and creator of life, and the one who is solely responsible for everything in it. These emissaries had a plan, a well thought out plan, mind you, in which they schemed that no matter how Jesus answered their questions, he would loose, they would have their sound-byte, their damning self-incriminating confession, and all that would be left to do was to call in the soldiers to arrest him.

What about “do not put the Lord to a test” do we not understand? Eve did it in the garden. Our ancestors did it by building a golden calf. The devil does it to Jesus. In similar fashion, these proxies do it to Jesus in today’s lesson. And who here doesn’t

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believe that we continue to do it today?

Jesus doesn't seek our empty promises, our desperate groping for an easy way out of a jam, or our insincere tears of conversion. He simply wants our faithful commitment to follow him and to build his kingdom.

2) Don't send others to do your dirty-work.

The Pharisees and king Herod were pathetic; sending others to do what they didn't have the courage to continue, namely, their confrontation of Jesus. Three times in the past three weeks we have heard from the Gospel that they had confronted Jesus with a hope to trap him. Every time they come back, they fail, and are made laughing-stocks in front of their own people.

They couldn't sustain the confrontation in hopes of trapping him; so today they send their proxies. They are manipulative and weak.

We tend to do the same, don't we? When we have issues with others, isn't it a human tendency to enlist the assistance of a third party, to make them your ally, and to get them to work for your cause? Don't we try to get others to do our work for us, in the name of good management, hoping to ride their coattails of success?

And don't we sometimes do the same with God? Other members of my family are attending church, so I don't have to, or, all the ministries of the church are getting done, so why should I lift another hand?

Take sufficient courage to stand on your own two feet.

3) Do not be insincere.

Notice how these proxies try to butter up Jesus? "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." Oh, please! Give me a break.

When it comes to dealing with Jesus, the best approach is a direct approach. Don't try the flowery, formal malarkey of a liar, cheat, or conjurer. Be up front, and don't try to hide anything. If there is anyone who knows what you want before you ask it, it's God.

4) Attempts to outwit Jesus are foolish.

Instead of making Jesus your adversary, make him your friend. Instead of working against him, walk with him to achieve God's will.

In today's world, I see those of us who have an academic approach to faith, those of us who are more theologically liberal, being threatened by an emotional connection with Jesus. And, likewise, I see those of us who have a more evangelical approach to faith, based on a personal conversion and testimony, feeling threatened by serious inquiry

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and questioning by the use and application of science. Liberals snipe evangelicals; and evangelicals looking down with disdain at academics.

All the while, I can just envision Jesus simply standing back and saying, “What’s so wrong with just being my disciple?”

Instead of trading barbs with one another, shouldn’t we be smarter than that and be reaching out to the lost, the least, the last, the one whose never heard the name of Jesus?

Here are a few lessons to be learned from Jesus’ words and deeds:

- 1) If you suspect the motives of others to be less than honorable, ask them directly to their face, “just what are your intentions?”

Sometimes our fear of confrontation is so great that we will make ourselves the incredibly rubber man or woman just to accommodate another’s dysfunction. Jesus comes right out and asks, “Why are you putting me to the test?”

Jesus pays no attention to their insincerity. He doesn’t care how much they attempted to butter him up. He sensed their malice and responded directly to it.

What I believe this demonstrates is just how important it is to speak with the confidence of a mature faith. You can’t speak like Jesus, unless you know him, and have spent the time to learn his ways. There is no shortcut, no Cliff notes, no Community Chest card that advances you directly to GO to collect \$200, by passing all the other pitfalls in life. The pathway of Christ is one that takes a whole heart, a complete commitment, for an entire lifetime.

Jesus teaches us the value of being clear, honest, direct, and to the point.

- 2) Hypocrisy is an inadequate defense before the Lord.

“Why are you putting me to the test, *you hypocrites?*” Jesus asks. This may be my emphasis on the word *hypocrite*, but I believe an emphasis is based on a more complete reading of the Gospel.

Simply put, Jesus hates those who talk a big game, but do something completely opposite: the religious authorities, who taught about righteousness under the law from the pulpit, but practiced savage injustice with their temple tax, oppressed the poor, and ostracized the diseased and challenged. Jesus hates two-faced people, powerful people who profess faith yet who show no responsibility for the poor, the least, the most vulnerable.

If you’re going to preach righteousness under the law, then you darn well better be prepared to practice it.

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I've heard that the goal of education is to change student's behaviors. So too is it the goal of faith and a relationship with Jesus Christ. If behavior isn't changed, then hypocrisy is exposed for what it really is, hot air and a bag of wind. That bring shame and dishonor to Christ and his kingdom.

3) Jesus teaches about money because he sees it as the root of all that is good, and all that is bad, about the world.

