

Children

Boys and girls: Quick now, I have a dollar bill. (Swish it in front of them.) Who's picture is on the front of it? (If they don't know, let them get a glimpse.) That's right, George Washington's.

Once some people wanted to trick Jesus. They ask him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus asked for a coin and asked whose picture was on the coin. They answered Caesar's. Jesus said, "Then render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's."

Adults complain about paying taxes, but we know that our government has needs that can't be met if we do not do our part. There are highways to be repaired and teachers to be paid and many good things that come from our taxes.

I am glad, though, that on the back of this dollar bill there is something else. What does it say right there? (Let them see and respond.) That's right, "In God we trust." We pay our taxes. We honor our government. But there is Someone who gets more loyalty from us than the government. It is God. God gets more than our taxes. He gets our love. And you know what? That's all He asks. That we love Him as He loves us.

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In the first reading for this Sunday, the Prophet Isaiah, actually the Second Isaiah, makes a startling statement. He refers to King Cyrus of Persia, a pagan, as someone who has been anointed by God. A pagan as the Messiah? Definitely unheard of in the Hebrew communities. Isaiah calls Cyrus *anointed* because God used him to restore the people of Israel from their exile. Cyrus was the king of Persia. The Hebrew people were being held in Babylon. They had no strength of their own. They just had faith that somehow God would deliver them from their bondage. And God did. Nations fell before Cyrus. Kings ran from him. Babylon fell. One of Cyrus' first acts in Babylon was to restore the captive peoples to their homelands. The Jews returned to Judea. It was as shocking and as sudden as the fall of communism at the end of the last century. The prophets had said that the Babylonian captivity was a temporary punishment from God for the crimes of the people of Judea. They prophesied that when the time of punishment was complete, God would restore His People to Judea and Jerusalem. God used Cyrus to fulfill his promise. Cyrus, in the eyes of the writer of Second Isaiah, was anointed, chosen by God to complete a particular mission.

The Gospels relate a second shocking statement regarding a pagan ruler. This time the statement was made by Jesus. The Pharisees and Herodians plotted together to frame a *gotcha* question to Jesus. First of all, the Pharisees and the Herodians had little in common. The Pharisees were very strict in their interpretation of the law. They had intricate, detailed laws and rituals all carrying great weight and all meant to preserve a fundamental commandment of God. For example, the commandment, "Thou shalt keep holy the Sabbath," was to be preserved from declaring that there can be no work on the Sabbath. The concept of work was intricately defined. There was a set number of steps that one could take when carrying a water bucket from a well. If the well was one step further, then the Sabbath would be violated.

The Herodians were the exact opposite. They were extremely loose. King Herod was hardly a Jew at all. He was a recent convert to Judaism, doing so only so he could be named King of Galilee. Like his father, who called for the killing of the innocents at the time of Jesus' birth, Herod had hardly any conscience. He had an affair with his brother's wife, then divorced his own wife and married her. This is the woman called Herodias. She probably took on the name of her new husband. She was the woman who had her daughter demand the head of John the Baptist. John the Baptist had condemned the King's immorality.

The Pharisees and Herodians had one thing in common: they both wanted to discredit Jesus before the large crowds that followed him. So they asked their *gotcha* question: “Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar or not?” If Jesus said, “No” the Herodians would certainly report him to the Romans as seditious. If He said, “Yes,” the Pharisees would tell the people that this proves that Jesus was not a real Jew but a collaborator with the pagan Romans. Jesus turned the tables by saying, “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” He was telling them to recognize their responsibilities to the Romans, and more than this, recognize their responsibilities to their God.

Actually, the Roman Empire turned out to be a vehicle for the spread of the Kingdom of God. Roman roads, Roman trade routes, the Pax Romana, the general peace that Rome brought after they conquered almost everyone, the unity of most of the then known world under the Romans, all provided a means for the Christian missionaries to travel long distances and spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. So, like Cyrus, God used those no one would expect to promote his plans, the pagan Romans.

