

The Second Baptist Pulpit

“What Belongs to God?”

Matthew 22:15-22

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I've only been booed once in my life.

It was several years ago when I was living in Waco, Texas. I was a student at Baylor's Truett seminary and I was pastor of the Spring Valley Baptist Church in Lorena, just south of Waco. The Waco Independent School District was considering a proposal to begin each school day in each school with a moment of silence for prayer. The pastor of the Mighty Wind Worship Center had proposed it, and it was

on the agenda for debate at that night's school board meeting.

I decided I was going to go to the meeting and speak against the proposal. I'm all for prayer at school when it's student-initiated and student-led, but I've always had a problem with getting the government involved in leading or mandating prayer.

I went a little early to make sure I got a seat, and it was a good thing. The place was packed. This pastor had done a good job stirring up the troops in support

of his proposal. By the time the meeting started, there was a person in every pew-- I mean seat.

People were standing against the walls on three sides. Not everyone could even get inside, so a big group was standing in the doorway. I found out later a couple of churches had even bused their people to the meeting. There was an audible buzz in the atmosphere.

I was sitting over on the far side of the room with two people: Derek Davis, the head of Baylor's church-state department, and a retired Jewish optometrist. As far as I could tell, we were the only three people in the audience who were opposed to the prayer time.

Eventually, they started the debate. There were about twenty-five of us signed up to speak. All the speakers before me were speaking passionately about the power of prayer and lamenting the fact that God had been kicked out of the schools. All of this to much applause and "amens."

It was near the end when they called my name. I introduced myself as the pastor of Spring Valley Baptist Church and said that I was there to speak against the proposal.

The crowd booed me.

It started out quiet but got louder as more people joined in. I was the only pastor to speak against the proposal, and it was as if I had gone to the local V.F.W. hall and spoken against the American flag. I was a traitor.

It was kind of a strange moment for me-- being the focal point of a large crowd's hostility.

I took a deep breath and said that a moment of prayer for school kids of diverse religious backgrounds was more likely to inspire boredom, note-passing, or even giggling than reverence. And they booed; and some even hissed.

I told them that I resented it when these people said that God had been kicked out of the public schools. I said the God I know couldn't be kicked out of anywhere and is present every day. I cited former U.S. Senator John Danforth, an Episcopal priest, who said that the God he believes in is not subject to the Supreme Court, the Congress, or even the school board.

Objects may be kept out of the classroom, chewing gum, for example. God is not chewing gum. God is the creator of heaven and earth. That statement, also, did not inspire the rousing cheers I had envisioned.

It's tough talking to a crowd and saying things you know they're not going to like. It's no fun, usually, standing in opposition to great numbers of people with whom you share a common faith.

But those of us who are committed to our faith have got to be willing to stand up and say, *No*, when people of faith try to give government dominion over things that belong only to God. Prayer is one of those things.

Along with Thomas Jefferson, I believe it is *sinful and tyrannical* for government to compel people to pay taxes for the propagation of religious opinions with which they disagree-- or even with which they agree.

George W. Truett, Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas for literally the first half of the twentieth century, said on the steps of the Capitol in Washington D.C.:

Christ's religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source, and to the degree it is thus supported, it is a millstone hanged about its neck.

Religious liberty is important to me. In fact, one of the reasons I went to law school after I graduated from college was my interest in church-state legal issues. I spent a summer in

Washington D.C. during college interning for a church-state lobbying group. I believe deeply in the separation of church and state. I have written numerous articles over the years criticizing the efforts of the Religious Right to trample on the principle of church-state separation.

So it is very hard for me to talk about this passage of scripture today where Jesus says to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's without getting into a theological and political discussion of the merits of the separation of church and state.

And now particularly in this election season, it is very tempting to preach a sermon about religion and politics.

These are vital issues, but the reality is that Jesus was not trying here to set down principles for church-state relations. And certainly not in a democracy, which didn't exist at that time. As much as I might be tempted to do it, I don't think we can be satisfied with even a principled and well-presented sermon on my views of the separation of church and state.

[thanks to Todd Weir of bloomingtoncactus.com for helping me to recognize this]

That would be the easy way out. But the fact is that this event in Jesus' life and his words here are much more difficult, much more demanding than that.

The Pharisees were plotting a way to try to trap Jesus into saying something that would get him into trouble with the crowds. They sent their disciples, along with a few of Herod's followers mixed in to bait Jesus:

Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students. So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

Now, either this was just insincere flattery designed to set Jesus up for a fall, or they really meant it, and they knew Jesus would get himself into trouble because he'd give an honest answer. Either way, they set Jesus up to make somebody mad no matter how he answered the question.

