

# Show Me the Money!

Sermon October 19, 2008

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

When I turn on my TV it bothers me when I get a commercial for something like Associated Tax Relief, with actors happy and smug because, thanks to Associated Tax Relief, they have been able to get out of tens of thousands of dollars in tax obligations.

I'm sure this must be a legitimate form of advertising, but somehow I find it disturbing. I don't like paying taxes, and I look for all the honest deductions I can find, but I figure that paying taxes is part of having income, so as you do, I go through the process.

In the Gospel we read just now, Jesus too was saying that if you're a citizen you pay your taxes. But don't begin to think that that is the end of the story.

We come here this morning as people who pay our taxes as citizens. We come here this morning as good Christians, supporting the church and showing up on Sundays more times than not. We're happy that St. James provides a good Sunday School for our children or our grandchildren, and at pledge time we are probably going to make an annual pledge. So how does it feel when you hear the familiar Gospel story that, when you think about it, causes you to think more seriously about these things?

It might be good to pay attention, because this story may have something unexpected to say about your life, right now, in the midst of a political campaign conducted at one of the most volatile financial times in our nation's history. Or, to update this after the last presidential debate, what does this say, not just to us in the relatively secure Washington area, but also to Joe the Plumber in Ohio?

Both presidential candidates, McCain and Obama, have occasionally complained about reporters' questions as displaying "Gotcha journalism." What we read this morning is a classic presentation of a "Gotcha" strategy, Talk about politics: here is politics at its grossest and most clever. The Pharisees were a movement usually in opposition to the occupying power and generally respected by the people, but a group whose overscrupulosity about the law seemed to trump God's love and mercy. The Herodians supported the puppet Roman ruler Herod, and so were generally despised. But here they are, banding together to catch Jesus in a trap, motivated by their common desire to get enough evidence to simply get rid of him.

They thought they could do it by what they contrived as a clever "gotcha" question, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Their trick question got a trick answer from Jesus.

He invited them to produce the coin that displayed the face of the emperor, which was objectionable to most Jews. Then he gave an answer that might seem responsive, but actually threw the issue back in their collective faces. Here's how he managed it. He gave what seemed like a simple answer, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's", and so refused to give the inflammatory answer they expected by denouncing the Roman authorities. He refused to take the bait, but *then* he finishes his answer by saying "and give to God the things that are God's." This text offers little or no guidance if you're in trouble about your taxes, but it does raise the provocative and still relevant question: What belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar?

As you think about this exchange, it is not just the clever bargaining gambit, "Show me the Money," that should get your attention. It goes to something more important than that. To live as well as we do in this great society of the 21st century is expensive, and part of the way we pay the tab for that is our taxes. But absolute allegiance to an ultimate God, rendering our entire selves to Him without preconditions or limits, without hedging our bets, demands a higher order of magnitude.

If we mean what we say, that there is one God, one divine reality in heaven and earth, then really what is at play with the trick question about the coin, and with the way we confront the world, divided as it is, is this: There is a deeper allegiance demanded of every human being on this global earth, our island home. Why we give to the diocesan Hunger Fund, as you will be asked to do later this morning, is because the underserved hungry that we may not see, are our neighbors in this part of God's planet. Or to focus it more sharply, there is a common humanity that is so much more than red states or blue states, than evangelical or mainline, than Catholic or protestant, than liberal or conservative, than even political or spiritual. That is the simple truth underneath those old gospel lyrics; "He's got the whole world in his hands."

Jesus didn't wiggle out of that "gotcha" question simply to save his skin at a particularly risky time in his final journey to Jerusalem. He actually was referring back to the basic nature of our lives when he said that that each of us needs to render to God, "the things that are God's."

What does that mean? We shouldn't just give an ordinary answer in the extraordinary, uncertain, rapidly changing times we're living in. I think that now is the time for us to think more seriously about what matters to you the most. In a way, we don't have a choice. The consumption society we have created just doesn't work any more the way it did for us, for so long. The September statistics on declining retail sales are out, if you want recent evidence. It used to be that people would try to "keep up with the Joneses"--until the Jones got re-financed. But now the use of credit at every level is open for surveillance and risk.

It is just the nature of the human condition that we always want MORE, but now we're beginning to realize that "MORE" in material goods may not be as available in the ways we've come to expect over the last fifty years. When we hear Jesus in the Gospel saying, "Show me the Money!" What he is saying to us now in the times we're living in,

that the way we use our money is clearly your honest answer to the question, *what do you really value in life?* And that answer may need to come in a different way.

In theory, that should always be the question you ask when you decide at pledge time what percentage of your income you offer in return for the good life God has given you. But now in these uncertain times it is more important than ever that you take that question more seriously. In the most difficult of times we are called to give the best answer, with our money, to the question: *what do you really value in life?*

I think you can see how this Gospel story takes us in several directions. Right now we're also on the eve of a very important presidential election, and political vitriol is elevated by the financial crisis. So it's important to be clear on what's really at stake.

If Jesus is the Lord of all creation, Lord of our personal and family lives, Lord of society and all of its social, political, economic, as well as religious institutions, then I think it's important to be reminded that the separation of church and state does not separate Christians from the public arena. Faith, of course, is personal, but it is not private.

Christianity cannot be spiritually redemptive without being socially responsible. So the Church's role as a community of faith is to call attention to the ethical dimensions of all issues; to keep alive the values of the Gospel as a norm for social, economic and political life, and to point out the demands of the Christian faith for a just transformation of society. Yes, we are called to be agents for change, but it is important that we always remember that, as someone before me has written, "*we are called to be value-driven but not ideological, political but not partisan, civil but not soft—and involved but not used.*"

That's a big order, isn't it? Matthew's Gospel this morning is of course not an explicit instruction on how people like you and me, who live in a complex society of competing loyalties, determine what to render unto Caesar and what to "render" unto God. That we must find in our own situations, informed by thinking seriously about the choices we're making about our money and our vote, and inspired by the Holy Spirit to make decisions that reflect our ultimate loyalties.

I found some perspective on that when I read the obituary of Paul Newman, who died a few weeks ago. He was lauded not just as a great actor but also as a great philanthropist. So in reflecting on what he wanted to be remembered for, he once said, "We are such spendthrifts with our lives...I'm not running for sainthood, but I just happen to think that in life we need to be a little like the farmer, who puts back into the soil what he takes out."

"Put back into God's soil what we take out", Paul Newman said. Everything we have is a gift from God, and ultimately belongs to God. In whatever we do with our vote and our money, what will we give back to God?

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