

# REGAL TENDER

## Sermon, October 16, 2011

### Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Government taxation has long been a rich source of cynical humor. As the old saying goes, there are only two things which are inevitable in this life, death and taxes. As one cynic put it, *"Death and taxes may always be with us, but at least death doesn't get any worse every time Congress meets."* Have you ever noticed that when you combine "THE" and "IRS," the letters spell "THEIRS"? A sportswriter once asked boxing champion Joe Louis, "Who hit you the hardest during your boxing career?" His reply: "Uncle Sam." Someone else pointed out that we all know April 15 is income tax day ... it is also the day the Titanic sank; it is also the day Abraham Lincoln was assassinated (*ed. note: technically, he was actually shot April 14; he succumbed to his wounds April 15*). Not a good day on the calendar. One of my all-time favorite Internal Revenue Service stories was told by IRS agent Donna Bell, writing in the *Reader's Digest's* "Humor in Uniform." About a week or so before April 15, she was working at her desk when an elderly woman approached her. The woman politely requested a thick stack of tax forms. "Why so many?" asked Ms. Bell. The elderly woman replied, "My son is stationed overseas, and he asked me to pick up forms for him and the soldiers on his base." "You shouldn't have to do this," Ms. Bell told her. "It's the base commander's job to make sure that his troops have access to the forms they need." "I know," replied the woman. "I'm the base commander's mother."

Taxation was no laughing matter in Jesus' time, however, because paying taxes then meant funding Israel's oppressors. People always resent taxes, but the people of Israel really resented their hard earned money going to the treasury of the Romans who ruled over them, and this comes into play in the lectionary Gospel text for today. We all know politics can make strange alliances. In political battle people who would normally be in opposition often join together to defeat a perceived common opponent; every election season witnesses surprise alliances and endorsements. There's one such unlikely alliance in our Gospel lesson. The party of the Pharisees team up with the Herodians, a 'political' party they normally opposed, often bitterly. But here they apparently join forces against a perceived common opponent, Jesus. The Herodians were called such because they openly supported King Herod. Herod was Jewish, but was a pro-Roman puppet monarch. The Herodians were sort of the inside-the-government crowd, they made it their business to try and reconcile Jews to the "status quo." They exhorted people to pay their respect, as well as their taxes, to the Roman authorities. However, most Jews in general and the Pharisees in particular chafed under Roman rule; they despised paying taxes to the Romans.

These two groups join together and pose a question to Jesus. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are." They lay it on pretty thick with this flattery, but as someone once cautioned, "The person patting you on the back may only be determining where best to stick the knife." And after this flattery, they do stick in this knife of a question: "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Whichever way Jesus answered He'd be in trouble, or so His questioners thought. If He said it was not right to pay the tax, the Herodians could report Him to the Roman officials for sedition; He'd be promptly arrested. If He said it was right to pay the tax, the Pharisees knew Jesus would then be largely discredited in the eyes of many faithful and patriotic Jews.

Jesus asked to see a denarius. Jesus asked whose image was on the coin. The answer: "Caesar." *"Well then,"* said Jesus, *"Give it to Caesar; it is his. Give back to Caesar what belongs to him; and give back to God what belongs to Him."* By inference, Jesus is saying, *"Whose image is stamped on the coin? Caesar's. Whose image is stamped on you? God's! You are created in the image of God, His image is stamped on you, so give back to God what is due!"* With this answer Jesus also lays down an important principle: Every child of God has dual citizenship. As represented by these two flags in our sanctuary, we are citizens who owe allegiance to the sovereign God of Heaven and we are citizens who owe allegiance to the sovereign nation in which we live. We have duties and obligations to both. As a bit of an aside, another related reason we have the American flag gracing this sanctuary is *gratitude*. It is here not because we *have* to display it, but because we *want* to display it in grateful appreciation of the freedoms we enjoy as citizens of this nation, especially the freedom of worship. We worship freely in this sanctuary each week largely because of the freedom guaranteed and protected by the republic for which this flag stands.

