Old Testament lesson – 1 Samuel 8:1-22
New Testament lesson – Matthew 22:15-22

Oh, Those Pesky Taxes!

If you are one of those people who does not think politics and religion should mix, neither one of these passages will meet your approval. Or maybe they would, as we see some disagreeable results when they are mixed. On the other hand, Jesus gives a response that mixes the two in a very creative way.

In our OT lesson, the people make a request of the judge and prophet Samuel that is displeasing to God. The people of Israel want to be like other nations. Up until this time, Israel had no king. They had judges from time to time, usually when the nation was in danger. But essentially the people were ruled by following the Law given to Moses. At least in theory, that was how the nation should have operated.

However, several times in the book of Judges we hear this phrase, "In those days there was no king in Israel." In two of those cases, there is this additional statement: every man did what was right in his own eyes. Sometimes, that led to wickedness.

So the people, rather than saying, "We need to do better," told Samuel, "We want to be like other nations. Give us a king to keep order and make us secure." That's what people want when it comes to being governed: order and security. A king would lead the army against enemies and keep the people safe. A king could enforce the law and maintain order in the nation.

To be perfectly fair, the system that was in place was threatening to go very sour on them. Samuel was sort of a combination of prophet and judge, almost like a second Moses. While he was hale and hearty, everything was fine; he could handle the burden of governing the nation. But his sons were not like him. They were using their positions of influence for their own financial gain. They took bribes and perverted justice. If you think those practices are new or unique to our government, here is evidence that they are much older than many people imagine.

Under the leadership of Samuel, as under the leadership of Moses, there was a marriage of religion and politics that is very difficult to maintain. This is what a true theocracy looks like. It requires one or more leaders who are truly in touch with God, not just in their own imaginations. You can't have a theocracy run by people who simply make God in their own image and use God-talk to justify whatever they want to do. Apparently, Samuel's sons were like that to some extent. Eli the priest, Samuel's predecessor, had similar sons, which was why God called Samuel to replace Eli.

Now that Samuel's sons were proving just as worthless as Eli's, the people had had enough. For some reason, they seemed to labor under the delusion that having a king would avoid this problem of corruption. As Israel's history unfolded, that delusion was exposed repeatedly.

Samuel tried to warn them. And his warning did not even address the problems of corruption. He did not mention how some kings would lead the people astray from God, or neglect the Law of Moses, or become involved in idolatry that would eventually lead to the conquest and exile of the nation. No, he just warned them about the normal activities of a king: conscripting men for military service, taking young women into service as cooks and bakers and perfumers, taking men to be farmers and armorers, taxing the living daylights out of everything they produced, and essentially making the people his slaves.

Now, maybe, as some scholars suggest, this little speech of Samuel's was edited into the story after years of seeing how the kings of Israel behaved. But as I said, there is no mention of some of the worst sins committed by various kings. So it seems to me that Samuel simply made some predictions based on how the kings behaved in every other nation that he knew of. It doesn't really seem that far-fetched. This did not

require a true prophet; only an astute observer. Samuel may have been both.

It is interesting to note that Samuel made a fairly big deal about how much a king would take from the people for himself: grain, grapes, olives, cattle, asses, sheep – in short, whatever the people had, the king would take part of it for himself. Oh, those pesky taxes! Just as with the corruption of government officials, the taxes of today are nothing new.

We find them rearing their ugly head again in our NT lesson. Now here is a passage where religion and politics really mix. Some of the details need a little unpacking to see just how involved they are.

First, consider the people who were trying to entrap Jesus: the Pharisees and the Herodians. It is not likely these two groups operated on the same page very often. But in the case of trying to do away with Jesus, they found common cause.

That is very, very interesting, because the Herodians were very much a political group, while the Pharisees were basically a religious group. But both groups perceived Jesus as a threat. That alone tells us that Jesus was both political and religious. He was a threat to both spheres of influence.

So they devised a very cunning plan, or so they thought, to catch him with a tricky question that would touch on both the religious and the political.

During the time of the Roman occupation, the Romans, of course, required taxes in all the conquered territories of their empire. Judea was no exception. There were two systems in place for collecting two different sorts of taxes. One system involved imperial officers collecting taxes directly for the empire. The other system involved a sort of bureaucratic structure for collecting other taxes. While the first tax was probably burdensome, the second was probably the more subject to corruption. It was the second type of tax collector that probably included Matthew the apostle.

