



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

Nicky Gumbel tells us of a man who sent a cheque to the Inland Revenue for back taxes with a note attached that said: “I felt so guilty for cheating on my taxes I had to send you this cheque. If I don’t feel any better, I’ll send you the rest.”

The temptation when you read today’s passage is that you tell yourself that this is a passage about money. Certainly I can understand where you might think this but you would be mistaken in doing so. Money does come into it and so does the idea of taxes but this is not a sermon about money... no it is a sermon about you in your entirety and complexity.

Let’s remind ourselves of the reading:

Mark Ch 12

¹³Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. **“Why are you trying to trap me?”** he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” ¹⁶They brought the coin, and he asked them, **“Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”** “Caesar’s,” they replied. ¹⁷Then Jesus said to them, **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”** And they were amazed at him.

Here we read of the Religious leaders once again coming up with an underhanded plot to trap Jesus in His speech. By doing this the schemers tried to sway the people to turn against Jesus. First they got together with the Herodians, whom the Pharisees barely tolerated, and cooked up a plot. They decided to send some Herodian and Pharisee scholars to talk to Jesus. As scholars, it was intended to make them appear as if they were seeking information rather than trying to trap Jesus.

The Herodian and Pharisee scholars were instructed to pretend that they had an argument and they wanted Jesus to settle the argument for them. Dr Greg Jones explains for us the significance of these two groups coming together, he writes:

Today’s passage makes it clear how desperate the Pharisees were feeling because they forged an alliance with an unseemly group, the Herodians. The Pharisees, who were the religious leaders, and the Herodians, who were the political leaders, were generally at odds with one another. The fact that they formed an alliance in hopes of ousting Jesus, demonstrates the drastic measures each group was willing to take. The Herodians were the party of Herod, the King of Galilee, who owed his power to the Roman army. It was his duty to enforce the law that required Jews to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor.

The Pharisees were the leading Orthodox Jews, and they deeply resented paying this tax to a foreign king. Not only did it underscore their subjection to a foreign power, but the Jews were required to pay this tax with a silver coin that had the emperor’s head engraved on it. Now, the Romans had minted copper coins without the imperial inscription for the

Jews to use as currency within Palestine. However, the Jews were required to pay the tax to Rome, with the silver coin bearing the picture of the emperor. It was the Romans way of saying, “This is who your lord is - the pagan Roman emperor.”

It's clear that there was no love lost between the Pharisees and the Herodians, but they were united in their disdain of Jesus, so they came up with a strategy that they thought insured their success. They decided to ask Jesus a question that they believed would land him in an impossible dilemma.

When these scholars came to Jesus they began praising Him and flattering Him. These young scholars tried to win Jesus over in the same way. When they thought they had won Him over, they sprung the trick question on Him: “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵Should we pay or shouldn't we?”

Here was the dilemma – the Pharisees hated the taxes that they were expected to pay to the Roman Government. On the other hand, the Herodians supported the taxes. The plotters against Jesus wrongly assumed Jesus would answer their question by choosing one side or the other. If he said, “No, it is not lawful to pay the taxes,” the Herodians would hand Him over to the Roman authorities labelling Him a rebel and a traitor to Caesar. If He said “Yes”, they should pay the taxes; Jesus would have made the Pharisees unhappy.

The Pharisees in turn would go to the people and tell them that Jesus was not the Messiah because a true Saviour would not suggest that the people pay taxes to their invaders. The two groups thought they had Jesus right where they wanted Him. Whatever side he chose, His response would seal His doom. The Pharisees and the Herodians hated each other and they felt that Jesus couldn't possibly satisfy both sides at the same time. Not only did Jesus answer their question in its entirety but he did so with interest.

It wasn't enough for him to simply answer the question and leave it at that, oh no, he went further than that he answered it and more – he challenged them too. The answer and the challenge we read had them amazed. ¹⁷Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.” In one fell swoop not only did Jesus give them political direction but he also gave them spiritual direction. This was not what they were looking for but it was what they got! Jesus answered the question on their lips but he also answered the question that should have been on their hearts. Well the question of what is Caesars is an easy one to answer and so we need to ask ourselves what is it then that we should give back to God.

In the same way as the image of Caesar was upon the Denarius so too is the image of God upon us.

Genesis Ch 1

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” ²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

W. Tozer, another wonderful devotional writer said this: The widest thing in the universe is not space; it is the potential capacity of the human heart. Being made in the image of God, it is capable of almost unlimited extension in all directions. And one of the world's

greatest tragedies is that we allow our hearts to shrink until there is room in them for little besides ourselves.

I think that it is a fair comment that so many Christians today love God half-heartedly. We love God when it's convenient, or in religious ways like singing songs of love when we're in church. But do we love God with all that's within us, with our time, with our resources, with our energy, with our passion? Do we love him with our minds by thinking deeply about the important things in life? So many affections clutter our hearts that our affection for God often is diluted and half-hearted.

