

Harris Athanasiadis

October 22, 2017

PAYING OUR DUES

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10; Matthew 22: 15-22

Paying taxes. Do you like it? Even if we think tax dollars serve a good purpose in general, I'm sure none of us is crazy about paying taxes. Even if we support overall our government's efforts to provide a fair tax system, it's no fun paying taxes. We're also not always sure our governments use our tax dollars well either. Is the money being applied to where it is needed most? Is the use of money efficient and careful or is it used in the service of private interests not in the public interest? Do we believe government officials use their expense accounts responsibly? Do we believe public services should be expanded more than they are? Do we believe we have a bloated civil service? We can go on and on with our many questions about how our tax dollars are used or misused and where our politics lie when it comes to taxes.

On the other hand, when we compare Canada to other parts of the world, we realize that things could always be worse. There are nations where money collected by taxation is misused because those in power are corrupt. There are nations where sufficient taxes aren't collected and public services are terribly inadequate. There are places where the gap between the wealthy and the poor are far worse than anything we see here in Canada because there is no progressive tax system in place.

Well, the situation at the time of Jesus would be similar to some of the worst situations in our world today.

People weren't elected into office but took office by force. The amount of taxes they collected was not based on majority vote but on coercive extraction. 'Pay taxes or pay with your life or your family's life.' Finally, the use of tax funds was not a matter of public opinion and vote but the choice of those in power who didn't use it to build schools and hospitals, but to pay their soldiers and build their palaces. Of course, in order to keep the public peace and minimize how much military presence they had to pay for, the Romans tried giving some localized power to Jewish officials. But it wasn't much. Living under the rule of an empire was no fun, unless you were part of a small Jewish elite who was linked to power through family or class. Paying taxes was like extracting teeth, without anaesthetic.

So, when Jesus is asked about paying taxes, he knows that whatever he says will be listened to very carefully. It's a very touchy issue. People have the strongest feelings about it. Jesus' popularity and credibility are on the line. The religious leaders who are part of the small elite with money and power, ask him the question with the hope that

he will answer in such a way as to get himself into serious trouble. But the answer Jesus gives is memorable and brilliant. That's why it is included in most of the gospel accounts. He answers in such a way that he doesn't step on any one's toes directly. At the same time, his answer speaks to the deepest meaning and purpose of life.

Jesus is all too aware of the different interests in the crowd. If he answers that it's good to pay taxes, he will be upsetting many people in the crowd who feel terribly burdened under foreign rule. The Romans have forced them into submission and tax dollars collected only go to support the Roman military machine that keeps the Jewish people subjugated. But if Jesus answers that it is wrong to pay taxes because they should be free as a people, he will fire up militant revolutionaries and upset the ruling authorities who will report to the Roman governor, who will then arrest Jesus for treason against Roman rule. So, on the surface of it, Jesus is trapped. Whatever answer he gives will get him in trouble. And if he says he has no answer, he will be seen as a coward.

Well, Jesus does give an answer, but he gives an answer that is neither a yes or a no to paying taxes. Or maybe it's both a yes and a no. Either way, clearly, he's getting at something else, something deeper. The first thing Jesus does is ask his questioners a counter question. He asks them to bring him a coin and then asks them to identify the image inscribed on the coin. It's the image of the emperor. The coins are Roman. The currency identifies the empire as dominating not only the economy, but something much more profound than the economy - the people. The empire owns their bodies. But does it own their souls?

It's all about the importance of money. It's all about our relationship with money. For those religious leaders, who are also the political elite, money is important. Money is the means to show up their status and privilege. Money makes the world go round and those who have it rule. Or, is it more true to say that they themselves are ruled? Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that we are ruled by what we value. Are we ruled by God or money?

Well but does there have to be a choice? Think about it. Why is it so often that we hate paying taxes? Is the biggest reason because we really believe our taxes are being misspent? Or is it also about a more basic desire? We would prefer to spend money on ourselves not share it with others. Our money and how we spend it shows what value and worth we have in society. Money represents our success in comparison to our neighbours. Paying taxes undermines how much we keep for ourselves and it levels the playing field. What's the value of money if not having the means to buying bigger and better and securing higher quality services faster than the rest of my neighbours? Just

being equal undermines the value of having more money for myself. After all, haven't I worked hard for it? Haven't I earned it fair and square because I'm smart and apply myself? Well, but what about the fact that you were born in the right place and the right time, or you were given good intelligence, good opportunities and good encouragement to believe in yourself? The truth is, nobody makes it in this world without so many vital things that are not of his or her making. Gratitude and appreciation are also recognition that all we have are gifts, including money and the ability to make money.

So then, beneath our resistance to paying taxes is also a core selfishness, as well as the need to find our identity and value by how much of it we have for ourselves. What Jesus is declaring by his answer is that the more attached we are to our money, the more we are ruled by the empire. The more we can become detached from our money, the less the empire rules us. This also means that we have to cultivate our spiritual life with different purposes and values than status, privilege or anxiety about earthly security. We have to develop within us a growing capacity for fulfillment in living more simply as well as a joy in finding opportunities to help others, share with others and give to others.

There's a great saying that's not a quote from the bible, but it may as well be. It goes like this: "Live simply, so that others may simply live." What this is saying is that living simply can also free me to be more generous and giving, but also to focus on other values and purposes to building up my security and worth as a human being. The alternative to living under the empire's rule is living under God's rule. If God rules me above all others, then I will focus on the cultivation of love in me, and by worshipping God I open myself to be filled up with God's love. As God's love is filling me and shaping my attitudes, outlook and purpose in life, I begin to value things quite differently as well.

To see someone in need for whatever reason they have fallen in need, to see that they get some help and support will fill me with joy, a joy that is far more enduring than getting the latest, newest and best. To see someone cared for who has little or nothing, whether they have made mistakes or not, so see them cared for through my giving and sharing will fill me with greater happiness than whether I can afford the best new renovations, buy a more expensive car, or have a bigger bank account. To see someone else make it after long struggle because they are given the resources to do so through my support will be more significant for my identity and purpose as a human being than whether I get all the security and recognition this world has to offer.

Obviously, none of us is totally free from the influence of others, the recognition and appreciation of others and our anxiety about having enough for today and tomorrow. Often, money and what money can secure is a basic means for all this. But little do we also realize how deeply we are being ruled by the empire rather than God, and little do we appreciate how much our soul can be starved and dehydrated because we are not applying ourselves as energetically and enthusiastically in giving and sharing so that others may live more abundantly.

Let's stop blaming others for their misfortunes. Let those toxins in our souls be purged so that space is created for God's love to fill us. If we have growing faith, growing hope and growing love, Jesus is saying, in effect, we will feel so alive, grounded and secure, that we will not be so anxiously attached to the things of this world. We will see others as gifts to us, gifts so that we exercise our souls in giving and sharing. We will come to give thanks for them beyond any thanks we may receive in return.

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." We need money in this world. But there is a good way and a bad way to use it. Paying taxes is no fun. Those who rule can abuse the privilege of making use of what is collected. But creating greater justice, equality and care for all is something we must value above paying taxes. Our souls are too valuable to let them be owned and ruled by the empire. To be ruled by God is to be free – free to give, free to love, free to serve, free to find fullness and peace in greater simplicity and generosity... Amen.