

The Giving Life

[Matthew 22:15-22](#)

Dr. Jean M. Coyle

Sunday, July 23, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Good morning. Thanks partly to Miss Lillian Elmendorf who taught my speech classes from fourth through eighth grades, I rarely get nervous in public speaking or preaching. Recently, however, I mentioned to deacon Gene Thompson that climbing into THIS pulpit MIGHT be a daunting experience. Gene's response was that if anyone were to be nervous in preaching here, he/she would be focusing on the people, rather than on letting God speak. I believe VERY DEEPLY that God speaks through each one of us at various times. I share this, because, if you do hear a clicking sound during the sermon, I want to assure you that it is NOT my knees knocking together. And, you know, folks, preaching is not about me. And it's not about you. Preaching is really about all of us— each one of us—listening to the Word of God.

Let us do that, now. I invite you to open your Bibles to Matthew 22 as, together, we listen to the Word of the Lord.

Let us bow our heads in prayer. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Several years ago when I was visiting a friend in Chicago, I saw an exhibit on Egypt at the Field Museum. One of the items was a model burial pyramid that you could walk through. You are aware, I'm sure, that Egyptians—especially pharaohs—were buried with all kinds of items their subjects thought they would need in the after-life, particularly jewels and gold. What I noted, that day, in that burial pyramid, WAS that all the jewels and gold were right there. The deceased pharaoh hadn't taken them with him. Those items hadn't moved from the spot where they had been placed. And he hadn't used them, during his life, to help the poor in his land. And I've thought, often, since then, that that is how each of us might well view all our material possessions. We don't take anything with us when we die. We're "temporarily" in possession of them. We have businesses, now, that come to help us organize all that we have—BECAUSE we have so much. And, as we go through life, accumulating more possessions, eventually we reach a point where we start discarding them. We are asked, by God, to be good stewards of all that we have, but we are only "temporary" stewards during our earthly journeys.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we immediately divest ourselves of all our material possessions. But what I believe God IS asking us to do is to be absolutely good stewards of ALL that God has given us—starting with—OUR VERY LIVES! We have been created by God *imago dei*, in the image of God, and God requires of us that we follow the model he provided through His Son, Jesus Christ. And God continues to ask us to use ALL the gifts he has given us—spiritual gifts, time, and physical possessions—in a Christ-like manner. To many people, stewardship immediately raises a mental image of money, but that's only a part of our overall stewardship of the resources we have been given.

Here's a question of whether we would notice the difference in giving. A priest once asked one of his parishioners to serve as financial chairman of his parish. The man, manager of a grain elevator, agreed on two conditions. No report would be due for a year, and no one would ask any questions during the year. At the end of the year, he made his report. He had paid off the church debt of \$200,000. He had redecorated the church. He had sent \$1,000 to missions. He had \$5,000 in the bank. "HOW did you do all this?," asked the priest and the shocked congregation. Quietly, he answered, "You people bring your grain to my elevator. As you did business with me, I simply withheld 10 percent and gave it to the church. You never missed it" (Hewett, 460).

How much do I give? Go give to the needy sweet charity's bread. For giving is living, the angel said. And must I be giving again and again? My peevish, petulant answer ran. Oh, no, said the angel, piercing me through, Just give till the Master stops giving to you.

And there is a very poignant story of a little boy who had survived a rare blood disease. His younger sister developed the same rare illness. And the little boy was asked if he would give blood for his sister so she could live. The boy hesitated only for one moment, before nodding his agreement. As he lay on the hospital gurney, with the blood coursing from his body to his sister, the little boy looked up and asked, "Will I start to die right away?" He had hesitated only a moment before being willing to give his LIFE for his sister, if that was what was needed. He was ready to give everything—his very life!! In the parable from Matthew's gospel that we read today, the question about paying the Roman tax is brought to Jesus by a coalition of Pharisees and Herodians. We know little about the Herodians, but their name suggests that they were a secular political party that supported the right of Herod the Great's successors to rule Palestine. By necessity, they were pro-Roman, since no one could rule any segment of the Mediterranean world without Rome's approval (Interpretation, 253).