God used pagans to accomplish his plans. How much more will He use us who are His People? God has a plan for each one of us, which is all part of His divine plan for the human race. Every one of us is called to make the presence of God real in the world. Since we are each unique, the presence that we each bring to the world is a reflection of God the world never saw before and will never see again. He uses each one of us for His Divine Purpose.

Those who are married can validly say, “God created me to love Him through the love I give to my spouse and my children. No woman, no man, has ever been loved the way that I am able to love my spouse. No children have ever been loved in the way that I can love my children. When I choose to step away from selfishness and love as God loves, sacrificially, then I can play my part in the Divine Plan.” Those who are not called to the sacrament of marriage can recognize that God has another way for them to promote and strengthen his kingdom. And our young people can say, “I was created to love God at this stage of my life as a child or Teen seeking out the course God has set for me. At the same time I am also called to make Him present in my school in the way I live my faith and in the ways that I reach out to those who are hurting.”

During World War II, that horrible war of four generations ago, the British people had a saying that defined everyone’s part in the war. They called it “doing my bit.” That bit might be that of an infantryman charging a bunker, an airman flying over enemy territory, a seaman working at the destruction of enemy submarines, or any role played in the military, even a clerical noncombatant role. That bit might be the work of a citizen at home supporting the war effort, growing extra crops, donating blood, working extra hours in the munitions factory. That bit might seem like little to some, but every single action of the military as well as those of each of the citizens all led to the eventual victory of the British over those attacking their country. Those who died in the war were heroes. Their bit cost them their lives. Those who lived might not be remembered on war memorials, but their bit had lasting value to the people of Great Britain.

Well, all of us have our bit to play in the work of the Kingdom of God. That bit might be something of which everyone is aware, or that bit might be something that no one sees but God himself. It really does not make a difference whether our bit is known or not. What matters is that our effort leads to the eventual victory of the Kingdom of God over the forces of evil that attack His world.

We have to stay attuned to the Presence of God in our lives, so that we can come to a deeper understanding of what it is that God wants from each of us, His call is deep within our hearts. If our hearts are closed to God, if our hearts are muddied with the immorality of the world, then we will not be able to discern the path God is calling us to fulfill his plan for us. But, if we do our best to be good Catholics, living our faith, then we will come to an understanding of the directions the Lord wants us to take so that we might do our bit in His plan for mankind.

God used the pagan King Cyrus of Persia and the pagan Romans as instruments in the fulfilling of His plan. How much more will He use us, the people He has ushered into an intimate sharing of His life? No one is insignificant in the battle for the Kingdom of God. Every one of us has a role to play in that Kingdom. We are all part of His Plan. May we have the courage to do our bit.

II

Late one night in Washington, D.C. a mugger wearing a ski mask jumped into the path of a well-dressed man and stuck a gun in his ribs. "Give me your money!" he demanded.

Indignant, the affluent man replied, "You can't do this to me . . . I'm a US Congressman!"

"In that case," replied the robber, "give me back MY money!" (1)

Ah, the "Infernal Revenue Service"--in one form or another, they have always been with us.

You know the story. The Pharisees were concerned about Jesus' growing popularity. They rightfully regarded him as a threat to the orthodoxy of the day. They sought for ways to expose him as a charlatan and a fraud or to paint him as a revolutionary who was a threat to the government.

One day they sent their disciples to try to trap him. They began with some high-sounding flattery. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are."

Anyone but Jesus would probably be seduced by such high praise. A man of integrity--a man who teaches the truth regardless of what others might think. High praise coming from the Pharisees. That was the bait. Now for the trap: "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

This must have seemed like the perfect ploy to the Pharisees. Would Jesus play to the crowd and encourage disobedience to Rome? Such boldness would have won him followers but at the expense of pitting himself against the Roman government. If, on the other hand, he sided with Rome, he would alienate those listeners who despised the outsiders who ruled over them. The Pharisees could not lose. Jesus could not win.

Matthew tells us, however, that Jesus "knowing their evil intent" said to them, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax."