Money, in and of itself, is inert. What it is, however, is an excellent bell-whether of the soul. Money follows the heart. Money goes to what we value, believe, and hold true.

If we live to God, then our money goes to God. If we live to mammon, then our money goes to satisfy the flesh. It is pretty hard to hide, too. No excuse could hide the fact that Lazarus lived outside the gate of the rich man - in full view of all the neighbors.

Likewise, when it comes to money, quantity doesn't count. Jesus clearly makes this distinction watching the widow contributing her gift to the temple treasury - a substantially greater sacrifice than the wealthy contributor, who gave out of his abundance. There is no difference between one penny and a billion dollars in God's sight. He doesn't care how many zeros trail.

But, what Jesus cares about is how we use it. When it's given to God, are there strings attached? Or is it truly and completely given? It isn't returned to God unless possession is completely surrendered.

Jesus teaches so much on the topic of money, wealth, and possessions - more than any other topic - because he knows there is no better means for assessing the spiritual health of a disciple. There is no better window to the soul. And his fundamental test that reveals just how strongly one is committed to Christ and his kingdom is to take it all away and give it to the poor.

The rich ruler turned and walked away, even though he had dedicated his life to learning the ways of righteousness. "Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor." He couldn't, and he bitterly walked away. His mind was committed, but his heart wasn't.

4) The things that are the emperor's means good government.

Perhaps this is my embellishment - to add the word "good" - but I don't think it is too much of a stretch to stake the claim that the emperor's take should be used to establish and keep efficient and effective government. And I believe, this is God's intentional desire.

There are some things we do better together than any of us could do on our own. Many of life's most challenging conditions means we have to have a little help from our

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friends, and we must give a little help to our friends. We must collaborate to provide good roads and schools, police and fire protection, insurance, banking and retirement. If the government doesn't supply the service, then it need to regulate the greed and corruption out of the system and make it work for the greater public good.

Good government is fair and just. It does compensate for the weakest members of society. I make this claim, not because of my party affiliation or political beliefs. I make this claim because this is what Jesus did throughout his ministry.

5) The things that are God's are good ministries.

Jesus doesn't use the words we would now days – advocating for a separation of church and state, but I have every reason to believe this is what he meant in this circumstance.

When we give to God the things that are God, we acknowledge the fact that what we have we don't own. We might be stewards of the money and things God entrusts with us, but we don't own a thing.

Don't' believe me? Just take a look at your quarterly 401(k) statement you just received in the mail.

Give to God the things that are God's. A better word might be "returni." We return to God that which is God's.

I suppose we could leave the money piled in the plate on the altar after the service, lock the door, and go home ... expecting God to take care of the details. But Jesus had a different vision.

The bread is a sharing of my body, and the wine is a sacrifice of my blood, Jesus taught his disciples. When we gather and share of his body and blood, we become the Body of Christ; small "b" to capital "B." We are the Body of Christ, alive and well, reaching out in mission and ministry as his hands, and his feet, as his mind, as his voice to a hungry and needy world.

When our charities are done in the name of Jesus Christ, when our gifts are given in the name of Jesus Christ, we are returning to God that which is God's. When we invite both the friend and the stranger to join us in a relationship with Jesus Christ, and we do so with gracious hospitality, we are returning to God that which is God's.

6) An imbalance in the two – either too much to the emperor or too much too God – leads to either bad government or corrupted ministries.

This is probably where my interpretation will most widely separate me from my evangelical colleagues. We shouldn't use God's money for government. Neither should we use Caesar's money for ministry.

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Faith based initiatives, while noble and well-intentioned, should be avoided at all costs. One can not be accountable to both God and an account or lawyer from the G.A.O. (Government Accountability Office). Likewise, inserting faith into government opens the door for every nut and extremist to claim their faith is just as valid as the faith we've come to know and experience through Jesus Christ.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

In the time of Jesus the Antoni Fortress was built right next to the temple. It was built just a little taller than the temple. It was built to house the Roman authorities and soldiers. It was also built to hold the priests vestments. They were unable to preside at worship without the express consent of the Roman authorities. The system was out of balance, and it ended in catastrophe a mere 39 years later.

Consider the wars that have been fought in the name of religion, when, in fact, they were more greatly motivated by greed, ego, and hubris. Mixing Church and state was recognized as dangerous by the wisdom of our founding fathers here in America, and it should be a point of mutual agreement with authorities in government and in the Church today.

Tying this all together, where do we find ourselves?

Pay your taxes, participate in collaborative efforts for good government, do your part to create and propagate a civil society. At the same time, return to God that which is God’s. Not just the money and things God has entrusted to your care. But give yourself, too. Give your time and your talents, as well as your money.

Be the Body, the Body of Christ, reaching out in mission and ministry in Christ’s name to a hungry and love-starved world.

This, my beloved, is the Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Amen.

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