In this story, the direct imperial tax seems to be what is in question. And that is what makes it extremely political.

At the time of the gospels, only copper coins could be struck in Judea. Silver coins were made in Rome and circulated within the empire. Thus, the coin for the tax had Caesar's image on it. So there is the political reality: Jews had to have Roman coins in order to pay the tax.

How does religion enter the picture?

You probably recall that one of the apostles was called Simon the Zealot. In Matthew he is called Simon the Cananean, but that is probably a mistranslation from an Aramaic word that meant someone who is zealous. The Zealots were a radical religious group whose beliefs involved them in political activism. They believed that Rome's army did not belong in the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. They considered it a violation of the Jewish religion to pay taxes to Rome. Meanwhile, others, such as the Pharisees were of a "go along to get along" mindset. And the Herodians were willing to use the arrangement with Rome to acquire power for themselves.

Do you begin to see how this question, in the minds of the Pharisees and the Herodians, presents a dangerous trap for Jesus? If he says it is wrong to pay the tax to Caesar, they turn him over as a dangerous rebel. If he simply says to pay the tax, he will offend the zealots such as Simon and probably many others, who would have thought the Messiah could never betray the promise of God. They thought they had him.

Back in the 70s there was a play called "Your Arm's Too Short to Box with God." It was based on the gospel according to Matthew, and this story illustrates how true that title is. Jesus knew what they were up to. He knew that regardless of his answer they would not change their thinking or their practices. He called them out to their faces and called them hypocrites.

Then he said, "Show me a coin. What do you see on there? A likeness of Caesar? Well, then, it

must be his. Go ahead and pay Caesar's tax with Caesar's coin."

Jesus was probably aware that the coins were made by Romans in Rome. Go ahead and send it back.

BUT, he added, give to God what is God's. He did not say rise up in rebellion and take back the land promised to Abraham by God, the land which was God's. But a zealot hearing these words could have believed that Jesus was really on their side. They heard, "Give God's land back to him."

Earlier in the gospel there is an inquiry about Jesus paying the half-shekel tax, which was religious in nature, not civil. It went to the temple maintenance. On that occasion, Jesus told Peter to go fishing. He was to open up the first fish he caught, and there he would find the money for the tax. I know there is at least one person in this church who would probably love to pay his taxes that way. I won't give his name, but his initials are Steve Mulch. If I could pay my taxes that way I would become a fisherman, too.

That is an irritant, isn't it? No one likes to pay taxes. But we do, because we have to. Deep down we realize the necessity of paying them so the government can do what it's supposed to do: Keep us safe and secure from enemies foreign and domestic, regulate things that need to be regulated, such as various types of commerce, and so on. We want to be able to trust the foods and drugs that we consume. We want to feel safe in our homes and traveling anywhere in the country.

Taxes were a big part of the reason for separating from England. We were tired of "taxation without representation." Now we have taxation *with* representation, and we still complain about it. But we pay the taxes. Partly we do it because there can be severe consequences if we don't, but whether we realize it or not, we are also following the example of Jesus. But it would be nice if we could do that fishing bit to find the money.

We are very blessed to live where we do. We pay higher taxes than many nations do, but we generally have a much better living standard than those places. Some places seem to have it better than us, for example, because they have free health care. However, I have lived in one of those places, and the health care is not free. It is free *at the point of service*. It is paid for with very high taxes, and the quality and waiting times are not very good at all. In addition, the British system is apparently going broke.

I think it is incumbent upon any Christian believer in this country to be very grateful for the blessing of living here in America. I also believe that anyone who claims to follow Jesus should follow his example of doing their civic duty. Jesus actually had fewer civic responsibilities with regard to the Roman Empire than we have as American citizens. He was not a Roman citizen as Paul was.

Here in America we have the privilege of participating in the election of our leaders. I have heard of Christians who think that because they belong to a "greater kingdom" they should not vote or participate in politics in any way. Personally, I think that might be an excuse for laziness, but that might be an unfair judgement.

So I want to encourage everyone who is old enough to vote in the upcoming election. God has blessed us with that amazing civil right by placing us in America, not in China or Cuba or Iran.

We have two political parties in America. I can't tell you which candidates to vote for, as I don't know what every candidate plans to do.

However, I can point out some things about the parties that might help you decide how you vote.