On the one hand, a bunch of the Jews were going to be upset with Jesus if he said that it was O.K. to pay taxes to the Roman government. For one thing, just like us, they thought they were over-taxed. And they really were. The Jews may have been paying close to forty percent of

their income in taxes. That's even more than Joe the Plumber thinks he's going to have to pay—if he gets his plumbing license and if he gets a business.

Also, there were the Zealots. They believed that Israel belonged only to God and that God alone was the legitimate ruler of his people. The Roman Caesar had no right to rule over them. Taxes paid to Caesar were an acknowledgment of his lordship, so Jews must withhold their taxes.

Even the coins themselves were offensive to the Jews. The tax had to be paid in a Roman coin which contained an image and inscription that was considered blasphemous by many Jews.

The coin said: *Tiberius Caesar, August son of the divine Augustus, high priest.* These coins were not just legal tender; they were pieces of propaganda for the imperial cult.

Imagine this. What if our coins said something like:

George Walker Bush, august son of the divine George Herbert Walker Bush, President of the United States, the Lord of the planet?

Those who are sympathetic to the Democratic Party wouldn't

be real excited about carrying around that money.

In the same way, what if all the money during the previous administration was engraved with the head of William Jefferson Clinton and had sayings about his divinity and virtues? I'm certain that many Republicans would refuse to carry or use such money. Every time they pulled out their money, they would be reminded that the enemy was in power.

What if after this election we had to have all new coins minted with the likeness of either Barack Obama or John McCain, whoever wins?

It may be significant that the pictures on all of our money are of dead people.

[Brian Stoffgren]

The very coin used to pay the taxes was offensive and blasphemous.

All of this is to say that if Jesus said it was O.K. to pay taxes to Caesar, he was going to alienate most of his fellow Jews.

Of course, on the other side were the Romans and the Sadducees. If Jesus openly proclaimed that the Jews were not to pay taxes, he'd be in big

trouble with the Romans-- probably arrested.

It was a pretty tough situation they put Jesus in. It looked like he was going to get stuck no matter what.

Jesus recognized what the Pharisees were doing, so he asked them, *Why are you playing games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it.*

They handed him a Roman coin. Now remember, this was happening in the Temple. Isn't it ironic that these Pharisaic Jews carried in their pockets in God's temple one of these blasphemous coins. They had lost face with the crowd already.

They handed Jesus one of their coins. *This image on the coin, Jesus said, who does it look like?*

They said, *Caesar.*

Then give to Caesar what is his, and give to God what is God's.

The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. That's the easy part. There are things we owe to the govern-

ment. Our taxes, our involvement, our support, our prayers.

Paying your taxes is simple. You may not like it, but you buckle down and write a check. Or, a lot of the time you don't even have to write a check, it is just automatically removed from your paycheck. Giving Caesar what is his is relatively easy, important and necessary. As someone once observed, civilization is expensive, and taxes pay the tab. Give to the government what is the government's.

But give to God what is God's?

Absolute allegiance to an ultimate God, rendering our entire selves to God without preconditions without limits, without hedging our bets, that is something altogether different. And it can't be done in a moment, and it can't be deducted automatically. It takes a lifetime.

That's why I said at the beginning of all this that Jesus' words are difficult and demanding, if you really think about it.

Give to God what is God's. What does the Psalm say? The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

You are God's, and God wants you all the way down to the core of your being.

I read somewhere that some trees can be killed by cutting off a two-inch strip of bark all the way around their trunk. The key to their life is at the surface. Not the palm tree, though. The life force of the palm tree is at its heart. And its roots go deep enough that it can live in the desert. You will see palm trees that are very old and battered. In fact, most palm trees don't even bear fruit until they are fifty years old.

And you might find a very old and battered palm tree, but its fruit will be very sweet. Because the source of its life is at its core. As American Christians, we have to constantly fight off shallowness. We have to fight against being a people whose faith is a mile wide and in inch deep.

What a difference it would make if we lived as though we belong to God all the way to the core of our being. And as we age, despite the scars life might leave on us, the fruit of our lives would be so sweet that everyone would recognize what is at our core.

What if someone looked at you, really looked at you, and asked Jesus' question: Whose image is there? This image on you, who does it look like?

Would everyone recognize that that image, that faint but recognizable image on you, is God's?

Jesus turns the coin into a mirror and tells us to look at that image. What do you see?

Give to God what is God's. That's you. The emperor gets his coins, but God gets our life.

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