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Render unto Caesar: A Priority Check

As we heard the Gospel reading just a few minutes ago, one of the questions that might have come to mind is, “How are faith and money related?” When the Pharisees and Herodians ask Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” they are asking about the religious law—is it right with God to pay taxes to the emperor?

Money is a frequent topic in the Gospels and it is often presented as a barrier to our relationship with God. In today’s lesson, however, the issue is far more basic—how does God want us to use our money? As Jesus says, we are to give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s. But what is the emperor’s and what is God’s? Whose money is it, anyway?

These questions are not easy ones—they have been debated for centuries. They must have been particularly difficult at the time of Jesus’ ministry, when Jewish law was very specific about certain things. For one, Roman coins, because they bore pagan images, could not be used at the temple in Jerusalem. That’s why the temple had moneychangers. Also, since the coins were Roman, they represented an authority that many Jews resented—even hated. This question to Jesus, although presumably about taxes, has serious implications and consequences.

If Jesus answers, “no, it is not lawful” then he can be charged with sedition, which was a capital offense to the Romans. However, if he says, “yes, it is lawful,” it would be seen as supporting the Romans. That would undermine his credibility with the people. The question is a trick one—in fact, a life-threatening one.

Jesus however, avoids their trap with what may be the best “come-back” answer of all time. To Jesus, the question isn’t about taxes, it is about our relationships with each other and with God. When Jesus says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” he isn’t just talking about money. He is talking about how we order our life and set our priorities. It is about what we emphasize and value—how we live and what that says about our character and our faith.

The Pharisees and Herodians are hypocrites. They come praising Jesus when they seek to trap him. They speak of Jesus as a great teacher, yet have malice in their hearts. This particular scene takes place at the temple, where pagan coins would have been forbidden, yet someone—probably a Herodian—has a Roman denarius. In fact, it is even hypocritical that the Pharisees and the Herodians are together. The Pharisees were opposed to any non-Jewish authority or influence, while the Herodians supported Rome. It is odd that they are together.

To Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians have become more concerned with worldly authority than with their relationship. Their priorities are out-of-whack and ultimately, they have distanced themselves from God because what they proclaim and how they live are not consistent. They think they are righteous, but their actions indicate otherwise.

Matthew clearly didn’t like the Pharisees and Herodians, but in fairness to them, they probably weren’t that bad. The Herodians were trying to work within a corrupt political system, and the

Pharisees didn't like all the foreigner influences in Judea. Like most of us, they probably just wanted to get by as best they could, and Jesus was a threat to that. He challenged them in ways they didn't like, so they wanted to get rid of him.

Uncomfortable challenges, though, as much as we don't like them, can be a real catalyst for change. This came home to me in an unexpected way one day about 10 years ago. One night I was paying the monthly bills. When I got to the pledge payment to the church—back then it was just another bill—it dawned on me that I was paying more money for ballroom dance lessons than I was giving to the church.

For someone who considered himself a good Episcopalian, it was a real “eye-opener.” It forced me to ask myself, “What does this say about my faith? Is dance instruction more important to me than the church?” Had I become like the Herodians or the Pharisees, someone who said one thing about my faith but did another?

It's not a pleasant thought, but one way to find out is to take a very simple inventory of spending time and spending money. For most people, those are the two most conspicuous indicators of values and convictions. It can be a tool for us to discover whether we are living our life the way we want, and if our hopes, our words, and our actions are aligned.

Sometime when you have a minute, make a quick list of the time you give to various activities. For most of us, work, school, commuting, laundry, cooking—the things we have to do—take up most of our waking time. But what about discretionary time—that elusive “free” time we all long to have more of? Do you spend it with family, with friends, watching TV, going to the movies, or perhaps a sporting event? Vacations, hobbies, sports—as you look at the items on the list, is the time more or less than you would like? And where does faith fit in? Is personal prayer or meditation on the list? How much time does the church get? How much goes to other charitable work, and to God?

How we use our money may be even more interesting. After the mortgage, the utilities, taxes, basic transportation and clothing, where do we spend our discretionary income? Now, there usually isn't much, but we all have some, and we usually spend it where we use our time, but not always. Are you happy with the way money is allocated in your house or would you make changes if you could? Are you as generous as you'd like, and if not, what would you change? That kind of self-examination can be very informative and very valuable. It helps us to see ourselves as others do, and the Good News is that we don't have to make any changes. God loves us just the way we are—just the way God loved the Pharisees and the Herodians. We're all sinners, and we're all here by the grace of God.

I believe that God wants us to use our money in ways that we enjoy and in ways that express our love for God and each other. There's nothing magic about stewardship. Often it's just about realizing what is truly important, then doing it.