

Well, as you know, I am very grateful to be your Pastor, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to come to South Meriden several days a week to be in ministry here. Doing God's work with you brings me a joy that is hard to describe, something that makes me kneel down and pray every time I'm in this beautiful church. However, there is one thing that I am NOT grateful for in my ministries, and it can be described with two simple words - Route 68! [ROAD] Since I started as your Pastor this summer, Eversource has been installing a natural gas pipeline between Wallingford and Durham all along Route 68, snaking up from Yalesville, across Interstate 91, and now down the other side towards Durham. Two things might give us some comfort as we endure this construction; one is that it will be over soon enough, and the other is that we don't see that familiar sign out next to it: [TAX SIGN] "Your tax dollars at work!" Instead, check your Eversource bill for the news of how this affects you. [BLANK]

Taxes are not a popular topic at any time of the year. We see those dollars that come out of our paycheck, or in our tax returns, and it seems pretty natural to feel a twinge of resentment in our gut. Of course, paying taxes is nothing new - they were doing it even in the time of Jesus, and as the comedy group Monty Python reminds us, people didn't like taxes even then: [VIDEO][BLANK] It's a funny scene, and it reminds us that sometimes we forget that we do get something for our tax dollars, even when we don't like paying them. We return something to our government, every year. The question is, what do we return to the God who is so good to us? Will you pray with me, please. [PRAYER]

In the time of Jesus, taxes were not a laughing matter. The Romans had conquered Israel, and the Romans imposed many different taxes on them, most of which went back to Rome. There were regular riots and rebellions over these taxes. Jewish tax collectors, like Matthew Levi in the gospel stories, were hated for helping both Romans and corrupt Jews, including the Herodians, [HEROD ANTIPAS] who supported Rome's puppet kings in Jerusalem, Galilee, and other places in Palestine.

[DENARIUS COIN] Some religious Jewish leaders didn't want their people to pay the Roman taxes at all. They looked at the coins that were used to pay the taxes, and they saw the face of Caesar, the Roman king, on the front, his wife on the back, and two inscriptions. [INSCRIPTION] The front of the tax coin in Jesus' time said "Caesar

Augustus Tiberias, Son of the Divine Augustus.” Rome declared their emperor to be the son of a god! The rear inscription read, “High Priest.” Caesar was the divine head of the state, and the head of the Roman religion of pagan gods. Many Religious Jews, including many Pharisees, wanted a pure Jewish nation in which they did not have to honor Caesar as a god and a priest, and have both religion and politics be purely Jewish under a Jewish God. [BLANK]

You can see that there was a power struggle going on, a struggle not only between the Jewish people and Rome, but between Jews, for the future of their people and their nation. Into the middle of this power struggle walked Jesus, the Son of the living God, proclaiming the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had a very different agenda, and it threatened both the Herodians and the Pharisees. They both wanted Jesus either on their side, or gone.

So we see in today’s reading from Matthew that the Pharisees laid a trap for Jesus. They praised him as being wise and not being partial, and then asked Jesus, is it right under the law of the Bible to pay taxes to Rome, or not? The Pharisees invited along some Herodians, their arch enemies, so that Jesus would be caught in the middle. If Jesus said, “Heck no, don’t pay that Roman tax, it’s for pagans who oppress us!,” then the Herodians would know that Jesus was against them, and have him killed. If Jesus said, “Sure, pay that Roman tax, I am OK with Rome!” then the followers of the Pharisees would reject Jesus as impure, and destroy his movement. For the people concerned with power, it seemed like a win-win scenario - if Jesus took a stand one way or another, we would lose power.

But Jesus was not just another wise man, another religious man, another man wanting power for his own sake and his own people’s sake. Jesus didn’t have a power agenda: he had a love agenda. Jesus wasn’t looking to be the savior of a kingdom on earth: Jesus wanted the world to be saved by experiencing the eternal kingdom of God on earth, God’s perfect love transforming everyone and everything in Creation. Jesus, the Son of God, wanted the world to give to one another the way that God gave to the world. And what we give as God gives, is, at the end of the day, is a gift, something that was never ours to start with.

So Jesus knew already how to answer the Pharisees and the Herodians who were

trying to trap him. He knew that the answer to the question is not about what people take from you, but where it came from. He asked the Pharisees and the Herodians to bring him the tax coin, and asked them, "Whose face, and whose title, are on the coin?" It was Caesar, of course, the son of a Roman god, the high priest of the pagans. And so, Jesus gave his accusers a simple and powerful answer to their question.

The response that Jesus gave to his power-hungry accusers was not about power, but what we return to those with power, and how. Our English translations usually have Jesus saying "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." But if you look at the original Greek, it is clear that Jesus was not talking about giving things that were ours, but returning things that were not ours to start with. "RETURN to Caesar what is Caesar's, and RETURN to God what is God's."

The money in our pockets, or in our bank accounts - we call it "ours," but it is our government's money, just like the coin in Jesus' hand was a Roman coin. [AMERICAN COIN] Our coins in America may say "In God we Trust," but that's just something stamped on a coin by our government - it is not our promise to God, just a claim by the powerful for your hearts, to trust them the way that we should always trust God, with or without coins. [BLANK] Jesus reminds us in this encounter with the Pharisees and the Herodians that their worldly wealth, and our wealth, comes from the power of governments; it was never ours to start with. To Jesus, the coin was just a piece of metal, not life and life eternal. God had no need of metal shaped in the form of human Gods. Return your taxes to Caesar, Jesus suggests: whoever collects them is more interested in their own power than God's power. If that's the gift of power that they want returned, so be it. But don't let it have power over your heart.

So Jesus puts the challenge to us, the Pharisees, and the Herodians: "RETURN to God what is God's." What is God's? Life itself. The very beat of your heart, the very air that you breathe. What is God's? Creation itself, the amazingly precious and completely unreplaceable universe that we live in. What is God's? Your very soul, the essence of who you have always been, and who you shall always be. None of these were ever yours to start with. Everything about you is a gift. Nothing you are, nothing that you have, nothing that you can possibly become, can be better than who God has already meant you to be as a child of God. You are God's gift. Period. Return to God what is already God's -

everything that you are, as God's precious, living gift.

The Pharisees and the Herodians could say nothing in reply to Jesus - and neither can we. Their game was over, they could no longer call the power of God to favor their worldly grasp for power - and neither should we. By the time that Matthew's gospel was written, the corrupt Herodians were gone, the Pharisees were gone, and just a few centuries later, Rome was gone - but Jesus was still there. And Jesus is still here. Jesus will always be here. Nothing can destroy the power of Jesus Christ. Nothing. Not words, not coins, not nails, not crosses, not armies, not selfishness, not cruelty, not injustice, not sickness, not pain, not death itself - nothing will ever, ever, ever, destroy Jesus Christ, the greatest gift that Creation has ever received. Through faith, real faith, you can receive this gift, a gift that is greater even than the gift of life that you breathe in at this very moment. It is the only gift that will matter to you in the end.

In our season of stewardship, think of the gifts that God offers you through faith in Jesus Christ. Are you ready to do some regifting? Are you ready to acknowledge through the things that were never ours to start with, what we need to offer to the king of all of our gifts? If you worship the source of these gifts in your heart, and not Caesar, you already know the answer. God does. God knows before you do. We can all head home to Jesus, through God's loving grace. Let's live like we're already home, giving what God has already given to us. Amen.