

Claim the Vision

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, October 31, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I'm holding in my hand a Roman coin. It's authentic. It's almost 2000 years old. I bought it at a coin shop years ago. On one side is an inscription of a Roman Emperor. I sat alone last night before the fire place with this coin in my hand, wondering where it had been. What other hands had held it or given it? Who first earned it, spent it, lost it? Was it ever stolen or lost or found? Had it ever been owned by a Christian? If only this coin could talk, what stories it could tell.

Jesus once held a similar Roman coin in his hand. Two groups of Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees and the Herodians had confronted him publicly with a question meant to discredit him: should God's people pay taxes to the Romans? Most Jews were nationalistic and hated the Roman military occupying their country. The Pharisees were sure that an affirmative answer on the tax question would undermine the acceptance of Jesus among patriot Jews. The Herodians, however, were ready to denounce Jesus to the Romans if he should tell the people not to pay their taxes. The trap, they thought, was perfect.

But Jesus knew their hearts. He asked to see a Roman coin. "Whose head is this and whose title?" 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."

Jesus teaches here the important principle that so long as a government discharges its God-appointed function, it's the duty of every citizen to pay taxes. But it's the second part of Christ's answer that cuts to the quick. We not only have an obligation

number of ~~its~~ ^{its own} duty to vote. ~~Thankful to those of our congregation who~~ ^{Thankful to those of our congregation who} ~~run for office & also are involved in the life of the church~~ ^{run for office & also are involved in the life of the church} ~~politically~~ ^{politically}

to pay taxes, but we have a far more sacred obligation to God. This obligation isn't discharged by an occasional \$5 bill in the offering or even by pledges of thousands of dollars. "The things that are God's" include far more than our tithes.

"The things that belong to God" - are us. We belong to God. Just as a Roman coin is stamped with the image of Caesar, we are stamped with the image of God. We belong to God. God is the owner of all things.

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalms 24:1). "The silver is mine and the gold is mine" (Haggai 2:8). King David recognized these truths in his wonderful prayer dedicating the offerings that had been brought for building the temple. He said, "All things come of Thee and of thine own have we given Thee" (1 Chronicles 29:12-14). And the apostle Paul wrote, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body." And our new Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith reaffirms this: "In life and in death we belong to God."

We belong to God. Just as we give to the government, we give to God the things that belong to him. We give ourselves to God, through Jesus Christ. Not just our money and possessions, but our very selves belong to God. Too often we think that what we earn is all ours to keep, forgetting that everything belongs to God and that we're only temporary stewards. Of all that God entrusts to us, he requires that we set aside 10% of God's money to be used to support the ministry of Christ in this world through Christ's church. Ninety percent of the money God has entrusted to us to be used to pay our taxes and to support our household in ways that honor God.

We are simply managers of God's resources. When we understand this, a significant change occurs in our attitude about money. Fear of the future - of not having enough money, or of economic catastrophe - subsides, and we begin to view ourselves as managers or trustees, not owners, of financial resources. Spending decisions will be made with a desire to know what God would have us do with his resources.

There was an article in Reader's Digest many years ago. The Rev. Matthew Sands received a telegram telling him that his son, David, had been killed in an airplane accident. His son David meant more to him than anything or anyone else in the world. When he read the telegram, he bowed his head and prayed with tears, "The Lord giveth. The Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." That was a hard truth for him to swallow. In his grief and sorrow he rededicated his life to Christ. He turned the telegram over and wrote on the back of it: "All that I have and all that I am I give to God and for his service." Shortly afterwards, while he was riding in the country, he came across an abandoned and run-down church building. On it was a sign: "For sale by auction." He entered the church, knelt and prayed. God gave him a vision of how that church building could once more come alive with the worship of God's people. He decided to use all his financial resources to buy this building. Just then, another man, Andrew Jelks, entered the building to look around. He had a vision of turning that old church into "Andy's Amusement Arcade."