The Pharisees, on the other hand, tended to be quietists who resented the Roman occupation but accepted it as a necessary evil—they counseled submission as long as Rome did not interfere with the practice of religion. These diverse groups are brought together in this incident by their common opposition to Jesus. Their intention is to place Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If he argues against paying the tax, they will be able to accuse him to Pilate of anti-Roman activity. On the other hand, if he supports the tax, he will be bound to lose some of his support in the general population, for whom the tribute was not only an economic burden but also a HATED symbol of lost freedom (253).

The question, while profoundly political, is phrased in religious terms: "Is it permitted?" The question can be paraphrased: "Does it accord with Torah to pay tax to Caesar, or not?" One facet of the legal question involves God's ownership of the land of Israel: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine" (Leviticus 25:23). Since Caesar is a usurper, is it not an act of disobedience to God to pay a tax to this pagan ruler? (253).

Instead of taking the baited hook by discussing the legal niceties of the issue, Jesus calls for a Roman coin, knowing that the tax can be paid ONLY in Roman currency. When a silver denarius is presented to him, he asks, "Whose image is this, and whose inscription?" Most probably, the head of the coin showed the head of the reigning emperor, and the tail an inscription that identified him as "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus," that is, as high priest of the pagan Roman religion. Exodus 20:4 prohibits "graven images" of ANY kind. Yet here, in the most holy space in the holy land, Jesus' adversaries promptly produce a coin that violates the dictates of their religion! The hypocrisy is obvious. They are happy to do business with Caesar's coins. Why, then, should they raise a religious question about giving Caesar his due? (253-254).

Since the question posed by the opponents is sufficiently answered by the object lesson and the first half of Jesus' epigram, special weight must be attached to the second half, "and to God the things that are God's." Perhaps, we should imagine Jesus pausing in the middle of the sentence, so that the full force of the conclusion will be felt by his audience. "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's---and to God the things that are God's." Although there is strict parallelism between the two halves, they are by no means of equal significance, because Caesar's role is so VASTLY inferior to God's. That is, Jesus is not saying, "There is a secular realm and there is a religious realm, and equal respect must be paid to each." The second half practically annuls the first by preempting it. In Jewish religious thought, foreign kings had power over Israel ONLY by permission from God. Tax may be paid to Caesar, because it is BY GOD'S WILL that Caesar rules. When God chooses to liberate his people, Caesar's power will avail him nothing (254).

Since the time of Tertullian, interpreters have pondered the possibility that the saying implicitly refers to humans as God's coin, bearing His image. Since men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), they belong to Him, as surely as Caesar's coins belong to Caesar. To God must be given back what is His. This may be fanciful, but the conclusion is sound. In the second half of his epigram, Jesus demands far more of his followers than in the first half. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns, "You cannot serve God and mammon (6:24). HERE, he is saying, in effect, "If Tiberius wants a few denarii, give them gladly, because giving them up will remind you that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his or her possessions (see Luke 12:15). What counts ABOVE ALL ELSE is living in accordance with the Father's will (254).

Jesus asks for the "legal tender" with which the tax is paid. He does not have it himself, but the Pharisees, in the sacred precincts of the Temple, produce the coin with its idolatrous image and inscription and acknowledge that they are Caesar's. When Jesus pronounces that what is already the emperor's should be given to him, while avoiding either a direct yes or no, he, in fact, gives an indirect yes. It is not against the Torah (this was the form of the question in v. 17, "Is it lawful?") to pay taxes to the emperor. The Pharisees acknowledge this by participating in the economic system made POSSIBLE by Rome, EVEN by having Roman coins in the Temple area. Although unconvinced, the Pharisees are silenced and depart from this round "in shock" (NIB, 420).

In the same breath in which he declares that paying taxes to support secular and pagan governments is NOT against the will of God, Jesus goes BEYOND their original question, declaring that what is God's must be given to God. This is not an in-principle division of the world into two realms with two sovereigns. Matthew's dualistic perspective is only penultimate; ultimately, he is a monotheist who resists this kind of dualism. THE KINGDOM OF GOD REPRESENTED BY JESUS EMBRACES ALL OF LIFE. Indeed, Matthew could hardly advocate the separation of religion and politics. He pictures Jesus and the Christian community as belonging to the series of Israel's prophets, who never made a split between religion and the political aspects of life (NIB, 420).

