

UNAVOIDABLE DILEMMA (Matthew 22:15-22)

Here's a simple question for you: Can you come up with a five-letter word that's used as a four-letter word? How about *taxes*?

I definitely considered *taxes* a four-letter word when I took the two semester Federal Tax class in law school. That was far and away the most dreadful class I've ever taken. I hated every minute of it. That class was where I first heard our basic tax law, the Internal Revenue Code, described as a "conspiracy in restraint of understanding." And that's one of the kinder things the Internal Revenue Code has ever been called. I've heard a few other choice four-letter words used to describe it. And probably used a few myself at one time or another. I don't mind paying taxes nearly as much as I hate the process, that dreaded annual ritual of getting all the information together and organized.

It's no secret that our tax system is a mess. Everybody knows that and everybody agrees something needs to be done. But nobody has the will to do it, to make the fixes. I don't know how many pages the Internal Revenue Code is up to these days, but it's huge. And its huge because it's stuffed with sacred cows. And nobody wants to sacrifice his or her particular sacred cow to make it the whole thing work.

Grumbling about paying taxes is about as American as apple pie. And ironically, some of the folks who grumble loudest are the same ones who love to proclaim what a great country we have – ignoring the fact that a lot of what makes this country great is paid for by...taxes. The loudest grumblers don't share Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.'s sentiment that taxes are what we pay to buy civilization.

It's too bad that when the Pharisees asked Jesus their "Gotcha!" question about paying taxes he didn't invite them to sit down and talk about capital gains rates and estate taxes and oil depletion allowances and progressive tax rates.

To hear some on the extreme religious right tell it, you would think that Grover Nordquist and his Americans for Tax Reform organization are channeling Jesus when they twist politicians' arms to get them to sign their no tax increase pledge. They're convinced that the Bible in general and Jesus in particular are opposed to progressive tax rates, capital gains taxes, estate taxes, minimum wage laws, and a lot of other things that to them smack of socialism.

It must be nice to know exactly where Jesus stood on issues he never said anything about – whether it's taxes or something else that gets the religious right all worked up. They seem to know what Jesus thought about a lot of things that are never even mentioned in the Bible.

Taxes do get mentioned in the Bible, but not very much – only a couple of times. And this is the only time in Jesus' ministry when the subject comes up. And if you were paying attention, you noticed that Jesus doesn't say a blessed thing about taxes in general or about any specific tax in particular. "Give the

emperor what belongs to the emperor and give God what belongs to God.” I’m sorry. You can’t base an entire tax policy on something that cryptic.

On the other hand, Jesus was notorious for being a friend of tax collectors. Matthew, one of his inner circle, was a tax collector. Zaccheus was a tax collector but Jesus invited himself to dinner at his house. I may be wrong, but it’s hard to imagine Jesus being so buddy-buddy with tax collectors, who embodied everything that was wrong and hated about the Roman IRS if he really hated taxes all that much.

It’s never safe or wise to assume that just because we’re against something or for something that Jesus must obviously have shared our opinion and been against it or for it. And yet it’s amazing how many Christians do just that: remake Jesus in their own image, with all their own likes and dislikes, prejudices and penchants.

In this case, image is everything. The denarius, the Roman coin that was used to pay the census tax, was stamped with the emperor’s likeness. That picture was bad enough. But it also had an inscription: “Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” “Augustus” meant divine. So when Jews used the denarius to pay the tax they were being forced into implicitly accepting the emperor’s claim to be divine. And for a pious Jew, that was blasphemy.

Jesus makes it sound so simple. Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor. But be careful not to give the emperor anything that belongs to God. The only question is: how do we decide which is which? What is the emperor’s and what is God’s?

Maybe that’s the point: never to be too sure which is which, to always have to wonder if we’re drawing the line exactly where it belongs, to be permanently uneasy when it comes to matters of church and state. It’s tricky because so often the claims overlap when the emperor demands something that really and rightfully belongs to God.

After the War of 1812, naval hero Stephen Decatur offered a toast with the famous line, “Our country right or wrong.” At the height of protests over the Vietnam war, countless bumper stickers demanded, “America, love it or leave it.”

Those are just two examples of the kind of blind loyalty the emperor demands or expects, even if the emperor happens to be a democratic state like ours.

Christians know it’s not that clear-cut. Abraham Lincoln was hardly an orthodox Christian. But he had absorbed a good dose of backwoods Calvinism growing up – enough that in his Second Inaugural address he confessed the ambiguity of cause that he believed in so fervently.

William Sloane Coffin said, “There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with the world.”

Jesus never says we aren’t to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, only to be careful not to give to Caesar something that belongs to God. The only way to do that is to carry on a lover’s quarrel with out country and its policies.

After the U.S. invaded Iraq, one pastor preached a sermon critical of that decision. He got a letter from a parishioner saying, "This is not a time for nay saying and criticism of the administration's foreign policy. This is a time for Americans to stand together, to stand with our leaders, and to show that we are loyal Americans."

"Our country, right or wrong." "America, love it or leave it." Those sentiments aren't how Christians look at things. They're not even how a true patriot or a loyal American looks at things. A Christian can't simply stand back and be silent when we think our nation is wrong. And neither does a true patriot. When our nation is wrong, we want to rectify those wrongs. And in the case of Christians, we do it because we have a set of core values that transcend any claim the nation can make.

It's a lot bigger than paying taxes. Our values as Christians shape how we vote, how we think about the future of our country, and what we do about it. I can't tell you exactly where the line is, can't tell you in every case what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. But I can and do pray that God will grant us all the grace to be permanently uneasy about the decision we have to make.