

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

The politics of Israel are extremely complicated, and have always been. A people that conquered land on which other people lived, and then were frequently over-run by more powerful empires before being kicked out altogether will develop a strong need for security.

And though the nation of Israel we know is a modern reconstituting of that ancient land, memories run deep.

One of the most heartbreaking things about the current flare-up in the generational conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is the knowledge that Israel has so often been the occupied territory.

That's the reality into which Jesus was born and grew up and exercised ministry.

The Roman occupation was among the more brutal but hardly the first – Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians – so much of what the prophets wrote about were these never-ending dangers and conflicts.

That's the reality in which the religious leaders constantly seeking to entrap Jesus were operating – wielding the limited power they had under the watchful eye of the hated Romans.

And one of the Romans' favorite weapons of subjugation was taxes.

Those whom the Romans conquered basically had to fund their own occupation.

Taxes were levied, increased at whim, enforced by terror –

and collected by collaborators from within the ranks of the occupied, who charged more than the amount demanded so they could take their own cut.

That's why "tax collectors" are spoken of in the same breath as "prostitutes."

So the religious leaders, already threatened by Jesus' popularity, thought taxes might be a good area to trick him and trap him.

Are we supposed to honor the Emperor or God? Should we pay Caesar's tax?

Now, if he says, "No," the Herodians there will get that message back to the Romans, who could have Jesus arrested as seditious.

If he says yes, pay the Emperor, the Saducees can tell his adoring crowds that Jesus advocates collaborating with the hated Romans.

Good way to end his popularity right there.

They set up a false either/or, and Jesus comes back at them with a both/and. Give me a coin – whose picture is on that coin? So, give the coin to the person on the coin. Give to God the honor due to God.

Now, we need to remember that Jesus is not articulating tax policy here. When we talk about taxes, we are talking not about giving money to someone else. In a democracy, we are the government. We're giving money to ourselves, putting a percentage of our resources into a common pot to fund the goods and services we believe our state needs to provide – education, police, a legal system, the needs of the less fortunate – and the bureaucracy to administer it all. If we don't like the system, we have the power to change it, as long as it's fair. We could have a long discussion about how fair it is, but we fund ourselves.

Same thing with our church money – we are how we fund the mission we feel called to live out as God's agents in this community. That's why each of us is asked to participate by committing some percentage of our funds to sustain our ministry. We are asked to give to God, in a sense, give to God a portion of what God has provided us with. The most challenging thing Jesus says here is not "Pay your taxes." It's what he says next: Give to God what belongs to God.

So if what goes to the emperor is the coin stamped with his image, what is the coin stamped with the image of God? Who bears the head and title of God? That's right: the Body of Christ. Those made in his image; marked with the sign of his perfect Son, who himself is the one perfect image of God. Who in this place are the coins to be paid to God? We are. The coin we give to God is ourselves. All of us. Every bit of us.

We belong to God. In a sense, God owns us. We live at God's command. That's not very American language, is it? We love to be our own people. But the premise of Christian discipleship is that everything in our lives, even our very selves, belongs to God, and is graciously loaned to us. You know how, in art museums sometimes you'll see a plaque on a picture saying, "On loan from the collection of ... " That's what we are: works of art on loan from the collection of the true Master of the Universe. Here to be admired and enjoyed; here to be useful and fruitful. But not our own.

And everything we have is also to be admired and enjoyed,
but not held, not worshipped – and not relied upon.
Our children, spouses, jobs, houses, retirement accounts, leisure activities.
They're all good. But they're not God. They are not to be worshipped.
The word "worship" comes from the root "Worth". To ascribe ultimate worth to.
When we allow giving to become a main attribute, we bring worship out of the
church into our weekdays and our wallets, our choices, our priorities.

I have a friend who started her own business some years ago.
She did very well – she's opened offices in New York and London, in fact.
But she sees her business success as a direct gift from God.
She sees her whole life as an offering of worship to God.
She works very, very hard with the gifts she's been given, and she takes good risks.
But she also believes God is blessing her business.
Her response to that blessing is to be very generous with her income.
She estimates she gave away over \$100,000 the second year she was in business.
She tithes, and her pledge to her church that year was \$35,000.
She gave \$25,000 to the building fund on top of that.
There were a few people she gave \$2,500, because they were broke.
She paid for her uncle's funeral... took some people on vacation.
She doesn't believe the money is hers to keep, just to use well.
And she keeps having plenty.

My friends, that is a vision of worship brought into our daily life.
"More love, more power, more of you in my life," goes the song we sometimes
sing. As we ask God to fill us with more of God's love, more of God's power,
we can also pray to be released into more of God's mission, released into giving.
I have a vision for this community – in which three things are normative:
1. Everyone comes to worship every week, unless otherwise prevented.
2. Everyone pledges, whatever they can, ideally a percentage of their income;
3. Everyone is in a small group of some kind, supporting each other in growing
in faith. Supporting one another in Christ we become unstoppable.

We are sons and daughters of the living God, ones who bear God's name.
Beloved, united with Christ, we are coins stamped in God's image.
We are God's coins, to be spent making the world whole.
As we offer ourselves to God, we will find ourselves blessed –
coins that God uses to buy back the world. *Amen.*

Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus 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.

Philippians 4:1-9

My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.