Again, we are citizens of this sovereign nation and we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and we have solemn obligations to both. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven", we are praying to make earth like heaven, to advance the heavenly kingdom in this world. On one hand, the Christian

is to work with all the passion and zeal of a revolutionary to advance the kingdom of God, to make earth like heaven. On the other hand, the Christian has a duty to patiently advance the heavenly kingdom within the framework and legal structure of the earthly political authorities and government structure as far as ethically possible. Christianity is no enemy to civil government, but a friend to it. It is the Christ-given duty of citizens to render that which is due according to the laws of the country. To be clear, though, where Caesar claims what is God's, the claims of God have priority. It wasn't long before Christians faced the wrath of Rome because they refused to worship the emperor ... an honor that belongs only to God ... and it was a refusal judged to be treasonous, punishable by death.

It was just over 340 years or so after this scene in Matthew that Rome fell. Rome, the Eternal City, the capital of the greatest empire the world had ever known, was plundered, overrun by the Visigoths, the Western Gothic tribes led by Alaric. This historical event shook the civilized world to its core. Rome was the Eternal City, the symbol of civilization, order and stability. In North Africa, these events prompted a Christian bishop by the name of Augustine to start writing about the lessons Christians should learn from Rome's destruction. The result was a book that has stood as a classic over the centuries: The City of God. Written as a Christian interpretation of human history, one might say Augustine's City of God was the original Tale of Two Cities: The "City of God" and the "City of Man." Augustine reiterated Jesus' teaching that while Christians live in the City of Man, we do not belong to the City of Man. Our presence in the earthly city is like that of strangers sojourning in a foreign country. While here, we are to enjoy the truly good blessings the City of Man has to offer, including (but not limited to) its rights, its protection, and its preservation of order, but the City of Man is not our true home. Our true home is in the City of God. And it is to that real eternal city we owe our affections and our ultimate loyalty.

Augustine would be quick to point out this is *not* an excuse for Christian withdrawal from the City of Man; it's anything but. Just as we are to enjoy the blessings of the City of Man, we must assume the obligations of citizenship: We are to obey laws, pay taxes, get involved and in all cases render unto Caesar as far as we are able, because out of obedience to God we are to love our neighbor. Abandoning your neighbor, withdrawing from your neighbor, is inconsistent with the command to *love* your neighbor, and so political and cultural engagement for the common good are required. We can never retreat into our sanctuaries and neglect our civic responsibility to help others and to help set the moral tone of our culture. After all, your neighbor is also made in the image of God ... one way we give to God what is God's is by taking every opportunity to honor and serve and love and help the neighbor who bears God's image. We bring the influence of the City of God into the City of Man, working for justice, righteousness and the common good ... even if the city is overrun (*or, run*) by barbarians.

We have one huge advantage the first century Jew in occupied Palestine did not have, especially in the area of taxation. Whose image is stamped on *our* money? *Our* image. Representatives of "We the People." And just so there's no mistake about it, those depicted on our currency are *dead* representatives of "We the People." The money doesn't belong to a living Caesar, or to an occupying government, it belongs to us! It's not T-H-E-I-R-S; it's O-U-R-S. Ours is a government of the people, by the people, for the people; we own our money and are responsible for how we use it and *for how we allow it to be used*. It is ours, entrusted to us by God. We have a Christ-given duty to be divine stewards of what we have been given by God, a Christ-given duty to disburse our money wisely, *and* a Christ-given duty to be good citizens who work within the structures of our government to see that our God-given resources are used wisely and properly! Our government is still a government by, of and for the people. Unlike first century Palestine, we are **not** an occupied country ... at least not yet. Part of our divinely appointed sacred duty as citizens of the kingdom of God and as citizens of the United States of America is to inform ourselves, to hold our elected representatives accountable, (*and I can't say this strongly enough!*) TO VOTE INTELLIGENTLY, thus encouraging wiser stewardship of our money and our resources.

The sermon title "Regal Tender" is an obvious play I made on the term "Legal Tender." Legal Tender is defined as a medium of payment recognized by a legal system to be valid for meeting a financial obligation; paper currency and coinage are common forms of legal tender in civilized countries. The origin of the word "tender" comes from the French verb "tender," which means "to offer." "Legal tender" is my lawful *offering*; it is what I offer for a debt I incurred. Well, our *Regal* Tender is that offering we make to pay our debt to the sovereign nation which secures our liberties, paves our roads, preserves our order, **as well as** that offering we make to pay our debt to the sovereign God Who secures our liberties in Christ, in Whose image we are made ... and to Whom we owe a debt we can never really fully repay. Again, as exemplified by the flags which grace this sanctuary, we have a Christ given duty to both ... to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to render unto God what is God's.