

**The Pop Quiz**  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 22:15–22

When our oldest daughter, Liz, was in the fall of her freshman year in college, she surprised me with a call in the middle of the day. “Hi, how are you?” I asked cheerfully. “OK” she said tentatively, my mom antennae immediately kicked in. “What’s wrong?” Well she was leaving her one class and accidentally slammed her finger in the door and now with her finger throbbing she was late for her very first college midterm.

This is the stuff that nightmares are made of. Not getting to the test on time or even worse, sitting there and realizing you are totally unprepared. In fact, I just had one of those dreams this past week. Trying to get someplace and produce something and everyone and everything was getting in my way. I was not prepared. My classic nightmare is sitting in a classroom and the teacher says put away your books. I look around and think, was I the only one not aware that there was a test today? The sweat starts to bead up and my palms are clammy. Then I wake up and with relief to realize I have left school far behind. I wonder if Jesus also felt like he was being hit with a pop quiz when the leaders posed a question to him covering the three most uncomfortable topics of all time: politics, religion and money.

We read from Matthew Jesus’ encounter between him and the Pharisees underlings and the disciples of Herod:

## **Matthew 22:15–22**

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup>They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As we read today’s Gospel, we know the complexity of the question being asked. Jesus is being set up. The Pharisees and leaders are trying to get him into trouble with Rome or discredit him in front of his followers. They wanted to embarrass him on the subjects that people have strong feelings; politics, religion and money. They want to trip him up and reveal Jesus as someone who was breaking either the laws of the Old Testament or of the government and taxation.

The Herodians support Caesar and the Roman hierarchy. These people are asking Jesus, “Who do you support?” Where do your loyalties truly lie? If Jesus were to say, “The state is who we should give our loyalty to.”, then the Pharisees would pounce on him for not following the mandates of tithing. If Jesus were to say the Jewish laws, then the state would arrest him for sedition. This is not just a nightmare about taking a test; the future of his ministry and life is at stake. Everyone from Jesus’

own followers to those who back the state to those who put their religion first were listening.

We know his response. It has been often quoted to support people's different views whether they are backing the state or their faith or wanting your money. Jesus is saying; pay attention to where your money goes.

Back in Illinois, I was called in for jury duty. An energetic young lawyer questioned me regarding how I would make decisions. He had read my profile and commented that I was minister and he asked, "What will you abide by, the laws of the state or by the laws of God?" I asked is there a conflict? He did not answer my question but asked me again. And I responded, "As any person of faith, I will act accordingly." I was dismissed. In direct and subtle ways, we, like Jesus, must navigate through these tricky paths between politics religion and money, continually. It comes down to who gets our gets our allegiance God, the state or financial wealth?

As I read this passage for today, my palms begin to sweat. As tempting as that might be, I can't wake up from this pop quiz and we can't turn our backs in what is happening to our world at this moment. I am well aware of how uncomfortable we Presbyterians are on the subjects of money and politics. We have moved from the acceptable subjects such as prayer and faith into the very personal matters, our own finances and our allegiances.

This sermon today is not for the fainthearted or the squeamish, because it is a sermon about money, allegiance AND it is a sermon about prayer and about faith. It is my hope that today, as we seek to be inspired by the gospel lesson that we are also challenged about how we conduct our very personal life, how we spend our money and to whom we proclaim our loyalty.

Today we baptized two beautiful children DJ and Rory. Why do we do it? Why do Michael and Christine stand here with the godparents and promise to teach Rory and DJ the ways of God, the ways of faith? Why do we do it and press our lives and likes and smile at the children as we make promises to help? It is because faith matters. God matters in our lives.

When physically going to church is denied, we realize how much we miss it because we know that we cannot compartmentalize God in our lives. We cannot put God on the shelf when it is less desirable to have God around. When we go and vote we know we cannot leave God at home. God is with us as we pay our bills and when we fret about our future. What Jesus teaches does not go away in those times. The gospel has a way of intruding into our most private and personal matters and opinions.

