

Sermon – October 18, 2020  
“What Are God’s Things?”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen*

Good Morning! Welcome to another beautiful fall day in the Northern Neck. Let me take just a few minutes this morning and help us celebrate some of the events in the life of the Northumberland Charge over the last week. Let me share with you a few pictures from this past week’s “mission project,” putting paint on a house that has not been painted in many years. Some of the group are from Fredericksburg and are people that Kay and I have been blessed to travel and work with on VIM (Volunteers in Mission) trips. They came to the Northern Neck, as most VIM trips to work overseas and CONOUS are currently suspended due to COVID. Others who came are from the Charge and local area. We have more work to do, so if you are interested in working on a mission project and can hold a paintbrush, let me know. Our yard sale at Fairfields continues and we have been blessed with lots of shoppers and lots of donations. The Good News Club restarted this week, and the team worked through the technical issues and engaged with a child who came to one of the sites. Phone calls are still going out from the nurture teams, prayer requests are being taken, and prayers are being offered. At Afton, the repaving of the parking lot has begun, and our Bible studies at both churches continue to help us grow in our knowledge of God.

Let’s put this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees’ disciples we heard read this morning into some context. Jesus’s parable-teaching about his authority and the religious authorities’ failure to recognize him as one sent from God has now kicked off a time of testing. Jesus’s parables have portrayed the religious leaders as wanting and they disagree. The three parables Jesus shared were comments on the failure of the religious authorities to produce fruit for the kingdom of God, and they have to be answered in their authority under the Law. Jesus

must be dealt with and his teaching ended. The challenge to their authority cannot be tolerated. There has been a planning huddle among the religious authorities and now we move into a new phase of interaction with Jesus. No more will the Pharisees listen to Jesus' teaching to critique what he teaches. Now they need to build a case against him that will allow them to eliminate him and his threat to their authority. Since Jesus did not directly speak words in his parables that they can use against him, but was successful in his parable-telling to get his point across, the religious authorities have come up with a plan to trap him with his words. They will ask him a series of "difficult" questions that are carefully crafted to force Jesus to speak words that can then be used against him. They need Jesus to openly state in his words that he is claiming to be one sent from God. First up in the effort to trap Jesus are the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians. The scripture is not clear why these two groups are sent. The disciples of the Pharisees would be those who are seeking to become Pharisees. They are students of the Law and the pious practices that the Pharisees stress. They may have been sent so as not to seem an obvious threat as would be questioning by a Pharisee, an "expert" in the Law. The religious leadership may be thinking it might be easier to trap Jesus with this less intimidating group. The Herodians are also a bit of a mystery. They are associated with Galilee where Herod still rules and not Jerusalem where Rome is the authority. They do have strong connections with Rome, and their presence may be to take any comments by Jesus about not supporting Rome to the Roman authorities. The question has been selected and given to those sent. It has been carefully crafted and worded so that no matter how Jesus answers he will be in trouble. They come prepared, optimistic, and overly confident. Those who come to ask the question are thinking that after this encounter with Jesus, and the ease with which they will entrap him, that they will be shoo-ins for becoming Pharisees.

The disciples of the Pharisees start their discussion with Jesus by calling him teacher, telling him how great his teaching is and how impartial he is towards all people. They have been listening and have some understanding of his teaching. But, instead of coming to him to learn and try to grasp the kingdom of God, they ask their question, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" I imagine them smiling and looking around at each other in pride after they ask this question. They have Jesus now; this is such a perfect question. If Jesus answers, "Don't pay taxes," then the Herodians take that answer to the Romans and Jesus will be accused of stirring up revolt among the people. If he says, "Yes, pay taxes," the crowd that has been so focused on Jesus' radical teaching will become angry with him because

they do not like the heavy tax burden that Rome and the religious authorities demand of them. Jesus is caught, they have done it, they will be Pharisees. They come as hypocrites, those seeming to seek knowledge, but in reality, they are seeking to trap Jesus with his words. They should be seeking the kingdom of God and instead they are seeking their own glory.

Jesus sees through their fake compliments and understands the implications of the question. Jesus does not hesitate at all but joins this new line of debate with his own question, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." It is interesting that the Pharisees' disciples do not respond to Jesus' question about their motives. Jesus does not seem to even give them time to respond, but asks them for a denarius. It is a silver coin with an image of Tiberius, the current emperor of Rome, on one side and words on the other that state he is God's son. In the currency of Israel, this is a large value coin, and Jesus and his disciples may not be in possession of one. One of the questioners produces a coin. One of them is carrying a coin that bears the image of the emperor in the courts of the temple. That they have the coin shows they are connected to Rome. They are using the currency of Rome. They are supporting Rome. This is another hypercritical point to their question. The presence of a coin with an image of the emperor violates the second commandment. The quote about God's son on the coin breaks the first commandment. Even though they strive and take pride in themselves for how they keep the Law, they can produce the coin. Their connection to Rome which they disdain is far stronger than they admit. With the coin produced, Jesus, in the form of rabbinical debate, asks them a question, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" Can't you see them smile at this poor teacher from Galilee as they tell him whose picture and title are found on the coin? "The emperor," they reply. They may be thinking, "Jesus is stalling for time. He knows whose picture and title are on this coin. Come on, Rabbi, answer our question." Their hope of being Pharisees has risen to new levels. Jesus has no way out, they think. He is walking right into their trap. This is so easy. However, with their answer, they have fallen completely into Jesus' guidance of the debate. Jesus tells them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." What did Jesus just say? To give to Caesar, Rome, the government, what is the government's and to God the things that are God's! That's not supposed to be the answer. Jesus' answer is supposed to trap him. This idea never crossed their minds or the minds of those who sent them. They are amazed at Jesus' answer. They are uncertain what it means except that their hopes to become Pharisees are crushed. They have failed to trap Jesus,

and instead, he has told them that it is possible to support the government and God. It is a “both and” answer to their question. Jesus says you can support the government with your taxes and serve God. Their certain victory is gone. They don’t know how to respond. The debate is over. They have failed in their attempt to trap Jesus, and they also go away.

