

**Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA**

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost: October 22, 2023

Taxes, Coins and Emperors

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church. I want to thank the congregation for putting aside an training fund for me to use to continue my education. This past week I attended a preaching seminar that I usually fly to the Northeast to take part in. Luckily, this year it was done on Zoom. I have to admit it was an amazing experience; and Zoom allowed us to have an attendee from the Virgin Islands, as well as people from all over the United States.

That being said, I had the opportunity to explore our Gospel today from many points of view. But there is one particular perspective that I would like to explore with you. In other words, take a little deeper look than most people understand.

We need to first realize that when we read this scripture it is not taking place with Jesus immediately there. I know, weird right? We kind of have this movie picture in our mind of Jesus actively telling these stories, or at least I do. But the reality is, this gospel was written 70 to 100 years after Jesus walked the earth.

Why is this important? The Gospels were written to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Every story is meant to have the reader solidly convinced that Jesus was the son of God, and that is the deeper context of this story.

The question asked of Jesus about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not, is not as clear a question to us today. Nor is the answer, compared to what would be expected back in the first and second century. Jesus is put in to a lose/lose situation, but for something bigger than tax money.

There are several issues at play. The ruler of Rome, the Emperor, the Caesar, once on throne, was considered a God. From Egypt to Rome, the one who had conquered, or inherited through blood, the power over the nation, was considered a God, often proclaiming immortality, or eternal life.

Remember this story is 70 or so years after Jesus. After the resurrection. We need to make clear, that rulers are not eternal. Does Jesus recognize the godhood in Caesar? If scripture is to recognize who Jesus is, we clearly see here that he is, in a very shrewd way, declaring he is not supporting the system and worshiping no other gods. For those after the resurrection there needs to be a clear distinction between Jesus and those who called themselves God.

If Jesus says yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then he could be perceived to be in collusion with Rome and justifying Roman occupation and the oppression of the Jews. This would not be a popular answer among the Jewish people. On the other hand, if Jesus answers no, paying taxes to the emperor is not lawful, he could be suspected of revolutionary sentiment against Rome.

The beauty of Jesus' answer, "give, therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," is that he both concedes payment of the census tax while subverting the reach of the emperor.

If read one way, Jesus' answer is simply an affirmation of Christian submission to governing authorities. Yet if read from another angle, Jesus affirms the all-encompassing reach of God's ownership.

The denarius which Jesus called his questioners to produce actually read, "Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus" on one side and "Pontifex Maximus" (high priest) on the other. In response to such an all-encompassing and even idolatrous claim, Jesus here reasserts God's ownership and rule.

If God owns all, then we belong to God alone. Yet we live a life in which competing powers and influences vie to own us, to sway us, to capture our hearts. The tendency, for example, for what we own to exert ownership on us means we need to guard against consumerism and materialism as competing allegiances to our loyalty to God.

This is a beautiful scripture to remind us all about stewardship. Everything we are and have comes from God. We here have been blessed in ways we often don't realize.

This past Friday, I officiated at a rather large funeral for a nurse who had passed away. She had requested this reading as part of the service, and I feel it speaks to today's scripture. It was written by a Holocaust survivor.

- If you have never experienced the dangers of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture or the pangs of confinement, you're ahead of 20 million people around the world.*
- If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the million who will not survive the week.*
- If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of the world.*
- If you have money in the bank or in your wallet, or spare change in a dish somewhere, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthiest.*
- If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful, you are blessed, because the majority can, but most do not.*
- If you are feeling blessed, pay for the blessing bestowed upon you, and do something for others.*
- A blessing cannot be kept. If it stops with you then the blessing will disappear. The blessing will only keep working if it is continuously passed around.*

It is my hope that you feel Christ the Lord is a blessing, and that Jesus really is the son of God, and that you do not look for a special ruler or consumerism to fulfill that position. We as children of God need a place and space to come together to renew and refresh ourselves for the week.

Here is my gratitude moment. Thank you all, for contributing to my wonderful conference, so that I can serve you even better.

We as children of God need a place where when we donate one dollar, and after the plate is passed, and at the end of the day, the collection is more than one alone can do.

Jesus clearly states who he is today. He separates himself from participating or recognizing the divine in Caesar, yet he understands that taxes need to be paid, as money is part of the social structure.

We are called not to worship our money, but rather to use it as a blessing. Consider exchanging Caesar, for living bread in Christ the Lord. Amen