

## **“A Taxing Situation”**

Mark 12:13-17, 41-44

*Sermons Series: Walk the Talk Week 5. Walk Freely*

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Well, the government is open for business again. While it may have caused headaches for our economy, the government shutdown was good for one business sector: the funny business. Late night comedians were very busy.

Jimmy Fallon commented,

"After Congress failed to reach an agreement on a new spending bill, the federal government officially shut down. So roads won't get fixed, public employees won't be able to help you, and getting a federal loan for a house will be very difficult – but there will also be a lot of differences."

Jay Leno observed,

"I'm glad the government has shut down. Think about it, for the first time in years it's safe to talk on the phone and send emails without anybody listening in."

David Letterman says,

"Even if the government shuts down, Americans don't care. The last time Americans cared about anything was when they shut down the Twinkie factory."

Arsenio Hall says,

"Now, I'm not sure how politics works, but I'm pretty sure if the government shuts down it means that we don't have to pay taxes. I'm just kidding, Wesley Snipes ... that's a joke ... pay your taxes."

Who loves to pay their taxes? Why not? No one likes it when something is taken from them...especially money. We earned it. We worked hard for it. It's ours. We need it. We have plans for it. Money gives us security, identity and power. Money matters. Money talks. Money opens doors. Money makes the world go around. At least that's what they say. And we don't trust the nameless government officials to spend it wisely. The IRS, however, wants you to be a cheerful giver. An IRS agent told a taxpayer, "It is your duty as a citizen to pay taxes, and we expect you to pay them with a smile." The taxpayer smiled broadly and replied, "Oh what a relief! I thought you expected me to pay them with cash!"

Even two thousand years ago the debate over paying taxes was a hot topic. It could get you into trouble.

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” (Mark 12:13-15a)

Always be cautious when someone leads with flattery. These two groups praise Jesus up and down. But He is wise to them. What tips Him off? It seems suspicious that these two former enemies are suddenly buddy-buddy. Pharisees strictly obeyed the Law of Moses. They grudgingly submit to the Roman governor but they have every reason to hate the tax man. All the money they pay goes not to schools or community improvements but to pay the army which has its boot firmly planted on their neck. They were forced to pay for their oppression.

The Herodians were Jews at the opposite end of the spectrum. King Herod was put on the throne by the Romans. His followers ignored the Jewish Law and lived like Gentiles. They enjoyed the luxuries and delicacies of Roman life. Taxes made such a lifestyle possible. The Herodians *were* the government and without taxes there would be a government shutdown.

So why did two opposing parties team up to trap Jesus? There is a saying in the Middle East: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” The Pharisees wanted to get rid of Jesus because, they thought, He led the people away from strict obedience to the Law. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. Worst of all, it was whispered by everyone that He was the Messiah and that God’s Kingdom was about to arrive. The Pharisees feared the Jewish nation might follow Jesus’ brand of Judaism instead of theirs.

The Herodians had different worries. They still remembered that in A.D. 6 another man from Galilee named Judas led a violent revolt against the Romans because of this very tax. The tax was called the *census* and subject nations, not Roman citizens, were forced to pay it. The uprising Judas led was violently crushed but it gave birth to the Zealots. They were an underground Jewish militia which said God is King of Israel and no taxes or allegiance should be paid to Rome. If this new Galilean had come with His many followers to lead a revolt in Jerusalem, the Herodians would lose their powerful and luxurious lifestyle and perhaps even their city and Temple. This was not an empty fear. Less than forty years later, the Zealots led a revolt which ended with the complete destruction of the Temple. So both groups have a reason to stop Jesus. The Pharisees accuse Him of heresy. The Herodians charge Him with treason. It’s a brilliant trap. No matter what He says about the census, He’s stuck.

Yet Jesus is wise to their ways.

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him. (Mark 12:15b-17)

How does Jesus’ avoid their trap? In debates on hot political topics we expect commentators to go for one side or the other, to the right or the left. Jesus goes up. He raises the whole discussion to a higher plane. Perhaps you viewed this as a debate about taxes. Maybe you thought the question was: who does my money belong to – me or the government? For Jesus it’s not about that. The Pharisees and the Herodians thought it was a political issue: who does our nation belong to? Roman Law or Jewish Law? Caesar or a Jewish Messiah? For Jesus it’s not about that. Instead, He goes right to the heart of the matter: who do you belong to?

The coin, he points out, is made in the image of Caesar. It belongs to him. Remember when you were a kid and someone said, “That’s mine,” and you replied, “Does it have your name on it?” Well the denarius had Caesar’s name on it...and his picture. It was his. ‘Give back to Caesar what belongs to him,’ Jesus says. He seems indifferent about this whole debate over taxes and kings and who’s in charge. What comes next is what really matters: “Give to God what is God’s.” The coin is made in Caesar’s image. What is made in God’s image? You and me. I belong to God. You belong to God. That is what Jesus has been saying all along: all your life belongs to God.

When the Jews paid the tax it made them feel like slaves to the Romans. Jesus told them you are not a slave to the Romans. You belong to God. You probably hate taxes for the same reason. But you are not a slave to the government. You belong to God. You may groan when you write out your mortgage check, but you are not a slave to the bank. You belong to God. You may moan about having to go to work, but you are not a slave to your job. You belong to God.

