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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 22:15–22

## NO MORE DUES

It is time that we quit looking at our lives as if there was a certain amount we owed in dues in every aspect of our lives. It's time that we begin to look at our lives the way Jesus saw it in relationship to God. The great theologian, St. Augustine, often wrote about that relationship and when he did, he went to the same theme over and over. It didn't matter if he was writing church confessions or religious novels like *The City of God*, Augustine always came back to the idea of justice. In fact, if he didn't coin the phrase, he at least made it a phrase that everyone heard if they read him. He talked about doing justice to God. I remember struggling with that phrase in seminary and I remember one paper in particular where we had to explain what Augustine meant. It's been nearly thirty years ago, but I still have the page with the notes from one of my professors in the margin, a written critique of my rambling. He said, "Carl, doing justice to God means we return to God what God has already entrusted to us."

At the end of this service we will sing a benediction where we will talk about giving back to God our lives as a gift. I believe it was a different theologian from Switzerland who actually coined the idea to say what we are is God's gift to us and what we become is our gift to God. You may have heard me disagree with that just a little because even in our becoming it is really God that is the one doing the work. What is it we give to God? Life. Our practice of forgiveness and compassion and community. Even our creativity and our ability to promote healing are all gifts we have received that we return to God. And in doing so, we either thwart or we promote the gift-giving. We either hinder or we enhance the ongoing sharing of those gifts—life gifts. But the truth is they all came from God as their source—we are giving back only what we have received.

The way we treat one another is our biggest indicator of how we understand God. You see, our relationship to God has to be reflected in how we handle one another's dignity. And these Pharisees (think the most famous of all sectarians that ever existed) are joining forces with the Herodians (think the most famous secularists that have ever existed)—these two groups that are 180 degrees opposite of each other join their combined wisdom, Matthew says, to entrap Jesus. They are out to challenge his authority.

We heard about their agenda a few weeks ago. Remember the Sunday when the rain was threatening and we had the church picnic indoors. Remember the Sunday we read

from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Matthew where Jesus goes into the temple and the first thing they ask him is, "By what authority are you teaching and healing here?" And he employs that wonderful rabbinical interrogative technique of not answering their questions but asking a question that shows he understands what they are inquiring about at a level deeper than they understand themselves. Remember his response was, "You tell me what you think of John the Baptist and his baptism and I will tell you by what authority." And they were in that double bind. No matter what they said, they were going to lose. If they favored John, they were going to lose. If they opposed John, they were going to lose. And now they are trying the same technique on Jesus. What they are really out to do is corrupt his message, to undermine his offering of eternal life and redemption, all because they are fearful of losing power and authority.

You see, Jesus not only understands the law, he understands the spirit that inspired the law. To say it another way, Jesus was weaning those who listened to him from a spirit of power—a weaning that we still need today—and instead offering them the power of the Spirit. So in today's lesson, do you think the leaders get it? Do you think they understand? It says they went away and left him. But they didn't stay away. They had come loaded for bear, you could say, and they wanted all of their ammunition to be used. And so, as the chapter progresses, they challenge him on the resurrection and then the famous question, "What is the greatest commandment?"

And, as if to show that Jesus really does get what they are after, at the end of the chapter he asked them a question about the Messiah and David. And they couldn't answer again. They were never really able to answer his questions. They were so interested in their own, so interested in defining what the dues would be for salvation. I wonder when David prayed his prayer if the words came to light for Jesus. And that's what he was referring to when he asked them about David. You see David had been denied—really he had been humiliated because he was not allowed to build the temple because of his life style, his disobedience in the past. And so he helped Solomon make the arrangements, the contacts with the contractors, to raise the money, to secure the goods to build the temple. But it wasn't his temple, it was Solomon's temple for the Lord. So this greatest child hero in Israel's history, the greatest general that had ever commanded a Jewish army, the greatest king that had ever lived who had united the kingdom of two Israels, in 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles, the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter, makes this confession, "Yours, O Lord are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, the majesty, for all that is in heaven and on the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are the exalted as head of us all."

Imagine being as powerful as David was and yet this is his humble prayer. He remains thankful throughout this 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles and later he says words that just,

it seems to me, had to be in Jesus' thinking that day in the temple: "But who am I and what is my people that we should be able to fulfill the free-will offering? For all things come from you and of your own have we given you." *Of your own have we given you.*

In the end, we all have to admit that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. In the end, we confess that not only are we the beneficiaries of all of God's wonderful gifts, but we utilize those gifts as their custodian, but it is God who is the giver. Everything has come from God. So when we read a passage like this—and I still go back to my childhood when we said, "Render to Caesar what's Caesar's and to God what's Gods,"—we have to be talking about something more than taxes or money or even our simple understanding of stewardship.

Matthew's message is about the realm of authority in heaven and on earth where God is the king, where there is no power greater than God, no allegiance greater than our loyalty to God—God working in heaven and on earth, in us, and in His church. Because, you see, in the end there really are no secular activities and then religious later. Everything is because of what God has done.

And so, when we look at one another like we did during the passing of the peace, if we have difficulty seeing Jesus, then like the Herodians and the Pharisees, maybe we are asking the wrong question. Their approach to faith was clearly not what God wanted. Do our agendas, do our religious practices, sometimes get in the way? Does our subtle rejection of one another or of God's authority shape our tradition more than the image that is there from the moment of our creation? Do you get the irony? He asked them for a coin and it was blasphemous to even have that coin. That was a Roman coin. It was the only coin they accepted for taxes. It was a symbol of the oppression that they were under. Jesus doesn't have one. His disciples don't have one. But right there in the temple, the Pharisees and Herodians are able to produce that coin quickly. They have one. They entrap themselves by producing it. And Jesus says, "So now give to God what is God's."

Aren't you imprinted with the image of God? Aren't we to give that back to God the image that we have received? The image of God is there in the face of someone who is hurting, who has lost hope, who is so sad they can't see a way out. The image of God is there in the hand that is wounded. It is there, the image of Christ, in each of us, and if we can't recognize it, maybe it's because we have allowed our culture to turn Jesus into someone we carry around with us, or who hovers over our shoulders and whispers in our ears. Jesus is resurrected over and over every time we turn from our agenda back to the things that are God's, every time our connection to others is more important than trying to win the day, every time we protect one another, every time we turn to God

with what is already God's, and that is the treasure of our relationships. Augustine would say to do justice to God is to return what is already the Lord's.

Think, if we could just allow God's authority to take charge of our tongues and our hearts and our minds then all the things in heaven and on earth would sort themselves out just as God desires. I pray that authority for each of us to become tangible. Stand with me. Let us say what we believe.

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.*