

The Sacred and the Secular

Have you ever read a passage of the Bible and understood the words but did not really get the significance of the passage? That could be the case today when you read and heard read the passage entitled 'Religious leaders question Jesus about paying taxes'.

Do you know the context for this passage....where it takes place? when did this happen in the life of Jesus? who was present? what was the atmosphere like? If we are going to really appreciate this passage, we would do well to know these things.

The good word for the day is taxes! Don't you feel good already? Income tax, PST, GST, HST, and on and on it goes. In Canada, the tax system varies to some degree province to province. Can you remember the last time you bought something in a place where there is not tax and you stood there waiting for the final tally once the tax was added..... and it never happened?! No tax is good tax!

In Jesus' time, there was a ground tax, income tax, and poll tax.

Ground tax is where a man must pay the Roman government $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of the grain and $1/5^{\text{th}}$ of the oil and wine he produced. This tax was paid in kind and money.

Income tax is where 1% of a man's income had to be paid to the Roman authorities.

Poll tax had to be paid by every male from the age of 14 to 65 and every female from 12- 65.

In today's passage, some Pharisees and some Herodians (King Herod's men) have ganged up on Jesus and have asked him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not.

Seems like a simple enough question, unless you understand the context and understand how loaded the question was and how devastating the consequences of His response could be. It was a trick question and Jesus knew it!

Once again...what is the context in which this passage falls?

Did you know that this passage takes place not long before Jesus' crucifixion? Jesus has just ridden into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. People are lining the streets and singing Hosanna! His popularity was at an all time high!

The religious leaders had long challenged his authority, and were now doing so even more aggressively. In the passages just prior to this one, with one illustration after another, Jesus turns the tables on them and shames them, insults them. In those previous passages, Jesus calls them out as the reprobates they are.

The Pharisees and King Herod's men were not on good terms with each other to say the least. The church and the state! They were now a curious united force confronting Jesus.

They needed to get him into a corner and they were getting him there fast! In their most arrogant tone they asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Jesus was in a spot! If he said “No”, it was not lawful to pay taxes, the Pharisees and the Herodians would promptly arrest him and he would be dealt with swiftly and harshly. This attack had come upon him in a public setting. Many of his followers were watching this confrontation. If Jesus said it was lawful to pay the tax, he would stand discredited in the eyes of so many of his followers. They all knew the tax system and tax collectors were corrupt. They also knew from experience, how unfair and violent they could be in their treatment of the public. Followers of Jesus believed that God was their King and the only king, not Caesar. To pay tax to an earthly king was to admit the validity of this kingship and thereby to insult God.

What was Jesus to do? Say No – It is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar and get arrested and dealt with by Herod’s men. Or say Yes - and betray his loyal followers.

He first let his attackers know that he knew they were putting him to the test. Then he asked to see a coin. "Whose head is this, and whose title?" he asked. "The emperor's", they replied. "Caesar".

We need to know that we might not be aware, upon a casual reading of the text, that in ancient days coinage was the sign of kingship. As soon as a king came to the throne, he struck his own coinage with his image on it. That coin became the currency of the day.

Jesus looked at them and said, "Then give unto Caesar, what belongs to Caesar".....You could almost hear Jesus' followers gasp. The Pharisees and the Herodians began to gloat! They had won! And then he added, "And give to God what belongs to him."

Every Christian has a double citizenship. ..a citizenship of the country in which one lives, and a citizenship of the Kingdom of God.

To the country, we owe money to pay for our safety, infrastructure, - our roads, bridges - our public services. Education, medicine, provisions for unemployment and old age. Money is required so that

the government can provide these things. As people of honour, Christians must be responsible citizens. Failure to be a good citizen, is also failure to be a good Christian. It is part of how we take care of each other.

But the Christian is also a citizen of the Kingdom of God. When it comes to things of principle, morals, ethics, justice, the Christian is called to stand on the side of right, even if that goes up against the religious laws of the day.

What Jesus was saying to the Pharisees and the Herodians, and what he was saying to his followers who were already feeling browbeaten by the government authorities, and what he says to us now, is that at one and the same time, we are called to be a good citizen of our country and a good citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Give therefore to the emperor, the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

As we move along our Spiritual Pathway, as we grow in our Spiritual Journey, the challenge for each of us is to sort out ...what is it that the state requires of us and how can we respond well? What does God require of us, and how can we respond well? It is for us to work out.

God bless you on your journey.

Amen