You know this is true, even in your own heart at times. And so many Christians love people selectively. We tend to love people who are like us, and withhold love from people who aren't like us. We're content with what the Greek philosophers called "friendship love," the kind of love people who are like each other share. So we love people who look like us, vote like us, dress like us, act like us. We love x but not y and you can fill in this values for yourself but living in Northern Ireland it isn't really that hard is it?

But devotion to God is loving people we're not drawn to. It's demonstrating with our loving actions and attitudes, that God's love is not discriminating. It's even loving our enemies, people who hate us and would like nothing more than to see us destroyed. That's not friendship love, that's amazing, God-kind of love. In fact, it's the same kind of love God has for us, because before we came to faith in Jesus, we were God's enemies. And he loved us and showed us his love while we were still his enemies, by sending his son to die for us. We didn't deserve his love, but he loved us anyways. And God wants us as people who bear his name and confess our loyalty to him to love in the same way he loves, to love those who hate us, those who don't like us, those who want to destroy us. In fact, Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that... But love your enemies, do good to them... and you will be called sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your father is merciful" (Luke 6:27-36 NIV). This command isn't to nations or to governments, it's to individual followers of Jesus Christ, people like me and you.

But listen my friends with this love comes active service too. We return to God the debt owed through our service to him in his church and beyond. We have many organizations in this church were at the moment we are in desperate need of help and all it would take is for those who as yet are not involved in service – or ministry if you would rather call it that. There is a debt that needs to be paid back to God and we need to deal with the I.O.U. we have promised to God in the past. Our service to God through our service is so very important to the advancement of God's kingdom. It doesn't matter who you are there is a need within many of our churches ministries that could use your service.

A large group of European pastors came to one of D. L. Moody's Northfield Bible Conferences in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. Following the European custom of the time, each guest put his shoes outside his room to be cleaned by the hall servants overnight. But of course this was America and there were no hall servants. Walking the dormitory halls that night, Moody saw the shoes and determined not to embarrass his brothers. He mentioned the need to some ministerial students who were there, but met with only silence or pious excuses. Moody returned to the dorm, gathered up the shoes,

and, alone in his room, the world's only famous evangelist began to clean and polish the shoes. Only the unexpected arrival of a friend in the midst of the work revealed the secret.

When the foreign visitors opened their doors the next morning, their shoes were shined. They never know by whom. Moody told no one, but his friend told a few people, and during the rest of the conference, different men volunteered to shine the shoes in secret. Perhaps the episode is a vital insight into why God used D. L. Moody as He did. He was a man with a servant's heart and that was the basis of his true greatness.

Jesus Christ had a servant's heart and has since been known as the Servant king. If we somehow feel that we can call ourselves a follower of Christ's and not serve him... is it somehow because we regard ourselves greater than the one who came to set for us the example of service?

I cannot answer that one for you – that is one only you can answer.

We need to give God back what is already his?

While this is how we should live because we are created in God's image and because in doing so we are returning to God what is already his there is a question that needs to be asked in closing...

Giving back to God a life of love for others, while it conforms to God's command for us is good and proper there is another aspect of the denarius that needs to be addressed. While the coin had on it the image of Caesar it also had his name. The name of the Emperor was clear to be seen on the reverse of the coin. There was no hiding it. The name could be read by anyone.

When we come to Jesus when we allow him entrance into our lives he writes his name on our lives.

2 Cor 3 reads:

¹Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. ³You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

As we allow God's control in our lives people can look at us and see the life that God wants them to see. The signature of Jesus Christ is signed upon our hearts and the life we live is a life given back to God in service and in gratitude.

What do others see when they look at you life? Do they see a life lived with Christ's signature upon it as it becomes evident that the life you live, is a life you are pleased to give back to God? Or do they see a life that is prepared to take from God all that he has seen fit to bless you with and yet you are unprepared to return anything to him as a sacrifice of thanks?

In Brennan Manning's superb book, *The Signature of Jesus*, Manning presents a radical alternative to the normal everyday, ho-hum, "comfort zone" mentality lived out by so many "so-called Christians."

His final statement in the book:

The Signature of Jesus is offered to Christians who want to live by faith and not by mere “religion,” for those who recognize that many of the burning theological issues in the church today are neither burning nor theological, [for those] who see Christianity neither as a moral code or a belief system but a love affair, who have not forgotten that they are followers of a crucified Christ, who know that following Him means living dangerously, who want to live the gospel without compromise, who have no greater desire than to have His signature written on the pages of their lives.

I am not interested in the taxes you pay to the Inland Revenue but we all need to think about the debt of love we owe to God...

Let us pray