- You are not a prisoner of your past. You belong to God.
- You are not a captive to a current crisis. You belong to God.
- You do not need to be frozen by fear. You belong to God.
- You do not need to be shackled by some substance. You belong to God.
- You do not need to dread the days to come. You belong to God.
- You do not need to be a people pleaser. You belong to God.

You do not need to crawl before anyone. Stand up on your feet and remember you are made in the very image of Almighty God.

And there’s something more. You belong to God twice over. This little debate with the Pharisees and Herodians happened during Holy Week. The Pharisees wanted to accuse Jesus of heresy. At the trial before the Jewish leaders on Thursday night they did. The Herodians tried to charge Him with treason. At the trial before Pilate on Friday morning they did. By Friday afternoon, He was dead. They stopped Him. Or so they thought. You see, Jesus was not a slave to the Sanhedrin or to Caesar. He did not belong to them. He belonged to His Father in Heaven. This was His plan all along. And when He died on the Cross that dark Friday afternoon, He paid the ransom price to set you free.

Not with a denarius. But with something far more precious: His life. So He made you. And when you were enslaved by sin, He bought you back with everything He had. You twice belong to God. That is true whether you believe it or not. You were made in God's image whether you believe in God or not. You were ransomed from sin and death by the life of Jesus whether you believe in Him or not.

The only question then is: Do you believe it? Do you believe you belong to God? Do you really believe it? As we've been learning all along in this message series: it's not enough to talk it. You show you believe it by how you walk it. Talk is cheap. Walk costs a lot more. We love to say, "I belong to God. He paid the price for my life" until He asks you to give Him your life, until He asks you to spend it for Him, to spend it on what matters to Him. Then suddenly we feel like He's an IRS agent. 'No, that's my time. That's my money. I earned it. I worked hard for it. I need it. I have plans for it. That money gives me status, security, serenity. I can sleep secure at night knowing my money is in the stock market or my 401K or the equity in my house. I don't need to spend a minute talking about why these can be risky. Even the fine print on the prospectus says there are no guarantees. God is the only one who promises eternal, unconditional security. You can trust Him.

Well, you say, I do give to God. So did the people in Jesus' day. Jesus watched them give.

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. (Mark 12:41)

Back then, God's people gave for many of the same reasons we give today. Some give because they are paying their dues. The Church is like a club, they think, and we've got to keep it running. Some give because they think it's their duty. 'God needs our help. It's our duty to pay our fair share.' Some give because they think they are paying a debt. 'I have to pay God back.' All these are the wrong reasons to give. Remember what Jesus said last week:

"...what can anyone give in exchange for their life?" (Mark 8:37)

You can't possibly pay God back. And the Good News is: you don't have to. So why give to God? Delight! Give because you love God. Give out of gratitude to God. Give because you know God will do great things with your gift. Your delight will bring "de Light" to others who are lost and lonely, suffering and struggling. Give to God because you belong to Him and all you have belongs to Him. He's the owner. So spend what you have in a way that pleases Him. He's pleased when you give to His work because:

- Villages in Africa, the DR and Haiti receive clean water
- Residents in the Bahamas and Appalachia have their homes restored
- Homeless people in Bucks County find shelter
- Prisoners in Philadelphia hear the Good News

- People in recovery find a reason to live
- Seniors at Manor Care sing hymns and get hugs
- Children in Lower Bucks sing God's praises and learn God's Word
- Children in Trenton get an education and hear the Gospel
- Hungry people in our community have a delicious warm meal
- Marriages are restored and people are saved.

Your giving to Woodside gives delight to God.

How do you do that? Jesus tells us. He watched others give a lot to the Temple.

But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on." (Mark 12:42-44)

The widow didn't give a lot. She gave her all. The others gave what they could afford. She gave her all. The others gave what they had leftover. She gave her all. The others gave what they could spare. She gave her all. She gave the way Jesus gave. On the Cross He gave His all. She did it not because it was her dues, her duty or her debt. She gave because it was her delight to do so. That takes a lot of trust in God. But when you realize He made you and paid His all for you, it's a little easier to do.

I'll be honest with you: I'm not ready to give to God all I have to live on. Maybe someday. Yet God is kind and patient. He doesn't make me start there. He says start by giving back to me a tenth of what I've given you. Start at the tithe and work your way up. So with the help of God, that's what Lisa and I are trying to do. And I can tell you without a doubt that God has always provided what we need. That's what a member of Woodside discovered when she took the tithing challenge. She gave me permission to share this story:

I decided to tithe after your request to do so, though it's been on my mind for some time. I know it's something God asks of us but since (my husband) is not really on board I was fearful of asking him to tithe from our personal account. I made a decision to tithe from my business account, since all (my work) is only because of God, it was about time. I told my intentions to a close friend (not of the church) ... so I would be held accountable. I didn't cheat. I added ALL my (income from all sources) and made my first check out to Woodside. Within days of my first tithe, I had my pay DOUBLE. I've heard stories like this, and I'm curious now to see what else God will do. I have been reluctant to trust Him in my finances and have been holding on to small jobs that are more of a nuisance because of fear. Here's to jumpin' IN!!

Let's be clear: tithing is not a double your money investment. As my friend says, tithing is an act of trust in God – it's trusting God with my finances and my life. It's giving back

to God a tenth of what He's given me, a tenth of what belongs to Him, and trusting that He will take care of me.

Where do you place your trust? We've seen the stock market crash, the housing bubble burst and the mighty US government shutdown. In whom do you trust? Why even your money says, "In God We Trust."