One of the two parties seems to think there is no problem with abortion, even up to the point of birth. The same party seems to support the actions of Hamas on October 7, 2023, when they murdered thousands of Jews, including women and children and elderly people. Elected officials of that party have publicly supported those

actions, and other members of that party have refused to condemn their fellow party members who did so.

Some elected officials of this same party refuse to cooperate with federal law enforcement officers who are seeking people who are in this country illegally, even if those illegal immigrants have committed other crimes since entering our country. Some of those elected officials hold high office in our state. For some reason, many members of this party do not believe we should enforce the borders of our country.

In recent years, many members of this party have embraced more openly the principles of socialism. Now, there's a philosophy that really likes taxes. One of the new favorite taxes they want to try out is a wealth tax. That is not merely a tax on wealthy people; it is a tax on *wealth*, everything a person owns. Let's say you have a farm of 300 acres worth $10,000 per acre. That is $3,000,000 of wealth that this party wants to tax. We haven't yet included the value of your machinery. Can you afford 5 or 10 percent of that every year? How long before you have to sell out? And who will buy it if all the other farms are going under? It is actually a brilliant plan for a socialist government to own all the means of production by taxing them into bankruptcy. And if you think you can avoid it by forming a corporation instead of owning the farmland as an individual, they have probably already thought of that.

One of the most interesting things about this party is that they have simultaneously embraced Islam and support of the LGBTQ community. If this party continues along these lines, it won't be long before it is reminiscent of the old Highlander TV series, in which characters were immortal, but they absorbed one another's life force by cutting off one another's heads. The tag line of the show was, "in the end, there can be only one." Socialism, according to Karl Marx, is only an intermediate step to communism. Communism considers religion to be the opiate of the masses.

Muslims, on the other hand, believe it is their destiny to rule the world. On the way, they might have to kill all the infidels, but they're OK with that. Infidels include, but is not limited to, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Taoists, Wiccans, and atheists. Oh, wait – wouldn't that include the socialists and communists who are currently on their team?

What about the other party? Well, they are far from perfect. Alone, simply on their own, they will not be the solution to every problem we face. They have not yet shown the moral courage to do all that much to actually solve many problems. Many people can not abide the personality of that party's current leader. So it boils down to choosing the lesser of two evils. And until Christ returns, that may be the best we can hope for.

So if you support even higher taxes, abortion up to birth, a socialist form of government, boys and men in women's rest rooms, locker rooms, and sports, illegal immigrants driving tractor trailers on the highways, and Muslim calls to prayer five times a day, you know which party agrees with you. Vote for them.

If such things do not align with your values, you should probably vote for the other party's candidates. You might feel like you have to hold your nose to do so. It might mean indicating support for some individuals or some ideas you do not agree with. As I said, we might have to pick the lesser of two evils.

I know I have been warned not to preach like this, that there are people who like the party I have been describing. But if you truly agree with all of the things I have described – abortion up until birth, men in women's bathrooms and locker rooms, supporting terrorist groups that want to kill every Jew and Christian in the world – including me and you, and most recently, justifying c c the murder of children, opening the border and providing free stuff for illegal immigrants while taking resources away from American citizens, encouraging children to question which sex they belong to – if you agree

with those things, maybe the time has come for you to part ways with the Christian faith, if you haven't already.

Someday my grandchildren may be asking me in a hidden room somewhere, "Poppaw, what did you do when the Muslims and communists were taking over America?" I do not want to answer, "Well, I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want to offend anyone. Now be quiet – someone may be listening, and we don't want to hurt their feelings."

In difficult times, we must make difficult choices. Some people think it is a difficult choice to speak up like this, but I disagree. When I consider what is at stake, I find it easy to point out what is facing our country.

I think Jesus sets us a clear example about our participation in society. Even if it is unpleasant or disagreeable in some way, as paying the Roman tax was, we should still do our civic duty. We live in a land of privilege, and one of the privileges we have is the right to vote. There are no good excuses not to. Vote like the future of your children and grandchildren depends on it – because it does.

If you need a ride to go vote early, let me know. I'll drive you if no one else will. Gasoline is only about $4 per gallon, a real bargain compared to printer ink, which is more than $10,000 per gallon. I would be happy to help you follow the example of Jesus. But if you need a fish, call Steve. As he would say, Amen.