

## On Paying Taxes

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16 October 2011

Text: Matthew 22: 15-22

*Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him 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."*

When I looked up the lectionary for today, I smiled. The question of how much we should "render" – literally "give back" – to society from the fruits of our own labor is as old as the gospels and as new as the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress.

The context in which Jesus was asked about taxes was very different, of course. The government to whom the taxes in question were being paid was not their own, but an occupying army. The government was the enemy. The money came from the fruits of people's own labor and was sent off to a foreign power who could be expected to give them nothing in return except domination. It was used primarily to fund the Roman military machine and its wars in foreign lands, as well as luxury living for the Roman elite. Widows, orphans, the poor, the unemployed, the hungry, and the sick were all on their own, left to fend for themselves, getting only that for which they could afford to pay. There were beggars in the streets. From a Roman perspective, the important benefit that the people got in return for their tribute to the emperor was *pax Romana* – peace in their own land, protection, security. The Jews were, in essence, paying for a security they didn't want from a government they hated. Some do view our own government in that way, but the difference is that we choose our governors.

So what about paying taxes to a government that we choose? It was quite an experience to live in Scandinavia again for a while this year. After getting to know me a bit, the Danes gently asked me some very good questions.

"Really?," they asked incredulously. "In America there are people who literally don't have food or a place to live? How can that be in such a rich country?"

"Really? You actually have people who are sick and can't get health care? How is that possible? Why do you allow it?"

They simply couldn't comprehend it. Their social consciousness is that different from ours. They pay on average about 50% of their income in taxes; up to 60% or so for the truly wealthy, and they do so willingly. In a Gallup poll done while we were there, the Danish were asked "Should your taxes be lowered?" Sixty-four percent said "No." Only 23% said "Yes." How is *that* possible? They see it as a fair exchange, to ensure that everyone is cared for. Health care is free for everyone, period. They do not worry that if they become sick or unemployed they will lose their home, their health care, and be hungry. They are cared for in old age. There is generous leave for parents to stay home with a new baby for up to a year, with their job guaranteed on return. Children not only get a free university education, but are paid living expenses to do so. Despite high taxes,

businesses thrive with a highly educated workforce. And in World Health Organization surveys, the Danes are the happiest people in the world.

What about government accountability? In Scandinavia there is no sense of giving the government a blank check to spend however they please. Danish politicians might be forgiven a sexual indiscretion, but what would be utterly unforgivable, from which a politician could never recover, is dishonesty or misuse of public funds.

Now, some argue that there is something unique or strange about Scandinavians. “They’ve all been brainwashed. There are only about 30 million people in all of Scandinavia, and historically they are fairly homogeneous. It could never work here,” they claim. Few remember that until 1963 the marginal income tax rate for the wealthiest Americans was 90%.

But let me come back to the gospel. If we had a truly Christian nation, guided by the central values of Jesus’ teachings, what would our priorities be?

First, Jesus sternly and consistently warned against the hoarding of riches. There is no topic that Jesus addressed more often than money. It is dangerous for the soul to accumulate wealth. You cannot serve both God and money. His compassionate advice to the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-25), who was apparently a very good and religious man, was to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. There is no Christian value of “Keep as much as possible for yourself.” Progressive tax policy by which the more you have, the more you pay, is a correction against the concentration of individual wealth.

A second clearly Christian value is preferential compassionate care for the poor. In both Jewish and Christian scripture we are charged to take care of the needy and the strangers in our midst. A public policy priority of the first century church was to see that all were cared for, that no one was in need. *No one* should be hungry. *No one* should be homeless. According to Matthew (25:31-46), at the last judgment those who are welcomed into the presence of God are those who gave food, water, clothing, healthcare, and companionship to those in need – period. Although Denmark is not at all a religious nation, I can imagine Jesus asking us in America the same astonished question: “How could you possibly allow this to happen in the midst of such wealth?”

A third Christian priority has always been caring for the sick. Some of the most memorable stories of Jesus are accounts of healing. Historically, Christian missionaries have brought health care to those without it. We honor Mother Teresa and countless saints like her for caring for those who are ill. How can it be that we have come to regard health care as a privilege for those who can afford it, rather than a fundamental human right for which we are all accountable? There is no Christian value of “Let the poor, the sick, the disadvantaged fend for themselves.” Quite the opposite: in Jewish and Christian scripture we are collectively responsible for and to each other, and accountable to God for how we care for those in need. We dare not leave the sick and wounded lying by the roadside while we pass by.

Is our government the right vehicle, then, to take care of these needs – to see that the people are safe, the sick have health care, the hungry have food, that the poor and those with special needs have a place to live, that children are educated, and that the elderly are cared for? Or should these things be left, as they were through most of history, to the church and to private largesse? Like the question posed to Jesus, the answer is not either/or, but both.

Personally I do not see any more reliable way to guarantee these basic human needs than through the government that we choose for ourselves. The very first line of our constitution says that the United States of America was founded to establish justice and promote the general welfare “in order to form a more perfect Union.” I gladly pay my taxes, though I am not pleased that so much of it is spent on military might – more

than is spent by the entire rest of the world combined. When I add up my federal, state and local taxes, social security, what I have to pay for health care, education, retirement funds, and long-term health care insurance, I am actually paying more than the Danes do. I am not pleased with all that our government does, but it is not an enemy beast to be starved. It is *our* government, for which we are collectively responsible.

Politics is all about making choices. And the Christian faith, the teachings of Jesus are all about the choices that we make. We are faced with a false either/or puzzle like the one posed to Jesus. The government is spending more than it's taking it in. Should we cut spending or increase taxes? The tea party solution is to cut social benefits *and* to cut taxes, with the claim that this will stimulate the economy, but we already have the lowest tax rates in 50 years, and so if this were true we should be in the middle of the biggest economic boom in half a century. We already tried "trickle down" economics (which itself is a horribly arrogant term toward the poor) and it failed.

So what would Jesus say about taxes? What if we asked God about our economic policy? If we believe the gospel, these three would clearly be core values:

It is not good for *anyone* to allow large imbalances in the concentration of wealth.

We should give preferential priority to caring for the poor. *No one* should be without the basic needs for food, water, clothing and shelter.

*No one* who is sick should be left alone and without health care.

May it be so.