



## **Taxing Questions**

### **1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22**

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Life together requires organizational agreements such as how do we fund the life necessities that benefit the whole population. From infrastructure like roads and utilities to people like first responders and postal workers, our taxes pay for many services we utilize frequently without ever having to think about it. Thanks to taxes, I've never had to build a bridge to cross a river or put out a fire at my neighbor's house or pay for disaster relief after a hurricane. In that way, I'm thankful for taxes. We might complain about the amount of taxes paid or the complexity of the taxing system, yet we must acknowledge the benefit of having an organized life and a way to finance it. Taxes affect everyone because most pay them and all benefit from them. To live in a society where we share one another's burdens, taxes are necessary.

How much we pay in taxes and to whom we should pay our taxes isn't a new question. Ben Franklin once said that "nothing is certain but death and taxes." In today's Gospel passage, Jesus also took on the question of taxes. The Pharisees didn't necessarily hate taxes in themselves; no one in this passage is claiming that taxation is theft. What they didn't like was the idea of sending taxes to Rome. While the Pharisees and Herodians disagreed on who had the authority to demand taxes, they agreed on one thing: Jesus was dangerous to their power. In asking whether to pay the imperial tax, they tried to frame Jesus either as a rebel to the empire or a traitor to the Jewish people.

Rather than take sides, Jesus takes this as a teaching opportunity about generosity and identity. The coins in circulation, with Caesar's image, carried value because the Empire said so. The same is true for money today. When Jesus says, "give therefore to Caesar the things that are

Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (v. 21), he's subtly reminding his listeners that people, who carry God's image, are about manifesting God in all they do and say. All is from God and all needs to honor God. The people were forced to pay taxes to Rome through the violence of a military occupation but they still had the choice and responsibility of behaving as children of God. A portion of the taxes we are paying might be going to purposes we do not like or approve and making that known through civil objection is important and appropriate. At the same time, we protest we do it by keeping in mind who we are and whose we are.

The Lutheran tradition adds a layer of reflection to this when it recognizes that God doesn't exclusively work through the church, but also through the government. This theology of Two Realms (often called Two Kingdoms, though that wasn't Luther's language) emphasizes that the political or secular realm serves a purpose in God's creation. Ideally, it ensures that civic life promotes the good of all. Giving ourselves to God doesn't mean we have to avoid paying our taxes. We live in two realms simultaneously; God is ultimately in control of both. We give ourselves to God in lives lived with grace and we share our wealth with Caesar (or Uncle Sam) because God is at work in first responders who offer care in natural disasters. God is at work in utilities that provide warmth to survive the cold weather.

Let's focus on why we long to scrutinize where our money goes. What is our relationship to money? Are we so possessive of it that parting with it, for whatever reason, causes pain? On the flip side, what about the truth that, in our current economy, money means agency, so it is important and deserves wise stewardship? Our relationship with money is not only economic but also spiritual.

Money gives us a sense of control. We may withhold money in situations we do not like. When there are disagreements in church, the first thing to go is the financial support. Money gets used to manifest disapproval and to leverage some kind of control and satisfaction. We vote with our money and we use it to demonstrate our grievances.

Yet, what if we started from the fact that God has richly endowed us with blessings beyond measure? What if we allowed the generosity of God to take hold of our heart and found ways to give back and glorify God by enhancing life around us? What if we realized that by passing on divine blessings we become channels of God's grace for the world, God's healing and enriching presence to the world? When we say that God has blessed us, we mean to say that God has touched our lives through the *people* that God has put on our path. We see God at work in us by the way others bless us. What if *we* blessed others and manifested God at work *in us* for them?

Following a common theme in the Bible, we pray: "Yahweh, you have shown yourself great in our midst for the benefit of others, now show yourself great among others for our own benefit."

Have learned to count your blessings? Have you learned to see God at work in your heart? On your behalf? In the world around you? Have you turned to God in awe and marveled at God's works of mercy?

Let us praise God in God's majesty, let us give God the glory forever and ever. Amen.