So they brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

"When they heard this, they were amazed," says Matthew. "So they left him and went away."

"Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's," says the Master. Do we have any choice?

It reminds me of a story that Patrick Doucette tells about a man on vacation in Mexico who was strolling along outside his hotel in Acapulco. He heard a woman screaming as she knelt in front of a small child. The man understood enough Spanish to realize that the boy had swallowed a coin.

Seizing the child by the heels, the man held him up and gave him a few shakes. Suddenly an American quarter dropped to the sidewalk from the child's mouth.

"Oh, thank you sir!" cried the woman. "You seemed to know just how to get it out of him. Are you a doctor?"

"No, ma'am," replied the man. "I'm with the IRS." (2)

Years ago there was a trial of the son of a U. S. Congressman. The young man had been charged with tax evasion. The judge showed little mercy. "Our tax system depends upon voluntary compliance," the judge said. "Therefore we must send a signal to other tax cheaters." The son of the congressman went to jail.

You may be surprised to learn that we have a VOLUNTARY tax system. Try telling that to the IRS the next time you are audited.

Giving back to Caesar is no problem. If the government needs your house moved in order to build a highway, you might as well start looking for a new one.

If Congress reinstates the draft, people will start packing the old duffel bag. What Caesar wants, Caesar gets. And most of us have no problem with that. We may not like paying taxes, but, for the most part, we are happy with the kind of government we have. And we are grateful to pick up the tab--within limits, of course.

Comedian Jackie Mason once said, "Everyone should pay their income tax with a smile. I tried it," he continued, "but they demanded cash."

You might be interested to know that when the federal income tax was signed into law in 1913, it was for 1 percent of the average person's income. One percent!

A senator speaking in opposition to the bill stated: "If we allow this 1 percent foot-in-the-door, at some future date it might rise to 5 percent." How about 35 per cent, depending on your tax bracket? And that doesn't count city and state taxes.

So we grumble and we complain, but still we give back to Caesar, partly out of a sense of duty and partly out of a sense of fear. But giving back to God--that's a different matter. Why do we give to God?

One reason, of course, is out of gratitude for all God has done for us. We're not rich people, but most of us have been blessed in wonderful ways. And we want to say thank you and to tell God we love Him.

Adam Hamilton tells a story about a camping trip he took with his family in the Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming several years ago. The trip coincided with his birthday.

When they were done setting up the camp, Hamilton explained to his two daughters that they could have \$20 each to spend the 3 days they were there. The girls in excitement dragged him toward a gift shop just beside their camp site.

His daughter Rebecca spied a baseball cap. She instantly picked it up and tried it on. "What do you think Dad?" she inquired with curious eyes.

"You look pretty in it, honey," Hamilton replied. "But that hat costs \$20, and that's all you have . . . you won't have any more money to spend the next two days."

"But Dad," she said, "all I want is this hat and I don't really care if I don't have any more money to spend."

Hamilton tried all he could to talk his 10-year-old daughter out of the idea of buying that ball cap. But the more he tried, the more resolute Rebecca became.

Exhausted, Hamilton finally caved in. "Honey, you can buy that ball cap, but you aren't getting any more money until three days' time is up," he said shoving the \$20 bill at Rebecca. She instantly used the money to buy the hat.

Before going back to their camp, Hamilton took his two daughters for a walk, and then sat on a bench near the lake to watch the sun set. "Dad," Becca said, tapping on her Dad's shoulder. "Here is my birthday gift for you." She said this as she handed him the hat. "Happy Birthday Dad. I love you."

Adam Hamilton said he sat on the bench, took her in his arms, and started to cry. That cap, he says, is among his most treasured possessions, his most often worn cap to this day because every time he wears it, he thinks of Becca's sacrifice for him.

All these years later it still touches him to think about how his little girl gave up all her spending money because she wanted to tell her daddy that she loved him.

"That's how God looks at our acts of generosity," writes Adam Hamilton. "When we share with God, our gifts are a way of saying, 'God, I'm returning to you a portion of what I have . . . to say thank you and I love you.'"

