

Read also Genesis 14:17-23. Check out the service, which is recorded on www.fpcd.org.

Abraham was a settler with a problem. This was a whole family thing. He and his nephew and all their large family had migrated to Canaan and settled the land. Imagine families moving west and settling Texas. Do you know any of those stories? I do. Stories of French colonization, Spanish missions settlements, Mexican Texas. Mexican authorities allowed immigration from the United States. Then the Republic of Texas was formed, followed by the USA. So we understand a little about settlement and struggles between peoples for independence.

There were nine kings in the area of Canaan, four of them allied against five, and one year Abraham and Lot found themselves in the midst of tribal warfare. Lot and all his goods were taken captive. But Abraham heard and he gathered his forces and they pursued these enemies, defeated them, and brought back Lot, along with all his family and goods. It was quite an accomplishment for this unknown man.

On his return from this great victory, a king named Melchizedek, from Salem, King and priest of God Most High, met Abraham to congratulate him by blessing him. And Abraham gave him a tenth – or a tithe of all he had. This was in honor of God, who gave him victory. You heard the story.

This is the first instance in Scripture of the practice of paying tithes, which simply means “a tenth.” This was carried on by his grandson, Jacob, who made his own promise of giving a tithe back to God in profound gratitude for God’s blessings. (Gen 28:22)

This became a pattern for Israel as the norm for honoring God. It carries on today.

So all throughout Scripture we have examples and practices of people responding to God, blessing God for God’s presence and help, showing us the way to relate to God. We are grateful that the Bible gives us that rich heritage.

Now in the New Testament, Jesus comes from heaven bringing with Him the ways of the Kingdom. We pray *“thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth – as it is in heaven.”*

But the Pharisees were suspicious of Jesus. So they couple themselves with the Herodians, supporters of Herod’s court. These two groups were polar opposites politically. The Pharisees were anti-government interference. The Herodians were “pro-Rome,” supporters of government. Polar opposites came together, joined by their dislike of Jesus.

Hear the story. READ Mark 12:13-17

I hope you hear what a strategist Jesus is. I hope you see His brilliance. He knew they had no concern for his advice about taxes; that, rather, their intent was to set him up for a fall. If he said, “pay the taxes,” the crowds would have turned away from him. If he said, “don’t pay the taxes,” he would set himself up for sedition. So Jesus strategizes.

Once a man strategized with the IRS. He wrote:

Enclosed is my 2003 Form 1040, together with payment. Please take note of the attached article from USA Today archives. In the article, you will note that the Pentagon paid \$171.50 each for hammers and NASA paid \$600.00 each for toilet seats. Please find enclosed in this package four toilet seats (value \$2,400.00) and six hammers (value \$1,029.00). This is in payment for my total tax due of \$3,429.00.

Out of a sense of patriotic duty, and to assist in the political purification of our government, I am also enclosing a 1.5 inch Phillips head screw, for which HUD duly recorded and approved a purchase value of \$22.00, as my contribution to fulfill the Presidential Election Fund option on Form 1040.

It has been a pleasure to pay my taxes this year, and I look forward to paying them again next year in accordance with officially established government values.

Sincerely,
Another satisfied taxpayer¹

Kind of similar to what Jesus did when He said, "Let me see the coin . . ." Looking at its picture He said, "*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*"

Don't you wish *you* could think like that on the spot?

What should a follower of Jesus believe about taxes? For as long as there are governments, there will be taxes. The Bible talks about attitude.

In the Old Testament Jeremiah advises Israel:

"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (v. 29:7)

In the New Testament Paul writes:

"Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority" (Ro 13:6-7).

"Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity" (1 Tim 2:1-2).

Peter writes:

"For the Lord's sake, respect all human authority -- whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed" (1Pet 2:13).

At the same time Jesus sees the higher call of God:

Give to God the things that are God's.

¹<http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/jokes/bljokeincometax.htm>, accessed 7/10/12.

That's convicting! It left people speechless then, and it makes us ponder now. Whatever does that mean? What are we to give God? What kind of call does God have on our lives?