What did Jesus just do? First, Jesus avoids the trap that had been set for him. More importantly, Jesus provides us with another key aspect of the kingdom of God. It is not a kingdom where those in it are bound to serve it exclusively. It is a kingdom that can be served while serving the authorities of government. The religious leaders and many in Israel did not believe that Rome should be part of their government. Because it was not set up along the lines of the Law, it should have no authority over them. Yet Jesus has told them that they can serve the governmental authority and still serve God. The Greek word here translated as “give” is much closer to the idea of “pay back,” as in “pay back” the government for the things one receives from them. This would be the things that come with a government such as defense from enemies, education for children, infrastructure, water, fire protection, first responders, police who maintain order, and the list goes on. We get the idea. This is not paying taxes as much as it is paying back for the things that we have received or will receive through the government. God is the source of the authority over us, and we are to be ready to pay back to those authorities for what we receive. So, what Jesus is telling us is that we should “pay back” our taxes. We are to give to the emperor, the governmental authority, what is due.

We also need to understand the second part of Jesus’ statement as it binds us and guides us for our response to the first. The key question for us to sort out is “What is God’s and what is the emperor’s?” Think about this: God is the source of everything. God is the creator and sustainer. God set up the governments. God is the one to whom our first and utmost loyalty is due. It is God’s image that we bear, and we are to seek to live life in a manner that honors God while we pay back the government that is establishing order within the world in which we are able to live and hopefully thrive. It is God who will provide us grace for salvation through Jesus Christ, grace that leads to eternal life. So, how do we sort this out? How do we honor God and pay back the governing authority? How do we know when the governing authority is faithfully exercising its authority? What do we do when it is not? Our goal is to live our lives in a manner that honors God and meets our obligations to the civil authorities. Let me pull from John Calvin some thoughts on this topic this morning. Calvin held that “the overthrow of civil order is

rebellion against God, and obedience to leaders and magistrates is always linked to the worship and fear of God, but if in return the leaders usurp the rights of God they are to be denied obedience as far as possible short of offence to God.”<sup>1</sup> This is classic Calvin in that he gives two opposing sides to his view. On the one hand, we are to see our support of and obedience to the civil order as worship of God, but we are to balance that by being mindful of how our government leaders exercise their authority, and when they begin to seek to take the place of God, they are to be denied that obedience. We are to seek a balance between these two aspects, keeping ourselves in check and seeking to be obedient to the civil authorities, but we are to always be mindful of how civil authorities are responding in the exercise of their roles in light of their obligation to honor God in their response. When we judge that the scale is tipped in the wrong direction, we are to respond in a manner that still honors God. So, next year when you pay your taxes, think of it as worship, if you can. The more biblical response comes from Peter, found in Acts 5:29 when Peter is being encouraged by the religious authorities not to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Peter replies, “We must obey God rather than men!” We are to live in the world’s governments as best we can while we are at work for the kingdom of God. When the two conflict, we are to obey God rather than men. Peter was very serious about this, but his aim was always to live within the boundaries of the governing authorities and to spread the Good News to all he met, giving to Caesar what was Caesar’s and to God what was God’s.

Okay, those are some very lofty ideas and we are left with trying to live them out. How do we do that? How do we live life in this tension between the civil authorities and God? Let me give you a few practical ideas. First, we need to know what God’s word says about a topic. We need to know the scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments. We need to study God’s word and discover where it speaks to our life situations. We need to do that with a group of Christians who are willing to help each other as we seek to live out what we find in God’s word. This is not setting aside aspects of God’s word that we don’t like, but seeking to understand and live what we find in the written word of God. We also need to stay informed about what the civil authorities are doing and seek to understand if their actions are honoring God. Pay your taxes, pay back what we owe, give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and above all, give to God what is God’s. Be at work in the kingdom of God bearing fruit as we live in the world where God has placed us. Next, once we have carefully weighed what we see in light of God’s word and have prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit, then we should vote according to what we have

learned. We are blessed in this country to have a government structure that gives us voice into the formation of the civil authority. We need to diligently look to God and make sure that the way we are voting is honoring God, and yes, that is often a difficult task. Finally, be found living in the now of life as one who is at work to produce fruit for the kingdom of God. This is fundamental. We are to be at work in the world producing fruit for God's kingdom. This is us giving to God what is God's. Our lives should be seen as a balance of kingdom work while living under the civil authority. This is what Jesus' answer, that amazed the disciples of the Pharisees, did. It told them that what they did not think was possible, was possible. We can live under a government, honor God, and at the same time produce fruit for the kingdom of God. It was outside of what the religious leaders considered the realm of the possible held, yet Jesus told them we could live in such a manner. Let's be those who are living lives honoring God and are living and working to honor God in the civil government we have been given and helped form. With that guidance, get yourself prepared. Learn what God's word says, learn what the governing bodies are doing and are planning to do, and vote accordingly while you love people into the kingdom of God.

*Pray with me: Lord, we thank you for the government that you have set up in our country. Lord, strengthen us to be diligent to study your word and to live out the total of what we find there as we seek to love people into the kingdom of God. Guide us to be those who have paid back what we owe and loved others more than self. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Wilkins, Michael J.. The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (pp. 736-737). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.