

God Wants Our Lives

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel text is one that is often used by people who are concerned about politics and the separation of church and state. I think one hopes to find a clear-cut answer when studying this passage. In fairness to what Jesus was trying to do during his lifetime we must be careful in how we use this text today.

In this gospel reading, the Pharisees think they finally have a plan to get Jesus into trouble with the law. They send their disciples and the Herodians, a group most likely loyal to Herod and therefore to Rome, to question Jesus on financial matters.

The Pharisees think they've got Jesus right where they want him. Using a similar technique that Jesus used in the previous parables, the Pharisees hope that Jesus

will condemn himself like they did when they answered Jesus' questions.

Unfortunately for them, Jesus doesn't give a cut and dry answer.

If we think for a moment about Jesus' options to the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" It seems that he has two options. On one hand, if Jesus says no, don't pay taxes to the emperor, he breaks the law and becomes the enemy of Rome. On the other hand, if he says yes – he upsets many people. Jesus was caught between a rock and a hard place.

To help answer the question, Jesus does a simple thing. He asks for a coin.

Someone gives him a denarius. On this coin there would be a picture of the current emperor, most likely Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus. In this simple act of holding up a coin, Jesus makes his point "Give the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

We can interpret Jesus' statement in a variety of ways. In looking at Jesus' response, I'd like to focus a little bit on the coin. The coin should be given back to the emperor because the emperor made it. And then, the second half of the statement – give to God the things that are God's.

Warren Carter raises questions in his commentary *Matthew and the Margins* concerning Jesus' response:

“What is the relationship of the two clauses and the meaning of the whole? Does the second clause annul the first: pay nothing because everything, including the land belongs to God? Or does it endorse the first: the emperor does God's will and is to be honored as such? Or does it contextualize and relativize the first: pay the emperor while recognizing God's greater demand of loyalty? That is, does Jesus urge outright, accommodation, or nonviolent subversion of Rome? The last option is more convincing.”

Carter raises a lot for one to ponder but suggests that Jesus, in his response encourages people to pay the emperor but ultimately they are to recognize God as Lord or all.

Jesus doesn't give a straight yes or no to the question asked of him, but makes the point that God's authority is above any earthly ruler.

For a moment, let's take a few steps back. We know that giving the coin back to the emperor is giving to the emperor what is the emperor's. What is it that we are to give to God?

Our lives.

Our lives are what we are to give to God. God created each and every one of us in his image. God has called us by name – we are his. God chose us. We are what belongs to God.

Laurel Dykstra wrote in Sojourners Online that: “Jesus’ answer challenges not only the legitimacy of the tax, but the legitimacy of the emperor. Each of us is made in the likeness of God. The coin? Give it back to the false god it belongs to, and give the whole of yourself to God.”

God wants our lives – our whole lives, not just parts of it. Jesus’ answer and Dykstra’s words give us insight on how we should try to live our lives. In the midst of our journey through life we need to recognize God’s authority.

Ultimately we belong to God and should live our lives according to his purposes.

How do we do this? I think the first step for each of us is to step back and examine our lives. Where does God fit into our relationships and activities that we participate in?

Secondly, we should try to identify the false gods we worship in our lives. Maybe it's our money. Maybe it's our cell phone. Maybe it's our career. Maybe it's taking credit for everything we do instead of giving the credit to God. Once we realize those things that distract us from giving our whole life to God we can pray and continue our journey with God in a different way. When we recognize God's authority in our lives our priorities change. Instead of looking out for ourselves we look to others who have no voice, no home, or no food.

Giving our lives to God is recognizing God's rule in our lives and making God's priorities our way of life.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's.”

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding be in your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.