Augustine, a very famous spiritual master who was a North African bishop, writes about that very subject. He said that we can find many traces of God in nature, but in an entirely distinctive way God is present in human beings – in you – because God has placed in you His image. And so you can reflect on things; you possess understanding, which gives you insight. You have free will, which enables you to give and receive love. Because you can love, you bear the image of God.²

If we bear God's image, we belong to God. If we bear God's image, even if we make decisions against God, mutilating his image in us, we cannot destroy it. We will simply be restless.

The image of God was present in both Abraham and Jacob as they honored God by giving the tithe. The image of God is in you, in your desire to worship and seek God.

So let's let Jesus interpret His own statement about how we give God the things that are God's. It's located later in the same chapter. READ Mark 12:41-44

Now there are some things that are not exactly lining up here. Obviously two pennies is not "*more than all those who are contributing.*" And how in the world could someone give "*all they have to live on?*" Perhaps she would show up at the temple that night for supper! The woman's act seems outlandish. Is this some kind of strange "divine exchange rate?" Yet Jesus doesn't say she *should have done that*. What is Jesus trying to say?

This goes back to His debate with the Pharisees and Herodians about what belongs to God. The widow was giving herself to God. She demonstrated undivided love – she loved and trusted God fully. She seems to understand something about money and something about God.

Augustine points out that "things" are limited and transitory. Things can give no firm and ultimate happiness. Hear his words:

"Everywhere you find things to love and things to praise. Yes, but how much more worthy of praise is he who made these things which evoke your praise? You have lived under their spell for too long, buffeted by conflicting desires. You bear the marks of the wounds they have dealt you. You are torn apart by these many loves, restless everywhere and nowhere at peace. Gather yourself together into your real self. If anything outside you has been giving you joy, ask who is its author."³

Being impoverished, the widow had no competing material possessions; God was her possession. She bore God's image, trusting God to take care of her. She found real security.

²T. J. van Bavel, *The Longing of the Heart, Augustine's Doctrine on Prayer* (Walpole, MA: Peeters), 7-8.

³En. Ps. 145,5.

Jesus said, “She gave everything.” But he makes no statement or rigid rule. He just lets it rest and leaves it all to us with how we will respond. Each one of us must judge for ourselves what belongs to God and where our loyalties and priorities lie.

If we are poor, let us be encouraged to give. If we are comfortable, let us give not out of surplus, but until we feel love.

O Henry tells a story of a man whose millionaire uncle died.⁴ He left his nephew \$1,000, and the nephew had to give account to the lawyers how it was spent. He was the only heir, save for a young orphan woman the uncle had taken in, who had received a seal ring and \$10. He pondered how to spend the \$1,000. He asked his friend down at the bar.

Should he buy a happy home?

Should he buy pure milk for one hundred babies during June, July, and August and save fifty lives?

Should he send an ambitious boy to college?

Should he move to a New Hampshire town and live respectably for two years on it?

Should he buy a painting or rent Madison Square Garden for one evening and lecture on . . . whatever.

Should he buy a diamond pendant for the star of the local theater?

He phoned for a cab and took a taxi ride to think about it. He found a blind beggar and asked him. But the man already had \$1,785. He offered to buy the diamond pendant but the star was uninterested. She had her eye on one for \$2,200 from Tiffany’s.

Going to his uncle’s home, he found the young woman, Miss Hayden, writing letters in the library. He told her the story. He gave her the \$1,000. He said, “You know I’ve always loved you.” She took the envelope but said simply, “I am sorry.”

Writing a note accounting for his distribution of the money, he left and took the sealed note to the lawyer. Unbeknownst to him, the uncle’s instructions were that if he spent the money prudently and wisely, he was to be given \$50,000. If, though, he wasted the money, as had been his habit, the \$50,000 would go to Miss Hayden.

Upon learning this from the lawyer, he took up the envelope with the note he had laid on the table. “Never mind,” he said. “I lost the \$1,000 at the races.” The lawyers shook their heads mournfully as they heard the young man whistling happily as he waited for the elevator.

Give, until you love.

AMEN

⁴O Henry, *One Thousand Dollars*, adapted.