

GOD AND TAXES

Scriptures: Mark 12:13-17; Acts 5:27-32

In the time of Henry VIII, the Lord Chancellor of England was a brilliant, principled, and religiously devout lawyer named Sir Thomas More. His story was portrayed in a play by Robert Bolt called *A Man for All Seasons*. Thomas More found himself at the center of a struggle over the supremacy of the king versus the supremacy of the church. Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn, one of the queen's beautiful young attendants. But the Pope would not allow it, so Henry persuaded the Parliament to make the king the supreme head of the church in England. Then Henry decreed his own divorce from Catherine and married Anne Boleyn. Henry wanted support for this from his chancellor, Sir Thomas More. In the play he goes to More and says, "It is my bounden duty to put away the Queen, and all the Popes back to St. Peter shall not come between me and my duty! How is it that you cannot see? Everyone else does." Thomas More replies, "Then why does your Grace need my poor support?" Henry says, "Because you are honest. What's more to the purpose, you're known to be honest."

I am struck by the similarity in how the Jewish leaders regarded Jesus. In our second scripture lesson they come to Jesus and say, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth." In other words, you are honest, and what's more to the purpose, you're known to be honest.

The issue was paying taxes to Caesar. The two groups who come to Jesus in this story are probably opposing factions on this issue. In all likelihood, the Pharisees objected to paying taxes to Caesar, while the Herodians supported it. Sort of like the difference between red states and blue states. Only for the Pharisees and Herodians, this was a religious issue. Both groups felt that their side was God's side, and they wanted to see which side Jesus was on.

I suspect that Jesus' response satisfied neither of them. He says to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Isn't it ironic that this would be our scripture reading two weeks before April 15? If you were hoping that following Jesus would excuse you from paying taxes, sorry. Claiming Jesus as your Lord does not exempt you from being faithful, law-abiding citizens of your country and your community. The apostle Paul makes that point in Romans, chapter 13. He says, "Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."

Precisely because Jesus is our Lord, we should be the best citizens of our community. If anyone is willing to share some of their income to support the good of our community, it should be us. If anyone observes the speed limit in order to keep people safe in our neighborhoods, it should be us. If anyone votes, it ought to be us. If anyone cares about what happens on the city council or in the state legislature or in the U. S. Congress, it should be us. We have a mission to the people of this world, and that includes caring about how our politics might affect them.

But that does not mean we confuse God with politics. Jesus says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Among other things, this means that God and the emperor are not the same. We should not identify God with any political party, even less with any individual politician, because every politician is a sinner. If you have not figured that out, you have not been watching the news. Every politician is a sinner. Every pastor is a sinner, too, but I’ll save that for another sermon. That is why I shudder whenever a particular candidate is labeled as “God’s candidate” or a particular party is labeled “God’s party.” God and the government are not the same.

This becomes painfully obvious in our first scripture lesson. Peter and the apostles are arrested for preaching about Jesus. They have been ordered by the governing authorities not to do this. But Peter replies, “We must obey God rather than human authority.”

In the play *A Man for All Seasons* Thomas More is confronted by his son-in-law who says, “The Church is already a wing of the palace, is it not? The King is already its ‘Supreme Head’! Is he not?” “No,” Thomas More replies. His son-in-law says, “You are denying the Act of Supremacy!” “No, I’m not,” More says. “The Act states that the King of England is Supreme Head of the Church in England, ‘so far as the law of God allows.’” Thomas More insists that the King’s authority is subject to God’s higher authority, an attitude that eventually cost him his head. The irony is that Thomas More was one of the King’s most loyal subjects. He even reported to the King a plot against him by the ambassador from Spain. Thomas More was a model citizen of his country. But he reserved his ultimate allegiance for God.

You have probably read the story of Abdul Rahman. He was arrested in Afghanistan for converting from Islam to Christianity. He was caught reading a Bible. It reminds me of the old question: If Christianity were illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you? There was plenty of evidence to convict Abdul Rahman, and he could have been sentenced to death. But the Afghan government did not want to provoke international outrage, so they found him mentally ill and released him. Christians aren’t evil; they’re just nuts. Well, maybe so. But what impressed me is that apparently Abdul Rahman never even considered saving himself by denying his faith. Nor is he ever quoted as attacking his native country or its government. He was quite willing to give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, but like Peter he knew that his ultimate allegiance belonged to God.

The Bible tells us to be subject to our governing authorities and to pray for them. The Bible tells us on several occasions to pay our taxes, and, I might add, to do it honestly and fairly without cheating. But there are times when Christians must obey God rather than human authority. In the first century when ordered to worship the emperor, Christians said no, and they were fed to the lions. In Germany in the 1930s, Christians were pressured to join a Nazi-sponsored state church, and some of them said no, and they were arrested or ostracized. In the 1960s Christians in some southern states were told not to sit at certain lunch counters, not to march for voting rights, and not to insist on their children being able to attend certain schools. But they recognized this as a violation of the dignity of God’s children, so they sat, they marched, and they walked their children to doors of those segregated schools. They knew they had to obey God rather than human authority.

For the last four weeks the entire country has been watching basketball, so let me close with a basketball comparison. Some of you have heard me share this before. Imagine a basketball player who is put in the game by the coach to score as many points as possible for both teams! Would a player like that be a good person to have on your team? In many ways, yes. Each time you brought the ball down the court you could count on that player to work as hard as possible to score points for your team. No one would practice harder; no one would hustle, pass, shoot, or attack the glass better than that player. That player would do everything possible to help your team score. The problem would come when you headed back down to the other end of the court and discovered that your player's loyalty was not exclusive. Suddenly you discover that the player's mission is bigger than the mission of your team. This player is on a mission to help both teams. Many times that fits in perfectly with the self-interest of your own team. But sometimes it doesn't.

That, I believe, is the situation of Christians in relation to their government. In many ways Christians are (or should be) the best citizens of their country and community. If anyone should be trying to make our country and our community better for all people, it should be us. But we also have a bigger mission. We serve a God who cares about the people of all countries and all communities. We like Jesus have to work both ends of the court, both sides of the street, because of such is the Kingdom of God.

- Ken Onstot