Jelks was a far richer man than Sands. It didn't matter though. Sands went home to figure up how much he had in the bank. He wrote a letter offering this amount as his bid for the church. Before he mailed it, he looked once more at the telegram

telling of his son's death. He looked at the words he had written on the other side of the telegram. And then he went to mail his letters to the trustees.

The day of the auction came and all those who had put in a bid gathered in the church. Sands was there also. While waiting, he stuck his hand in his pocket and found his bid there. He had forgotten to send the letter to the trustees and now it was too late. Just then the trustees began to file in. The chairperson announced that the church was sold to Matthew Sands. "His is the highest offer," the chairperson said. His bid is this: "All that I have and all that I am I give to God and for his service." Sands had sent his telegram by mistake instead of the letter containing the bid.

There may be many people in this church and in this town who are richer than you are. God doesn't expect you to give more than they are able to give. God, does, however, require that we give what we have to him. "Render unto God, the things that are God's" "All that I have and all that I am I give to God and for his service."

When we don't give all that we are and have to God it means that a few people end up sharing a heavy burden that all of us should be sharing. Did you know that about 20% of the members of our church give 80% of the total moneys received? And about 20% of the members do 80% of the work. It reminds me of a story I heard from a Reformed Presbyterian Minister who served little rural churches in the mid-West.

His uncle Horace had a mule named Hannibal. Hannibal wasn't a perfect mule. Hannibal could be stubborn. Hannibal could kick at times. But Hannibal was also a hard worker and was also willing to carry a heavy load. One day Uncle Horace got himself a new hired man to help him build a new barn. When the truck from town

unloaded the sacks of cement in the wrong place, the new hired man decided that the easiest solution would be to load them on the back of Hannibal and let the mule carry the load down to the site of the new barn. The man hoisted a sack of cement onto Hannibal's back, and then another. The two bags weighed 200 pounds. Hannibal could have carried them without any trouble. But the hired man figured if Hannibal could carry 200 pounds, the mule could also carry 400 pounds. Now 400 pounds was just about the limit for poor old Hannibal. But the hired man didn't stop. By the time uncle Horace came on the scene, Hannibal was lying helpless on the ground with eight hundred pounds of cement bags on him and the hired man was about to pile some more on. Uncle Horace rescued Hannibal and fired the new hired man.

There's a lesson here for all of us. In our church, we find some people who are willing to give all that they have to God and to God's service. They might not have as much money or energy as other people. But they give to God the things that belong to God. They give themselves and all that they have to God for God's service. Every Christian should give all he or she has to God and to God's service. Every Christian should be willing to carry his or her share. But our tendency is to keep adding to the load of the willing worker and the willing giver until, like Hannibal, they get so weighed down they end up not being able to do anything at all.

None of us, of course, can repay to God, the debt of love we owe.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Even when we give to God the things that belong to God, we still can't earn our

acceptance. That's why we need Christ. There's an old gospel song that says:

Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe.

The glory of the Christian gospel is that Christ, suffered and died for sinners like you and me so that he might bring us to God, restore us in God's image, and enable us to render to God the things that are God's. The greatest motivation for us to give all that we have to God, is gratitude for what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ.

When you pledge to the 1994 mission of this church I ask you, first, to bow your heads in prayer and say from your heart, "All that I have and all that I am I give to you, O Lord, and for your service." If you are unable to pray that sincerely, than, at least ask God to make you willing. "All that I have and all that I am I give to God and for his service." If we were all to do this, we would all share equally in the mission of Christ through our church because all of us would be giving all that we have.

One of our elders once said this at a session meeting: I wish for the Oxford Presbyterian Church that it could continue to be a landmark in the middle of Oxford... for its members working together in faith, sacrificing and giving a tithe to build the kind of church that God would have serving him in Oxford, knowing that God is in our midst and that unless God is building our church, we are laboring in vain. My hope and prayer for the Oxford Presbyterian Church is that it would stand as a beacon, a shining example in the community of how Christ would have his kingdom grow."

Let us pray: Yours, O Lord, are grandeur and power, majesty, splendor, and glory. All in the heavens and on the earth is yours, and of your own we give you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.