

Matthew 22: 15-22

4th of July Weekend; July 1 & 2, 2018

On Thanksgiving Eve, November 24, 1971, a middle-aged man carrying a black brief case, approached the flight counter of Northwest Orient Airlines in Portland, Oregon. He identified himself as "Dan Cooper" and used cash to purchase a one-way ticket on Flight 305, a 30-minute flight north to Seattle. Once the flight was in the air, he ordered a drink and passed a note to the stewardess saying, *"I have a bomb in my briefcase. You are being hijacked."* His demands were simple. He demanded \$200,000, in unmarked bills, four parachutes and the plane be refilled in Seattle after it landed.

When the plane landed in Seattle, Cooper exchanged the hostages on the plane for the money and parachutes, and ordered the plane to take off again. 30 minutes into the flight, Cooper deployed the back stairs of the airplane and jumped out. An exhaustive investigation turned up no clue as to where Cooper or the money wound up, though a small amount was found near the Columbia River some years later. Despite an extensive manhunt, no sign of Cooper has ever been found. Most of the marked ransom money remains missing, and the case continues to be the only unsolved air piracy in American aviation history. Some would say that he got away with the perfect crime.

The Pharisees and Herodians thought they had come up with the perfect question to trip Jesus up. They were going to use politics to try to trap Jesus. (How original?) They thought that they had come up with a political question that no matter how Jesus would answer that question, there would be people mad enough at him that it would be much easier to get rid of Jesus once and for all. Yet, Jesus' answer, can teach us a valuable lesson about the blessing of government and the Church. Therefore on this Independence day weekend, let us take a look at their question and Jesus' answer, and ask ourselves the question: ***"How shall I live as a Christian in America?"***

"Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that 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. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"

These two groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians were on the exact opposite side of politics. Normally, these two groups did not associate with each other. The Pharisees were pro-God and anti-government. They were the rule keepers. They were the very ethical, moral and conservatives of their day. They tended to resent the Roman government because they were under the control of the Romans. The Herodians were the exact opposite. They followed King Herod, a puppet king of the Romans. Therefore, they loved the Romans. They were pro-government. They were ok in supporting Caesar with taxes. These two groups were on the opposite ends of the spectrum of politics in Israel. For these two groups to work together, it shows just how much they hated Jesus. If you think about, it's a brilliant question.

If Jesus says "yes," then the Pharisees can say to the people that Jesus is supporting the enemy. If the Jewish people were waiting for the Messiah to save them from the Roman government, then they can say that Jesus is not the Messiah. The people will reject Jesus. If Jesus says "no," then the Herodians will run to the Roman government and tell them that Jesus is guilty of treason. If that happens, then the Roman government will take care of the Jesus problem. Either way, it's a win for them.

Jesus knew it was a trap, but he wasn't going to walk away from the question either. Jesus' response: ***"You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax."*** They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ***"Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"*** "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, ***"So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."***

As much as the Pharisees hated the government, they were also benefitting from the government. They lived in a Roman territory. They benefited from Roman defense, Roman law and order, etc. All those benefits were supported by taxes. Even if they didn't like the Roman government, governments are established by God to maintain law and order in society. The Apostle Paul would make that abundantly clear when he wrote the words of our second lesson for today. ***"The authorities that exist have been established by God.... This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay***

taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” In other words, give the government what they deserve. The role of government is to maintain law and order in this world. These words of Jesus and the words of Paul are not just speaking about one form of governments. The government that was in place at the time of the Apostle Paul was a “bad” government for many. In other words, our opinion about a government doesn’t change the fact that God places governments in place to benefit us. They deserve honor, they deserve respect and they deserve to be supported. They don’t deserve all the bickering, the fighting, the excuses, and the attacks, etc. **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.”**

Jesus continues: **“give to God what is God’s.”** God deserves first place in our hearts and our minds. A few verses after our text Jesus says: **“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”** God deserves to be obeyed. He deserves to be trusted. He deserves the best that we can give him. He deserves the best of the worship that we can give him. He deserves the best of the offerings that we can give him. We love others because we have a God who unconditional loves us. **“Give to God what is God’s.”** The answer to the Pharisees’ and Herodians’ question is a rather simple answer by Jesus.

“How shall I live as a Christian in America?” Jesus’ answer is simple: 1. Honor the authorities that have been established by God; 2. Honor God with your entire heart. No government in the history of the world is perfect. But we need to recognize that God’s plan is to bless us. What do we do? We give them honor and respect. We pray for our leaders. We **“give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”** We give God honor and respect. We put God first in our hearts. We give **“to God what is God’s.”**

This week, as we celebrate all the blessings that God has given to us by living in this great country, let’s give thanks to our God for that blessing. Let’s give God the best in everything we do.