To whom do we give our money? Money is pretty important to us. Or else we would not spend so much time making it, worrying over it, complaining about it, and avoiding talking about it at church. If money is important than our decision of the money we give away is also an important decision. It is not something to be taken lightly.

The Pharisees and Herodians were demanding of Jesus to take a stand. Either choose to follow the laws of the land or to turn his back on his teachings about God. But, Jesus' response is not setting a delineation between the two. In his answer, Jesus gets very political. He takes a coin. What is a coin worth? A piece of metal with a figured stamped on it that says, who is on this coin? Everyone knows it is Caesar. Cesar has to put his stamp on everything to remind people he is in charge. Give that piece of metal to Caesar, he can have it. Then Jesus looks around at everything else the world; the beauty of the human hand, each individual that is gathered. Whose stamp is on that? It's God's. God who created

the light from the dark, the mighty winds that blows. Everything else give to God.

Caesar may have his minimal piece of what is due but all things belong to God. How are we doing with that perspective? Can we accept that all that we have all that we value comes from God? If so, then talking about finances and living our lives in gratitude to God, should be as natural as breathing. It is in partnership with our Lord that we make the choices that we do. We seek God's guidance in prayer, in how we spend our money and how we determine our portion; our commitment back to God. Prayer is a crucial part of dealing with our family finances as well as our church budget and our outreach to others. As we are called upon to make a commitment toward the work and life of this church for the coming year, we need to take a deep look at how we use our money. The first step begins with prayer. We need to pray for the church and pray for what we can do. We need to pray for our Pastoral Nominating Committee as we prepare to receive and welcome a new pastor.

Giving is a matter of faith. It is faith at its rawest form. Once we give our money away, it is taken out of our control. How do we know that the session will make the right choices for it? How do we know that our denomination will use it in the most prudent and fruitful way? We are attracted like magnets to the stories we read and hear where money is been misused and squandered. I think we seek such stories to justify our reason to hold onto our money tightly. It is hard to trust others with our money. If we believe all we have comes from God, then God must either be quite faithful or foolish to trust US with God's own bounty!

When we give, we are asked to let go of something that is precious to us. For me, determining what I give away has always been a struggle. There are times when I looked at financial situation and see all the Caesars in my life demanding money from me. I get anxious and think how can I

give to others with all these obligations? What if we don't have enough? What if we need it?

I remember, sitting in my college dorm long ago. Looking at my bank book, back when we had bank books, and thinking do I have enough to write a check for \$10.00 (college was a long time ago!) and send it to One Great Hour of Sharing? I would put it down and then pick it up again. To this day, I still can recall getting my pen and writing it out and putting it in the envelope before I changed my mind. The release, the victory I felt after I had done that. You would think that it would get easier over time but it doesn't. Every time any of us gives our money it is a commitment in faith. We do not know what tomorrow will be like, but we know that all that we see and who we are is from God.

Money and politics matter in our life, in our church and in our relationships but we cannot stop with those subjects without wedding them to prayer and faith. It all comes together as we look to Jesus who never shied away from anything because it was too hard or too uncomfortable.

I leave you with a challenge today. It is a challenge much like a pop quiz. Not the quiz from the Pharisee's who had their own agenda to trick Jesus. This quiz that comes from Jesus. Where do you put your money and your allegiance? I can't tell you what to give to this church or to all your causes you support. I will not presume to dictate to your politics of what is very important to you. But I do commend you to use prayer and your faith to help you determine the answers to these and other questions that come to us in this time and day. To face such important questions, with God's help we will be more than victors and we will be a witness to our neighbors and the world.

As for our daughter Liz, with her hurt finger and her first midterm looming. She went to the wellness center and got her finger fixed up and grace abounds even in a secular impersonal university, she was able to take her midterm later that day.

We too will meet the challenges of our day. We will do so with a prayer in our heart and a boldness that comes from faith in God. Now more than ever, the world needs to see and hear our actions as people of faith.

Amen.