(3)

That's the first reason we give back to God--out of a sense of gratitude for all God has done for us.

But there's a second reason we give back to God. **It's because we recognize that everything we have belongs to God in the first place.** "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," writes the Psalmist, "the world, and all who live in it . . ." (Psalm 24:1).

Leadership expert John Maxwell tells about a certain congressman who took his son to McDonald's one day. The congressman bought a large order of fries and a Coke, and he and his son retired to a small table not too far away from the window to savor their tasty snack.

After settling down, the father stretched his hand out to take a fry, but his son pulled the fries toward himself and covered the fries with his hand, blocking his father's attempt to gain the fry. With resignation the father said quietly, "It's all yours son."

The father looked through the window and wondered, "Could it be that my son has forgotten who bought those fries? Doesn't my son realize I do not need any of his fries? I can go get my own. What would he do if I took those fries away from him? What if I bought more fries and decided not to give him any? Why did he fail to see that all I wanted was to share a couple of fries with him?"

It was at this point that the congressman came to realize something: we are all tempted to act in the same way as his son in our relationship with God. First, just like his son, we end up forgetting that God owns all the blessings

we thought were ours. Secondly, we selfishly deny God the portion of the blessings that rightfully belong to Him. (4)

Everything in this world belongs to God. We are only stewards of God's wealth.

Josh Harris writing on the Internet notes that the word "steward" actually comes from a Greek word (oikonomos). "It referred to someone who managed a household. In Greek culture, if a person was wealthy and had a lot of money and possessions, they would use a steward to manage their household. This person wasn't the owner, but they were empowered to act on the owner's behalf.

Harris says it's kind of like Bill Gates. He notes that twenty years ago, when Gates was worth only \$5 billion, he hired a man named Michael Larson to manage his money. People jokingly call Larson the "Gateskeeper" because he has final say on every financial matter. He is given full control of Bill Gates' money and investments, and his whole job is to be a good steward of the money he is entrusted with. He uses the money on behalf of Mr. Gates to benefit him and do his work.

"These days, Bill Gates is worth \$81 billion, and at a party he recently said that he has 'complete trust and faith' in Larson. The money isn't his, but he has been given control over it for a purpose." (5)

Of course, Bill and Melinda Gates have themselves proven to be good stewards as they, through their foundation, serve humanity through billions of dollars of bequests. Not that I agree with all they support, but I think it is great that they do so much for others

Nothing truly belongs to us. We are mere stewards of that which is God's.

But here is the most thrilling thing about giving back to God. **God takes that which we give Him and multiplies it to do far more than we can even imagine.**

That is the message of the story of the little boy who gave the Master the tiny gift of the fishes and loaves with which the Master fed thousands of people. That is what always happens when people offer up gifts to the Master.

It's like something that happened last summer at the Olympics in Rio. The story was about a Polish track and field athlete named Piotr Malachowski.

Malachowski says he can still remember the overflowing feeling of gratitude he experienced as he waved his silver medal on the podium of the Rio Olympics.

"I never imagined winning a silver medal while I prepared hard for the Olympics games," Malachowski posted on his Facebook account. "I did everything [by] the book, but gold refused to come my way. Instead of feeling angry, an overwhelming feeling of gratefulness has taken over me thanks to my silver medal."

Coming in second in the Men's discus throw, however, gave Malachowski an opportunity to show his gratitude in a very special way. The mother of Olek Syzmanski, a 3-year-old boy suffering from a deadly form of eye cancer contacted Malachowski shortly after the Rio Olympics. Olek needed surgery to remove the cancer.

At a price tag of \$126,000, however, Olek's mother simply couldn't afford it.

Malachowski instantly took interest in the little boy's case, and decided to auction his silver medal to raise money for the surgery.

After months of fund-raising efforts, however, Malachowski's silver medal only attracted \$19,000--nothing near what Olek needed for the surgery. But then something of a miracle occurred. Two Polish businessmen stepped forward and volunteered to pay off the rest.

