

Matthew 22:15–22: Are We Buying – or Giving?

Have you ever been trapped in a conversation you couldn't win? I feel that way sometimes during this election season. When I hear a political claim I know is untrue, should I speak up and risk offending a friend, or stay silent and betray my conscience? Either way, I seem to be in the wrong.

That is where Jesus finds himself in Matthew 22. His opponents ask whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar. If he says no, Rome can call him a traitor. If he says yes, his followers may think he is on the side of the Roman rulers who oppress the poor and encourage people to turn from belief that there is only one Lord and God. It is a carefully planted political landmine.

Jesus asks to see the coin used to pay the Roman tax. One of these devout men produces a Roman denarius. Jesus asks whose image is on it. "Caesar's," they answer. Then comes the response that silences them: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God."

It is tempting to stop there and enjoy Jesus' perfect comeback. But his answer reaches much deeper than taxes. It asks us how we think about all God has done for us—and whether what we offer God in return is a payment or a gift. Let me tell you a story that shows what I think the difference is.

My father-in-law loved shopping, especially when he found a bargain. He never said what he *paid* for something; he said what he *gave*: "Can you believe I gave three dollars for this?" The tone he used let us know if he thought the deal was a good one, or not so good. That word he used—give instead of pay - has impacted how I think of what I spend money on. Paying implies that I'm engaged in an impersonal transaction or settling a debt. But when I replace "pay" with "give", it implies something more personal – something offered with a spirit of generosity and gladness.

With that difference in our minds, I ask again: when we offer our hearts, our service, and our resources to God, are we paying—or giving? If we are paying – what are we buying? Jesus tells us we cannot buy God's love. We cannot purchase salvation. There are no inheritance taxes due when we enter God's kingdom. There is no "pay to play" in the kingdom of God. The price of our salvation has already been paid for us on the cross, through Jesus's death and resurrection. What we give to God is not payment, but instead is our grateful response to His overwhelming grace.

This week, may you find joy in giving back to Jesus, who has already given everything for us. Amen.