

Matthew 22: 15-22

THERE ARE TWO THING THAT ARE CERTAIN IN LIFE---DEATH AND TAXES. I WOULD ASSUME MOST EVERY AMERICAN KNOWS THE MEANING OF APRIL 15TH. IT IS THE DREADED DAY THAT ONE'S TAXES ARE DUE (UNLESS YOU'VE MADE OTHER ARRANGEMENTS). THE IRS, OF COURSE, IS ONE OF THE MOST DESPISED AGENCIES OF GOVERNMENT—IN LARGE PART DUE TO THE FACT THAT ITS ONLY JOB IS TO TAKE OUR “HARD EARNED MONEY” IN THE FORM OF TAXES. IT DOESN'T MATTER THAT THESE REVENUES HELP FUND IMPORTANT SERVICES THAT WE BENEFIT FROM---IT STILL HURTS TO PAY TAXES.

WHATEVER YOUR VIEW OF THE IRS IS, WE MUST ADMIT THAT TAX COLLECTORS HAVE NEVER BEEN POPULAR. NOT IN BIBLICAL TIMES. NOT IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD. NOT TODAY!

NOW WE COULD DEBATE THE PROS AND CONS OF THE AMERICAN TAX SYSTEM, BUT I'M NOT SURE THAT'S THE POINT. THE BIGGER ISSUE IS ONE OF ALLEGIANCE, WHICH IS SYMOBLIZED BY THIS PARTICULAR TAX—THE IMPERIAL TAX. THERE WERE A VARIETY OF TAXES LEVIED ON THE PEOPLE OF THE EMPIRE, BUT THIS WAS THE MOST DESPISED OF ALL TEXES. IN ESSENCE, ROME LEVIED A TAX ON THE PEOPLE TO PAY FOR THE ROMAN LEGIONS THAT CONTROLLED THE REGION. AS YOU MIGHT EXPECT, OCCUPIED PEOPLE NEVER LIKE PAYING THE SALARIES OF THEIR OCCUPIERS. THINK OF THAT FOR A MOMENT, FIRST CENTURY JEWS WERE REQUIRED TO PAY THEIR OPPRESSORS A YEARLY TAX TO SUPPORT THEIR OWN OPPRESSION.

BUT NOT EVERYONE SAW THE TAX THAT WAY. THE HERODIANS WERE LOCAL SYMPATHIZERS WITH THE ROMAN RULERS. THEY WERE A POLITICAL PARTY RELATED TO KING HEROD, THE LOCAL PUPPET RULER SUPPORTED BY THE ROMANS. THE HERODIANS SUPPORTED THE IMPERIAL TAX, THEY BENEFITED FROM IT. THE PHARISEES, ALSO A POLITICAL PARTY AS WELL AS RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS, DID NOT HAVE MUCH USE FOR THE IMPERIAL TAX, BUT THEY PROBABLY SUPPORTED IT SINCE IT ALSO HELPED KEEP THEM IN POWER. AND, AS FAR AS MATTHEW WAS CONCERNED, THE PHARISEES WOULD DO ANYTHING TO TRY TO TRAP JESUS.

THE IMPERIAL TAX WAS OPPOSED BY THE MOST, IF NOT ALL, OF JESUS' FOLLWERS. MANY OF THEM WERE NATIONALISTS WHO FOUND THE IMPERIAL TAX OFFENSIVE SINCE IT DAILY

REMINDED THEM OF THEIR HUMILIATION AND OCCUPATION BY THE ROMAN EMPIRE. NOW, THE IMPERIAL TAX SHOULD HAVE BEEN A PROBLEM FOR THE PHARISEES, TOO, AND NOT ONLY FOR POLITICAL REASONS. A COIN ENGRAVED WITH A PICTURE OF THE EMPEROR CAESAR AND A PROCLAMATION OF HIS DIVINITY—WHY, THAT BROKE THE FIRST 2 COMMANDMENTS! THEREFORE, IN JESUS' TIME, ANY CONVERSATION ABOUT THE IMPERIAL TAX WAS VERY DIVISIVE AND IMMEDIATELY REVEALED WHERE ONE STOOD IN RELATION TO ROME AND FAITH.

AND THAT IS HOW THE HERODIANS AND PHARISEES GOT TOGETHER TO TRY TO TRAP JESUS. NORMALLY, THEY DID NOT GET ALONG, BUT ON THIS OCCASION, THEY WERE UNITED IN THEIR DESIRE TO TRAP JESUS. JESUS HAD JUST ENTERED JERUSALEM—THE PEOPLE LOVED HIM. NOW, JESUS WAS PREACHING IN THE TEMPLE AND STIRRING UP ALL KINDS OF TROUBLE FOR THESE STATUS-QUO FOLKS. SO, TOGETHER, THE HERODIANS AND PHARISEES DECIDED TO TRAP JESUS. WITH THEIR QUESTION ABOUT THE IMPERIAL TAX, THEY THOUGHT THEY HAD JESUS TRAPPED—IF JESUS ANSWERED ONE WAY, IF HE ADVOCATED PAYING THIS TAX, HE WOULD DISAPPOINT HIS FOLLOWERS. IF JESUS ANSWERED ANOTHER WAY, IF HE ADVOCATED NOT PAYING THIS TAX, HE WOULD BE IN TROUBLE WITH THE ROMAN RULERS. THEY THOUGHT THEY HAD HIM!