In excitement, Malachowski took to his Facebook page and posted, "I feel really elated, our efforts [have] finally paid off, and now Olek can have his eyes treated. I really feel fulfilled." (6)

He ought to feel fulfilled. What greater joy can a person experience than that of being responsible for saving a child's life?

Did you know that you can save a child's life . . . and it won't cost you \$126,000--though if you have \$126,000 to give, you could save many more than one child's life? Remember the Combined Federal Campaign

What better use could you put your money to? And remember Christ's words, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me . . ." (Matthew 25:40). Whenever you give to the church's mission program, you are showing your love for God. So, why do we give back to God? We do it out of gratitude for all God's done for us and because we love Him. We give because everything already belongs to Him and we are but stewards of His bounty. And we do it because we know that God will take what we give to Him and will bless it and cause it to go further than we can possibly imagine. Give unto Caesar? We don't have much choice. Give unto God? That is a wonderful privilege.

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1. Monday Fodder Update, March 6, 2006.
 2. *Free Sermons: The Best Free Sermons for Modern Times* (Kindle Edition).
 3. Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity*. Abingdon Press. (Kindle Edition).
 4. Cited by C. Paul Willis, <http://cohglory.squarespace.com/sermon-notes/2013/5/30/why-i-have-never-given-to-god-sermon-596-june-2-2013.html>.
 5. <http://holytrinitynarberth.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Sermon-10.12.14-18th-Sunday-after-Pentecost-Year-A.pdf>.
 6. <http://www.today.com/news/olympic-track-field-athlete-auctions-medal-pay-boy-s-cancer-t102288>.

III

Those of you who have played or followed sports, you know that one of the most important lessons in learning to play is to keep your eye on the ball. Whether baseball, or football, or tennis, or soccer, or any other game that requires a ball, you need to be alert to where that ball is at all times. If you allow yourself to become distracted and look away, you will lose your focus, disable your ability to play astutely, disengage from your team and its joint vision and strategy, and the other team may gain the upper hand.

Keeping your eye on the ball doesn't just mean on the ball itself, but it means keeping your attention on the game, on your role as part of the team, and on your commitment to the team's mission to play to the best of its ability.

This goes for nearly anything you do in life. Want to succeed in school? Keep your eye on the ball! Want to do well in business? Stay committed and keep your eye on the goal! Want to stay invested in your discipleship and secure in your faith? Keep your eye on Jesus!

Don't be distracted by the ways of the world, the politics of the season, a cultural milieu of doubt and despair, the peer pressure to conform to a watered-down discipleship. Stay firm in your faith by keeping your eye on Jesus.

Keeping your eye on Jesus doesn't mean disengaging from the world or your role in the social and political arenas. It simply means, keeping your priorities straight. Keeping your life in perspective. Always putting God first.

In our scripture for today, Jesus is confronted by a group of Pharisees and Herodians who want to challenge him on his politics, hoping to twist his words, entrap him, and reveal him as a hypocrite and revolutionary, so that they can diffuse his mission, or better, have him arrested for sedition.

The political arena in Jesus' day consisted of not just the secular and foreign-god-worshipping force of Rome, but a strong political tug-of-war between Jewish political parties who vied for Temple power and provincial rule. Three of the strongest of these were the Pharisees (educated rabbis and legalists wielding power over Jewish individual and communal behavior), Sadducees (priestly families of Temple power), and Herodians (those who wanted to keep Herod's family on the Jewish thrones of power). For all of these, wealth was also a significant factor.

Meanwhile revolutionaries abounded, and all three political parties in power had an interest in squashing any potential threats. Jesus, with his amassed following of folk dissatisfied with the current state of affairs was seen as a definite potential threat.

If they simply arrested him, they risked an uprising. If they left him alone, they suspected, they could soon lose control of their power and positions or risk the disdain and rage of their benefactor, Rome. They feared above all removal from power, and loss of wealth, status, and position.

