

XXIII Trinity 2024
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
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St. Matthew 22.15-22

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If we're looking for a definitive answer as to whether or not we should pay our taxes...Jesus gives us the answer in today's Gospel.

Jesus has just finished telling a story about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It will be like a Great Wedding Feast a king made for his son. Many get invited to the Wedding Feast, but few are chosen. Evidently, some men who heard Jesus tell the story thought he was talking about them.

The Pharisees in this morning's Gospel were looking to trap Jesus with trick questions they hoped to use against him. They conspired with some Herodians and put their plan into action by showering Jesus with disingenuous praise. They call him "Teacher"; they say he always tells the truth about God's will. They ask him a question about paying taxes.

We're familiar with the Pharisees and Sadducees, the two major religious parties within Judaism. But who are the Herodians, and why did the Pharisees need their help to trap Jesus? The Herodians were supporters of King Herod Antipas, the puppet King who ruled Israel for the Roman government. The Herodians were a political party who had little interest in religion. They liked the cozy relationship they had with the Romans. Both the Pharisees and the Herodians saw Jesus as a threat to their authority and power. They wanted him out of the way.

The question about paying taxes to the Roman government was intended to get Jesus to answer "yes" or "no". Either answer would have accomplished what the Pharisees and Herodians wanted; something they could use against him to get him arrested. If Jesus answered "yes", the Pharisees could accuse him of blasphemy for supporting a pagan government that declared the Emperor to be a god. If he answered "no", the Herodians could accuse him of treason against the pagan government they supported.

Jesus, of course, knew what their plan was; so he does what he often does; he answered the question with a question. He first calls them hypocrites and then asks them to show him the coin used to pay taxes. He asks them to tell him whose face and name are on the coin. They answered the face and name is the Emperor's. "OK then", says Jesus. "Pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God

what belongs to God.” The Pharisees and Herodians could do nothing but walk away confused and beaten in their own game.

There is a wonderful story about the motto “In God We Trust” that appears on United States coins and currency that is worth repeating. The motto first appeared on the 1864 two-cent piece. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt had the motto removed from newly minted \$20 gold pieces. He considered the motto sacrilegious and feared it would be used for activities he called “ungodly”, such as gambling and facilitating crime. The public outcry to Mr. Roosevelt’s order was largely negative. Also, Congress had to gently remind the President only it had the authority to change coin designs. The motto reappeared on \$20 gold pieces in 1908.

We honor the men and women who have helped make our country what it is by having their images and names on our coins and currency. We celebrate the good and positive things these men and women did. Our coins and currency only become sacrilegious when we make them more important than God.

The Gospel isn’t so much about paying taxes as it is about putting God first in our lives and giving to God what is due to him and him alone. It’s about loving God with our whole heart, and mind, and soul. But if we are looking for a definitive answer about paying taxes, Jesus has already given us the answer. So has our friend Saint Paul.

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul tells us we must obey state authorities, because no authority exists without God’s permission. City, State and Federal governments provide order to our lives. We believe in a God who created order out of chaos. Paying our taxes is one way we show we really do believe what’s engraved on our coins and currency, “In God We Trust”.

Unlike the Pharisees and Herodians in today’s Gospel, we don’t have to leave here confused and shaking our heads. We understand what Jesus is saying. Anything that distracts us from doing what is right and keeps us from loving God and loving others as we should, can become an idol to us. What Jesus wants from us is for us to trust God and always put him first. The rest will take care of itself.

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