

*15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16So 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. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21They 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." 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

Did you ever take a good look at a dollar bill? It has all sorts of words and images and patterns. Federal Reserve Note, The United States of America, The Great Seal of the United States with its Latin phrases, lots of ones, and right in the middle of the back above the word one is this phrase, In God We trust.

In God we trust. How different was that coin that Jesus' questioners produced when Jesus asked them for a coin. The image of Tiberias Caesar, the ruler of the Roman Empire was engraved – depending on the coin words declaring that he was the son of god or that he was divine were imprinted on the coin. For an observant Jewish person to even possess such a coin was to break the first commandment - You shall have no other gods –you shall have no no idols or images of gods. But in Jesus' time the Roman emperor ruled over Judah and Galilee and demanded taxes from all citizens – taxes to be paid with the coins of the Empire. What a dilemma the people faced – to be faithful to God and to risk death or to pay the tax and to break God's commandment.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?" they asked Jesus.

"Whose image and inscription are on the coin?" Jesus asked them.

"The emperor's," was their reply.

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

But our money declares, "In God we trust."

But it is not always so. Whenever I teach about the first commandment and ask the question, "What are some of the gods we worship?" first on the list is money. We know that in God we should trust but far too often it is in

money we do trust. We know how important money is to having good health care – or having a roof over our heads, food to eat. Money buys an education for us or for our children – and entertainment in our homes or at the stadium or concert hall. Money has kept me preaching God’s word in your midst and Randi playing the organ and Bill cleaning the sanctuary and Diana preparing the bulletin. This morning Charlie introduced the Stewardship campaign for this fall – he hopes through informing you of what our congregation is doing and plans to do that you will be generous in your offerings. So as I preach to you this morning I have really two issues on my agenda – the government issue – what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God and the Stewardship issue – what of your resources should you retain for your own use and pleasures and what should you offer to God to be used by God’s people.

Now if that wasn’t enough the Lutheran agencies that serve the poor and those with various needs want me to preach on their work today and that is about money too. But maybe it is in thinking about these Lutheran agencies that we will get a clue about how to hold all of this together.

Years ago I first learned about one of the agencies – Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries. I learned that they had a budget of 5.4 million dollars. Now the churches and individuals gave them maybe 700,000 dollars out of the 5.4 million. Where did the rest of the money come from? The government. Cuyahoga County provided money to provide a shelter for runaway teenagers – Westhaven. The State of Ohio funded a program for monitoring nursing homes through the Long Term Care Ombudsman. The Cleveland City Schools and the federal Department of Urban Development paid for the Red Coats, men and women who had been in prison but who were now protecting the vulnerable in the public housing projects and in the schools. In each case LMM saw a need, created a program to meet that need and sought government funding. But it is not just LMM – hunger centers and county food banks depend on government support and food commodities that the government supplies. Is God served by these programs? Jesus said, “As you feed and clothe the least of my brothers and sister you feed and clothe me.”

So while Jesus was faced with the question of paying taxes to a government that was the enemy of true worship of God, we live under a government that serves God in providing order and by providing help for the most vulnerable.

Should we pay taxes? Of course.

Should we keep money for our own use? Of course.

Should we give to the church? Of course.

In all three ways God is served.

But what if the money is not being used wisely? What if money you give to the church is used frivolously? What if the money you provide in taxes is squandered and wasted? What if the money you spend on your family and on yourself does not bring health and vitality to your life? In Jesus day the emperor could be blamed or the high priests. The people did not have much say but you and I do. You and I through voting, through involvement in the life of the church or in the political process do have an influence. Our responsibility is to see that our influence is based on what God wants.

Next week we will hear the great commandment – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind and with all your soul and your neighbor as yourself.” How shall we show that it is God in whom we trust? In using our money to show love for God, love for self, love for the neighbor.

Can we do that through our taxes? – yes. God is glorified when schools teach children, when prisons protect the society from those who would harm the vulnerable, when soldiers and sailors and FBI agents restrain those who do harm.

Can we show love for God, love for self, and love for neighbors when we use money for ourselves and our families? Yes, God delights in providing what we need.

Can we show love for God, self and neighbor through what we give to the church? Certainly.

You and I are blessed to be living in this nation where we have a voice.

You and I are blessed to be part of a church where we have a voice.

You and I are blessed to be people who know the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Share that love in every way you can. Amen.