While Matthew is clear that loyalty to God is a different and higher category than loyalty to Caesar, this text is not instruction on how people who live in a complex world of competing loyalties may determine what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. It simply declares that this distinction between what belongs to Caesar (as some things do) and what belongs to God (the ultimate loyalty) must be made, and he leaves it to readers in their own situations to be "Jesus theologians" who, in the light of his own life and teachings, actualize the distinction (cf. 5:21-48) (NIB, 420-421).

Friends, each of us has so MANY ways to give to one another—not just with the coins of Caesar. There are so many people in this congregation giving in so many ways.

Let me share with you a story about giving that may be familiar to many of you—even so, always worth the retelling. This is the story of "The Giving Tree" by Shel Silverstein. The story focuses on the loving relationship between a tree and a little boy. When he is very young, the boy gathers the leaves and makes them into crowns to play "king of the forest." He climbs the tree and eats the apples and he rests in the tree's shade. Time goes by and the boy grows older—and the tree is often alone. One day, the boy comes and tells the tree he is too big to play in it and he needs money to buy things. So the tree offers her apples so the boy can sell them and have money. And the tree is very glad to help. A long time goes by, and the boy becomes a man. And he tells the tree he needs a house so he can provide a home for a wife and children. So the tree offers her branches so he can build a house. Finally, after a long, long time, the boy comes back and he is older. He tells the tree he wants a boat to take him far away from there. "Cut down my trunk and make a boat," the tree says. And that is what the boy does. Again, after a very long time, the boy comes back as a very old man. The tree says to him, "I have nothing left to give you. I am just an old stump. I'm sorry." The boy says, "I don't need very much—just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired." "Well," says the tree, "an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." And the boy does. And the tree is very happy.

At the end of my life, I would like to be all used up—just like that tree. I would like to have used all my spiritual gifts to their fullest, at least to the fullest of my ability to explore them. Our lives are given to us by God—we must give our lives to God's purpose for us. I believe that God has not given us our gifts to store away, like special china that is brought out only on very particular occasions. We are to use our wonderful gifts every single day of our lives—NOT just on special occasions. Let us give our LIVES, just as the tree gave hers—in every possible configuration throughout a very long life.

One final story—of an elderly woman who was a faithful servant of God all her life and very active in her church congregation. Finally, near the end of her life, she lay bedbound in a nursing home. She had served for many, many years, faithfully and well. Perhaps, she deserved, now, to rest. But that's not the story. What did this woman do? Bedbound, lying in her nursing home bed, all

day long and all night long, this woman chose to pray for the youth in her congregation. She wanted them to know that someone was praying for them and someone really cared for them. Was she all used up? Not yet. God still had a plan to use her for God's good purposes.

Cardinal Mercia once said, "We must not only give what we have; we must also give what we are." You may remember that, last Sunday, Dr. Huffman asked us to consider two questions: Who are you? And where are you going? I would insert another question in the middle—WHAT are you DOING with who you are? Thus, our questions become: Who are you? What are you doing with who you are? Where are you going?

Grace abounds in each of our lives and continues to abound every single day. Poet Ralph W. Seager wrote of the extravagance of God's gifts to us-- More sky than man can see, More seas than he can sail, More sun than he can bear to watch, More stars than he can scale. More breath than he can breathe, More yield than he can sow, More grace than he can comprehend, More love than he can know.

For God SO loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him SHALL not perish, but HAVE everlasting life. God has created us in God's image—our very lives are God's gift. Let us use them up--wisely and well and with love! Love, unlike gold, is treasure that gains value by being spent. Gracious and loving God, thank you for our earthly lives. Strengthen us, each and every day, to live our lives to YOUR glory. Guide us in giving our lives in a Christ-like manner. Help us to share the love that we have been given by you to all those around us. We pray in the name of your Son, and our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. References Boring, M. Eugene. Matthew: The New Interpreter's Bible. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1995. Hare, Douglas R. A. Matthew: Interpretation Series. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993. Silverstein, Shel. The Giving Tree. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964.