

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“TO CAESAR OR TO GOD?”**

Matthew 22:15-21

October 19, 2008

8:45 & 11:00 AM Services

Our moral obligations are seldom a simple choice between something good and something evil, or even between something good and something better. We need wisdom in setting our priorities and sorting out our responsibilities.

Making practical choices can be difficult. We cannot do everything, so we must decide what we will do. We cannot give to every cause, so we must decide which ones matter most. Our moral decisions are not always black or white, but require us to decide what portion of our attention and resources will go to each worthy cause.

Jesus had a profound sense of proportion. He knew that we live in a world that makes conflicting claims on our loyalties. He entrusts us with the responsibility of determining how to manage the many claims that the world makes on our lives.

Here we are this morning in a building dedicated to the worship of God. Is it appropriate to ask, “What do we owe to God?” Is it appropriate to ask what other obligations we have? Jesus did not speak only of our obligations to God, but frequently emphasized our moral and spiritual obligations to our neighbor. We are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. But what is our obligation to the state, to the government under which we live? What is the Christian’s obligation to a tyrannical, godless government? Jesus was asked this question. Let us seek today to understand his answer.

Here’s the situation. Palestine was made up primarily of Jews. There was also a large population of Samaritans who were half-Jewish and half-Gentile. At the time of Jesus, however, Palestine was under occupation. Rome ruled, but Rome allowed certain Jewish leaders a degree of authority as long as they did Rome’s bidding. The Jewish authorities frequently tried to outwit Jesus, either by baiting him on some delicate issue or by embarrassing and discrediting him before the people. One of their efforts involved the question of whether taxes should be paid to Caesar. It was a trap, designed to force Jesus into a dilemma from which he could not escape.

The Pharisees opposed the payment of a tax to Caesar. The Herodians were Jews loyal to the heirs of Herod the Great and, because Rome granted them a measure of power, they supported paying the tax to Caesar. The tax in question was what would be called a poll tax today, a tax levied equally on all males over fourteen years of age and all females over twelve. The tax was paid with a special silver denarius, which bore the image and the name of the reigning Caesar. The tax was especially resented by patriotic Jews, because it forced them to acknowledge their subordination to a foreign power and Caesar’s image violated their law against idolatry. The situation was complicated and volatile. Some paid the tax and worked to stay on Rome’s good side, while others opposed the tax and plotted a rebellion against Rome.

Now this sets the stage for the question put to Jesus! “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” The Pharisees believed they had Jesus in a “no-win” situation. If he answered, “Yes,” he would alienate all Jewish patriots. If he answered, “No,” the Herodians could charge him with sedition or treason. The issue for us is: what is the nature of our responsibility to the government under which we live? If our government were a theocracy, the issue might be avoided. But the governments of today tend to look

and act much more like Caesar than God.

The Pharisees underestimated Jesus; first, by thinking he would be susceptible to flattery. They addressed him as “Teacher”, a title of honor. They praised him for his impartiality, meaning he did not judge people by outward appearances. Jesus, of course, was aware of their evil intent, and called them hypocrites. But he did not evade the question. In fact, he gave them a straightforward and surprising answer. What is the alternative to “straddling the fence” if not falling off on one side or the other? Jesus suggested a better alternative: take down the fence! He called for one of the special coins that were used to pay the tax. The Pharisees gave him one. Now, the very fact that they had the coin seems to suggest that they already were acknowledging Caesar. In accepting Caesar’s coin they were assuming certain obligations. “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” Jesus asked. They answered, “Caesar’s.” Jesus charged them to give (literally, to “give back”) to Caesar what was Caesar’s and to give to God what was God’s.

Jesus refused, on the one hand, to support what proved to be Israel’s ill-advised and devastating war with Rome. On the other hand, he refused to say that Rome had a right to rule over Israel. The immediate issue was effectively resolved by Jesus.

What is the lesson here for us? What can draw from Jesus’ words? Well first of all, the issue is not either-or - - Caesar or God, government or God. Jesus took down that fence represented by the “or.” He acknowledged the validity of human government and recognized the fact of Rome’s rule in Palestine. This does not mean that Jesus approved of the totalitarian aspects of the Roman empire, or that he endorsed any particular type of government. Nor are we to conclude that Jesus would never oppose an evil government or engage in civil disobedience. But Jesus clearly believed that where we live under a system of government that provides public services, economic stability, and the protections of the law, we have obligations to that system - - even as we work to improve or change it.

The Pharisees represent an unacceptable option. We cannot, on the basis of our belief in God, be oblivious to our civil obligations and unsupportive of a government whose protections and benefits we accept. As a general rule, the issue is not God or Caesar. And of course, there are exceptions! A government may become so repressive that we are forced to choose between God and an evil regime, between our conscience and civil authority. Such choices have produced thousands of Christian martyrs.

The story of the martyrdom of Sir Thomas More is a case in point. He is now popularly known as “A Man for All Seasons” because of the play and the film on his life. Lord Chancellor of England, More was beheaded in 1535, but not because he hated or betrayed the king. He was a patriotic Englishman, who loved the king and had served him as Lord Chancellor of England. But finally Henry VIII demanded that More choose between his king and his God. As he mounted the scaffold More joked with the Tower official, “See me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself.” I pray that we are never asked to renounce God for the sake of Caesar. But if we are, may we not hesitate for even a moment.

Each of us is different. Some of us are inclined to try to meet every need we encounter. Others of us are so focused on our own agendas that we may not notice some of the needs around us. Somewhere between a “Superman complex” and irresponsible neglect is the maturity of the perfectly balanced personality! None of us will ever achieve this, but we have in Jesus Christ an excellent example of how to prioritize needs and find a responsible balance between the many claims upon our lives.

I know you can’t beat God giving, no matter how you try. I would love to be your pastor I would live for this to be your church.