

A Sermon by the Very Reverend Roger Wm. Smith on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 16, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A Sermon about Stewardship - 3

Jesus said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's'. – Matthew 22:21

Most of us remember the old translation of that verse: "Then saith he unto them 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's'."

Let's take a minute to consider the background of this story. The Jews were not allowed to bring Roman coinage into their temple because imagery, such as the head of the emperor, was considered disobedient to the 2nd Commandment: "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath... Thou shalt not bow to them or worship them".

In Islam, they continue to adhere very strictly to this commandment. The Muslims' mosques are decorated only with geometric designs, never with designs that depict anything in nature. Carvings or paintings depicting the Prophet Mohammed or anyone else are considered blasphemy.

So in Jesus' day when you wanted to make an offering at the Temple, you had to stop in the outer court where the money changers would give you temple coinage with no imagery on it in exchange for whatever Roman coins you might have. What was Caesar's money was replaced by that which could be offered to God.

Jesus gave this clever answer to the disciples of the Pharisees and the emissaries of King Herod, (Matthew 22:15-22) when they tried to trap him. When they asked him whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor, had he said it *was* lawful, he would have been considered disloyal to his own countrymen. Had he said it was *unlawful*, the Roman soldiers might have thrown him in prison.

We can become so focused on why Jesus answered his detractors in such a way, that we might over look what he actually said. For example, when he told them to "give to God the things that are God's", what did he mean by that? What are the things that are God's? If such things belong to God, which presumably all things do, what is there left to *give* to God?

If you were here last Sunday, you will remember we said that the Christian standard of giving is not 10% but 100%. Jesus' call is to give up everything and follow him.

In the traditional form of the Communion service we offer and present unto God "our selves our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice..." When we pray like that, we are saying to God, "Take all of me." That means giving all that we have and all that we are. What we do in the work place, what we do in the classroom, what we do in our homes and on the playing field—all of what we do, we offer to God.

So if a man earns enough money to support himself and his family, it is an offering to God. If he wants to give a portion of his earnings to his Church, that is also giving to God, but no more so than the manner in which he uses his wherewithal to support himself and his family. If we give to support some worthy cause, like the Red Cross or Hospice, that also is giving to God that which is God's. If we coach a little league team, if we prepare

a good meal for our guests, if we play games with our friends, all of it is an offering (perhaps I should say a “returning”) to God—the Giver of all good things.

Everything belongs to God. You belong to God, I belong to God, and all of our possessions belong to God. We are merely caretakers of the things that have been entrusted to us. That is what is meant by that word “Stewardship”.

This is my third sermon about Stewardship. And you'll be glad to know that it is my last...at least for this year.

When I was in seminary, I took a number of courses in homiletics (that's what they call preaching). One of my professors warned us that every year at this season, someone will ask us to preach about giving. They will call it a sermon about Stewardship. “If you can possibly get out of it,” said my teacher, “Don't do it.” Let the Wardens, the Vestrymen, or the Church treasurer do it, but you would be well-advised NOT to do it yourselves.” “Why is that?” we asked him. “Because,” said he, “the clergy have a long-standing reputation for always asking for money. It is based on the sad history of clerical materialism and greed, and it jeopardizes their pastoral relationships.

One day when a young lad who came home from Sunday School, his parents asked him what he had learned. He said, “We were told that story about the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and was beaten up by thieves and was thrown into a ditch. “By and by two preachers came along,” said the boy, “and when they saw that the man had *already* been robbed, they passed by on the other side.”

When it comes to how much you have in your bank account, how much real-estate you own, what money your grandfather left you, whatever you have, I would prefer to pass by on the other side. We clergy make much better pastors if we remain uninformed about such things. So when I speak to you about giving, about Stewardship, I am not listening for the jingle of the coins in your pockets, I am simply reminding us all of how blest we are to have such a generous and loving God.

Again, quoting the *Book of Common Prayer* Book, We, his unworthy servants, meet here to give God most humble and hearty thanks for all his goodness and loving kindness to us and to all whom he has made. We bless him for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life; but above all his immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace and the hope of glory...

We don't give because we must.

We don't give because we're afraid not to.

We don't give to win God's favor.

We don't give because the preacher asks us to

We give because we have been surrounded by the wonders of creation and blessed with God's generosity. We have been given so much for which to be grateful we can do no other than offer ourselves, our souls, and our bodies—all that we have and all that we are—to the Giver of all good things. *Amen*