BUT, AS WE KNOW, JESUS NOT ONLY EVADED THEIR TRAP, HE TRAPPED THEM IN THEIR OWN QUESTION. “WHOSE FACE IS ON THE COIN?” JESUS ASKED. PERHAPS OVER-EAGER TO ADVANCE THEIR OWN PLOT, JESUS' OPPONENTS FORGOT THAT BY SHOWING A COIN WITH THE EMPEROR'S IMAGE ON IT, THEY BETRAYED THEIR OWN COMPLICITY WITH THE ROMAN SYSTEM. THEN JESUS ASKED WHOSE IMAGE AND PROCLAMATION ADORNED THE COIN. “THE EMPEROR'S” THEY ANSWERED. EVERYONE IN ATTENDANCE KNEW THE COMMANDMENTS AND THEY KNEW THAT JESUS HAD JUST TRAPPED THE TRAPPERS IN THEIR OWN BLASPHEMY ACCORDING TO JEWISH LAW.

AND THAT MAKES JESUS' RESPONSE EVEN MORE BITING---“GIVE, THEREFORE, TO CAESAR, THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S, AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S.”

“GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY” WAS THE LEAD SONG ON BOB DYLAN’S 1979 ALBUM *SLOW TRAIN COMING* AND WAS HIS LAST HIT SINGLE. IT WON THE GRAMMY AWARD FOR BEST MALE ROCK VOCAL FOR 1979.

THIS SONG MARKED BOB DYLAN’S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY. “YOU’RE GONNA HAVE TO SERVE SOMEBODY,” WROTE DYLAN AND HE NOW KNEW WHO HE WOULD BE SERVING. THE LORD, JESUS CHRIST. IN OUR TEXT FROM MATTHEW TODAY, JESUS MADE IT ABSOLUTELY CLEAR WHO HE SERVED.

COULD JESUS BE TALKING TO US? HE IS NOT TRAPPING US, BUT IS JESUS INVITING US TO DECLARE OUR ALLEGIANCE TO GOD? DAVID LOSE PUTS IT THIS WAY: PERHAPS THE KEY QUESTION HERE IS NOT WHOSE IMAGE IS ON THE COIN BUT RATHER WHOSE IMAGE IS ON US! WHOSE IMAGE IS ON OUR HEARTS? JESUS IS INVITING US TO DECLARE OUR ALLEGIANCE TO GOD. OFTEN THIS TEXT IS INTERPRETED TO PRESENT THE DICHOTOMY IN OUR LIVES, THAT WE HAVE DUTIES TO BOTH GOD AND COUNTRY. VERY TRUE. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY JESUS IS TALKING HERE PRIMARILY ABOUT OUR DUTY TO GOD. WE ALL HAVE OUR POLITICAL VIEWS..SOME ALIKE AND OTHERS VASTLY DIFFERENT, BUT BEFORE AND ABOVE ANY OF THESE, WE---YOU AND I---ARE CHRISTIANS, FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST. JESUS IS OR SHOULD BE OUR FIRST LOYALTY.

LIKE MANY STORIES IN SCRIPTURE, JESUS RAISES IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR US BUT DOES NOT GIVE PAT ANSWERS. THERE ARE ELEMENTS IN OUR LIVES THAT ARE INDEED, PART OF THE WORLD ORDER AND SHOULD BE “RENDERED TO CAESAR,” AS THE TEXT STATES. BUT THERE ARE OTHER PARTS OF OUR LIVES, OUR VERY SELVES, THAT BELONG TO GOD ALONE. IF WE REMEMBER THAT, ALL OF LIFE TAKES ON GREATER FOCUS AND MEANING. WE BELONG, NOT TO ANYTHING IN THIS WORLD, WE BELONG TO GOD.

AND THIS MEANS THAT NO MATTER WHAT WE MAY DO OR SAY, NO MATTER WHERE WE GO, NO MATTER WHAT MAY HAPPEN TO US, WE ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST AND FOREVER, GOD’S OWN BELOVED CHILDREN. ISAIAH 49:16 READS: “YET I WILL NOT FORGET YOU. SEE, I HAVE INSCRIBED YOU ON THE PALMS OF MY HANDS.”

YES, THE IMAGE CAN SOMETIMES BE DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE. WHEN WE LOOK AT EACH OTHER OR AT OURSELVES IN THE MIRROR, WE TEND TO SEE THE INSCRIPTIONS THAT OUR WORLD HAS LEFT ON US: YOU ARE WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE, WHAT YOU HAVE, WHAT YOU WEAR, WHAT YOU DO, HOW MANY DEGREES YOU HAVE, THE FRIENDS YOU HAVE OR HOW MANY FOLLOWERS OR LIKES YOU HAVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA. NEVERTHELESS, UNDERNEATH ALL THOSE INSCRIPTIONS IS A MUCH DEEPER MARK: IT'S THE WATERY SIGN OF A CROSS MADE ONCE UPON A TIME ON OUR FOREHEADS...FOR MANY OF US WE HAVE NO MEMORY OF THAT MOMENT...PERHAPS PICTURES OR STORIES, BUT NO MEMORY. BUT OUR SOULS REMEMBER AND SO DOES GOD. THE IMAGE OF GOD IS ENGRAVED ON OUR HEARTS, WHO, IN JESUS, STAND BEHIND US WITH FULL FAITH AND CREDIT.

YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO SERVE SOMEBODY. AND, WE KNOW WHO WE SERVE. ALL OF LIFE IS GOD'S. WE SERVE AND LOVE AND LIVE IN THE LOVE AND RULE OF JESUS CHRIST. WE BELONG TO GOD. WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN. OUR TASK IS TO BELIEVE THAT AND LIVE IT.

YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO SERVE SOMEBODY. AMEN.