

# “Grateful Giving”

*Matthew 22:15-22 & 1 Thessalonians 1:1-6*

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**PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING** Gracious God let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

A reading from the gospel of Matthew: **Matthew 22:15-22 NLT** “Then the religious leaders met together to plot how to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. They sent some of their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to meet with Jesus. “Teacher,” they said, “we know how honest you are. You teach the way of God truthfully. You are impartial and do not play favorites. Now tell us what you think about this: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” But Jesus knew their evil motives. “You hypocrites!” Jesus said. “Why are you trying to trap me? Here, show me the coin used for the tax.” When they handed him a Roman coin, Jesus asked, “Whose picture and title are stamped on it?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. “Well, then,” Jesus said, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” Jesus’ reply amazed them, and they went away. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jesus modeled how to handle loaded questions. Be non-anxious, avoid a quick answer to one binary side, ask good questions and bring people together to find a solution that benefits everyone.

The religious leaders try to catch Jesus off guard by praising Jesus. They are looking for an answer that they can twist to incite fear and hate so they can arrest Jesus. Surprisingly, part of the proper answer is found in their words of praise, “You are impartial and do not play favorites.”

There was a raging political fight, so the religious leaders thought they crafted a question that would force Jesus to choose a side, enraging one side or the other. If Jesus approves of paying taxes, it would contradict much of his teaching. Roman taxation was sparse on the rich and crushing on the poor, an intolerable burden riddled with bribery and cheating. Roman taxation was a system promoting inequality, for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer. Roman taxation tempted with two forms of idolatry; worshipping money over God and worshipping the emperor, and empire, over God.

The religious leaders expected Jesus to speak out against taxes that is why the religious leaders brought the supporters of Herod, so Jesus could be arrested by them on the charge of sedition against Rome. Herod and his supporters do not care about the wellbeing of the community, rather they were greedy, fighting to continue their skimming of money for their luxurious life.

Jesus has been teaching and modeling compassion, love, forgiveness, welcoming the outcast, and equality for all. Religious leaders think they are loving by enforcing the letter of the law. They fail to love by declaring certain lifestyles, certain people, unclean, judging them and restricting them from worship. Jesus names their sin, calling them hypocrites. Our prayer for understanding today was taken from Psalm 19 urging us to have our thoughts, feelings, and words all acceptable to God. Jesus loves, forgives, and will heal everyone, including the religious leaders, Herod, and the Romans. Jesus does not call the religious leaders evil. Jesus calls their motives evil. Lack of love, compassion, and not trying to change systems that sustain inequality is evil. Not trying to change the judgment and inequality of institutional religion is evil.

Next Jesus asks for a coin used for taxes. Jesus asked, “Whose picture and title are stamped on it?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. “Well, then,” Jesus said, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” Jesus’ answer in the form of a question does not support either binary choice. Most of our political issues will not be solved for the benefit of everyone by supporting either side, rather deeper questions need to be asked, the issue needs to be reframed, viewed from several steps back, the evil intentions stripped from the equation, the attitude that one side has to win and the other lose stripped from the equation, identifying the needs of everyone added to the equation, so a new solution that benefits all can be identified and tried. Jesus is doing all of this in his question. Jesus does not answer the question rather invites everyone to wrestle with the issue until a compassionate, loving, equality answer can be found for all. Is it right to pay taxes? Maybe. Perhaps since everything belongs to God, we should pay nothing to government if that government is not serving everyone with compassion and love. Perhaps we should pay taxes, for the government is a tool to create a loving community. Perhaps, it means that there should be separation between church and state. Perhaps, it means taxes are permitted as long as government does not take away the freedom that God desires for all people. And perhaps, it means numerous other insights. Whatever it means, Jesus is modeling the

importance of remaining non-anxious, looking deeply into issues, listening to everyone, asking good questions, searching, debating, and discovering fresh solutions for the wellbeing of all.

A more subtle insight of Jesus' reply is grateful giving. Roman coins had the image and title of the emperor stamped on the coin. Jesus said give the coin back to the creator. Each of us, everyone, is created in the image of God, the goodness of God is stamped into us. We are to gratefully give our entire self, all we have, to God. Jesus is challenging us to discover for ourselves what it means to give to God, everything and our self, for all belongs to God. Jesus is inviting us to imagine our self as a coin, our lives, as an offering to God. Are you striving to be a pleasing offering to God? Do you experience joy when you give?

Back in the third century, Rome was still the dominant power and Christians were undergoing persecution. In the year 258, the emperor Valerian commanded his Imperial treasury to confiscate all money and possessions belonging to the Christian church. Responding to this threat, the Pope put Lawrence in charge of the church's resources and gave him responsibility for the church's outreach to the poor. The Roman emperor demanded that Lawrence turn over all the resources of the church and gave him three days to round up the money. Lawrence quickly sold all the church's valuables and gave the money to widows and the sick. He then distributed the church's property to the poor. On the third day, the emperor summoned Lawrence to his palace and asked for the wealth of the church. With great fanfare, Lawrence entered the palace, stopped, and then gestured back to the door. Streaming in behind him were crowds of poor, crippled, blind and suffering people. He proclaimed, "These are the true treasures of the church."

The treasures of the church are people made in the image of God. The treasure of the cosmos is humanity, created in the image of God to be creative in expanding love, joy, peace, wonder, and goodness. We give to God when we devote ourselves to feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and caring for the vulnerable. We do God's work when we affirm the image of God in every person.

The Apostle Paul wrote: **1 Thessalonians 1:1-6 NLT "This letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. We are writing to the church in Thessalonica, to you who belong to God the Parent and the Lord Jesus Christ. May God give you grace and peace. We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly. As we pray to our God about you, we think of your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have because of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know, dear siblings, that God loves you and has chosen you to be God's own people. For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true. And you know of our concern for you from the way we lived when we were with you. So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord."**

God highlighted for me the phrase, "enduring hope" also translated "steadfastness of hope". The political fighting and the enormity of problems we are facing are discouraging. It was refreshing to hear enduring hope, steadfastness of hope. Hope is a confident expectancy in the promises of God. Despite how I feel, despite how everything appears, the Kingdom of Heaven is coming to earth, light is dispersing the darkness, love is overcoming fear, joy is scattering hate, peace is engulfing anxiety. We are created in God's image. We are inspired by the Holy Spirit. We have the goodness of God within us, enabling us to be grateful givers, to serve others with love, bringing heaven to earth.

Paul's generous giving flows from his enduring hope and gratitude. Every letter Paul wrote addresses some sort of conflict and each letter has a section on gratitude. The practice of gratitude invigorates our giving and creates community.

It is stewardship season and typically this is where you would expect me to talk about giving money. This year I am suggesting something that will fill you with hope, fund the church's financial and volunteer needs, and solve all the world's problems: gratitude. At least daily practice gratitude. Keep a gratitude journal. When someone asks how you are doing. Answer with I am grateful for... Chase away discouraging thoughts with a thought of gratitude. Sincerely compliment your family, friends, and coworkers with a sentence of gratitude. Spend some time doing what you enjoy and then relive it through gratitude. Savor, absorb, and wonder in goodness and be grateful for those moments. Send texts, emails, or cards of gratitude. Disperse anxious thoughts by gratefully counting your blessings. Start each day by thinking about all you appreciate and expect from the day and end each day by naming that for which you are grateful. Give continuous attention to the image of God in everyone, the goodness in everyone, the goodness in the cosmos. Gratitude creates joyful, loving service. Gratitude creates giving. Gratitude nurtures community. Strive to expand your gratitude. Amen