So, they plotted a way to entangle Jesus in a political conundrum. They asked him, “Tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

Now, it’s easy to focus simply on this sentence and read over the one preceding it. But the preceding sentence is very important to this interaction, because we the reader can see them setting Jesus up in their very introduction of the question: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere (posturing), and teach the way of God in accordance with truth (leading....truth is a key word here), and you show deference to no one (hint: trap coming.....for Rome requires showing deference to the Emperor); for you do not regard people with partiality (alarm sounding, warning: trap ahead).” “Therefore.....tell us what you think.....”

Jesus, “aware of their malice,” first notes that he knows, they are “testing” him, that is, “baiting” him. Then Jesus goes on to issue a brilliant response:

“Show me the coin used for the tax,” he says.

They bring out a coin. The coin they produce is called a Tyrian half shekel. Otherwise known as the Roman denarius. They were minted in the Roman city of Tyre from about 126 BCE to about 56 CE and used as a means to pay the Jewish Temple tax. In fact, even after the closing of the mint in Tyre, Roman authorities allowed the Jewish Temple to mint the coins in Palestine, as long as they continued to bear the image of the Roman Emperor upon them. Although these were coins used for Jewish religious purposes, the coins clearly impressed upon them that they were nevertheless “owned” by Rome, and that the Jewish faith existed only by Rome’s favor.

In a sense, Jews were forced to produce and to use for religious exchange, an idolatrous medium, which also defined them as a member of the Jewish faith community. The Temple tax bought them membership into Temple and into community for the year and would have also been used for buying their sacrificial animals and for submitting their tithes.

If Jesus answers that taxes with Caesar’s image on them should be thwarted, he risks being labeled a dissident, encouraging people to undermine the government, both Jewish and secular.

If Jesus answers that it is lawful to pay the Temple taxes “to the emperor,” he sets himself up as a lover of Rome or at least willing to allow Rome’s worship of Caesar supercede the Jews worship of YHWH. By paying the upkeep and supervision of the Temple with a coin imaged by the head of the Roman “ordained by god” Caesar, he appears to be selling out to an idolatrous invader. Hence, he may lose his followers. Jesus needs to define “whose law” they need to follow. Are the Jewish people subject to Rome’s secular (pseudo-pagan) law? Is he a politician like all the rest willing to sacrifice faith for power and prestige or at least conformity? Will he sell out the people, who feel that Rome’s graven image is an insult and a sin? Which law prevails? Scriptural law? Jewish law? Roman law? Laws of decency and fairness? Jesus is faced with a dilemma. Here’s what he does.

Jesus answers their question with a question: “Whose head is this?” “Whose title?”

They answer: “The Emperor’s.”

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

At this, Jesus has them.

For what belongs to the emperor? “a coin with his head on it.”

What belongs to God?

Our faith, our deference, our hearts, our souls, the Temple, the people, and all things created.

What belongs to God?

You do. And nothing Caesar can do can ever take that away from them. They are not serving God by giving Caesar back the coin that bears his image.

For every one of them is made, stamped, and sealed by a far greater and more pervasive image: the image of God.

Every one of us has been created in God’s image to be a son and daughter of God. We are already signed, sealed, and committed to God by our faith, our allegiance, and our relationship with Jesus.

No secular thing, whether politics, wealth, threat, or demand can ever take that from us. So, let the secular world create its own idols, its own currency, its own politics, its own power plays.

God’s people know in their hearts, that God is so much greater than any of these. And that all things sacred and secular belong ultimately to God.

We live in a world of which currency matters. And as a citizen of the world, we can take part in that currency. But it does not define us.

For as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, as disciples of Jesus, Christians of the Church, we navigate with a currency of love. And that currency bears the image of God in Heaven.

As we enter into one of the most tumultuous times in our country’s history, I encourage you to remember who you are.

You may adhere to a party, a politics, or even an economic preference or system of choice. You may choose to play the game of life in whatever ways you choose.

But as Christians, never forget whose image is sealed into your heart, and whose currency must supercede the rest. Christ Jesus’, who sacrificed his life to save yours. God’s, who created you and sustains you.

May God bless you in your living and bless you in your loving.

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