

St. Andrew's UMC
October 19th, 2008
Matthew 22:15-22
"The Things That Are God's"

As an immigrant who grew up in the U.S. , I had my share of confusion caused by American idiomatic expressions. I remember hearing in the Air Force: "Do that, and then apply some elbow grease. It will look nice." I did not know where to find a can of elbow grease, because no hardware store carried it. The elbow grease. Who invented the phrase, and how did it come into the vocabulary of everyday words?

Then there was the expression, "catch-22". The recruits and civilian workers would sometimes use it alike: "It's a catch-22 situation, man. No matter what you do, you are in deep trouble." Of course, military personnel used difference terms of endearment to express the sentiment, and they are still regarded as unprintable words.

I did some research, and catch-22 is from a novel about the WWII aviators, and the number, "22," was a random one the publishers picked, after trying to avoid other numbers, such as, 18, 11, etc. There were many catches in the military life, and the number 22 was the situation where the aviator would be considered insane for volunteering to go on a bombing run, because it was almost certain that he would not return from the mission. He could request not to be sent, but once he made such a request, it would prove that he is sane, because he is now deemed capable of assessing the danger. So that was the catch 22.

Other expressions I have heard was, "Damned if I do; damned if I don't. "I lose anyway, no matter what I do." "It's a lose-lose situation."

And the Pharisees found a perfect catch-22, in order to entrap Jesus. They would ask Jesus, whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. If Jesus says it is not, then they could accuse him of disrespecting the Caesar and the Roman Empire . The penalty would be a certain death. If Jesus says it is lawful, then it would make a lot of people upset, because the Roman Empire invaded Judea , and made it into sort of a colony. Now Jesus could be castigated as a traitor, and be condemned in the same category as the tax collectors and sinners. It was a neat idea, as Oliver North would say.

So they rushed gleefully to Jesus, and presented the fateful challenge, barely able to hide their excitement. Then the biggest let down took place: Jesus calmly asked to show him the coin used to pay the tax. He took one look at it, and asked:

"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.**" When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

You could almost hear the jaws drop, and see the expressions they could have worn on their Pharisaic faces.

There is another catch-22 in today's presidential election, it seems. I feel sorry for the Republican presidential candidate, McCain, because he has been touting his voting record to the Republican constituents. He boasted that he voted with the President Bush 90% of the time. He needed to prove to the constituency that he is a hardcore Republican who could be trusted to champion their cause.

Then, at the same time, he had to prove that he is his own man, and not the extension of the unpopular incumbent. If he says he voted with the President Bush, the Dems could use it against him and label his presidency as the third term of the Bush administration. If he says he is no President Bush, he risks raising the suspicion within his own constituency, whether he would raise taxes and cut off the pork, or toe the republican line, as he is expected to. It's a catch-22.

His campaign staff were not helping, either, because of this "real" Virginians statement the campaign manager made. Those undecided voters will be wondering, who the campaign thinks qualify to be the "real" Virginians, and if they qualify to be the "real" Americans. Those semi-real and phony American voters would wonder, if McCain administration will worry about those whom it does not consider "real" enough.

And as for the current political sentiment of this land, even Jesus is in danger of getting the boot, even from the church. If we interpret correctly what Jesus said, and apply to the modern context, Jesus could scare many people who are afraid of the "tax-and-spend" liberals in the high places. Jesus told his listeners to pay whatever that belonged to the government. I have

trouble reconciling that Jesus with the Jesus of “no-new-taxes; read-my-lips” voting bloc.

Flippancy aside, what we have to examine is the three opposing dimensions of our treasures. One part belongs to the government. The other part belongs to God. The third part belongs to us. I want to talk about the part that belongs to God.

In order to sort out what belongs to God, we need to inventory first what we have. I have heard from both young and the old this story: “I am going to do for God this and that, when I become this or that.” From one family man I heard that he said he wanted to be the one in the church who gives the biggest portion of the tithe. The tithe is 10% of the income (before tax, mind you), and the man was saying in effect that he want to be the largest income earner in the church. What he was not saying was that God would have to wait until he became the largest income earner, before God saw the tithe coming from him.

I have heard from teens that they would do this and that philanthropy, when they became a millionaire. What the teens did not say was that they were not going to split their allowances, and give it to the needy now, because there was not enough to share at the moment.

I have heard from others that they were going to give their money to the various worthy programs and scholarships, when they hit the lottery jackpot. What they did not say, of course, was that they were not giving, until they hit one.

The key to giving to God what is God’s is this: we can only give to God what we have now. We cannot give to God anything that we might be having in the distant future. The human mind being as deceptive it is, people would feel good about their potential generosity, by planning to give what they do not have. Since they do not have to give anything in reality, they can be extremely generous in their scale of imagined giving.

What do you think God feels about that generosity? Would God be so moved to shower the blessing, and grant all the requests made, having received those promises and plans as the collateral?

If we are expecting God's blessing now, we also need to demonstrate our blessing to others in action now. If we are going to expect our prayers answered, don't you think that we should do what God asked us to do, just to be on the fair side?

If you listen to these people, you would think that God received stuff only from the rich. As a matter of fact, the richer you become, the harder it is to part with your treasures.

Okay, so what is it that we have now, and what are the things that are God's? We can give to God only what we have now. We cannot give anything to anyone that we do not have now.

Material things are not the only things that belong to God. Time is also what belongs to God. How much of our time belongs to God? There are 144 hours per week (Sunday is Sabbath, and it does not count). Is it possible that we should give a tithe of our time to God? Every one of us spend the absolute majority of time to sleep and work. What else sliver of time does God get from us? Through our prayers, through our services, through our worship and fellowship, do we give a tithe? That will be 144 hours per week. If not, how many hours a week do we occupy our minds with godly things and godly labor?

How about our talents? How do we spend our talents, gifts, and graces? What claims the most of our precious gifts? I am certain the majority will be our jobs, followed by family and friends, and entertainments and hobbies. How much share of our talent, intellect, and skill do we give to God?

What else about ourselves are God's? What does the Bible tell us about our relationship to God? We find this in Isaiah:

Isaiah 43:1 - But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

The writer of John defines the relationship as a family kinship:

John 1:12 - But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God;

And Genesis makes it clear where we came from:

Genesis 1: 26-27 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

We are God's, we are children of God, and we are created in God's likeness. Like father, like son. We are created in God's image. We inherited a lot of what God is like. At least that is what the Good Book is telling us. Just as our children are dear to us, we are dear to God.

So, what else about ourselves are God's? Here is the answer: the whole of our being is God's.

The Christian theology argues that for us, a Son is given, and this Son came and lived among us, and died for our sake, so that we might have the eternal inheritance in the kingdom of God .

It is the poverty of perspective and understanding to measure what is God's only in terms of material things. If we are greedy, then it is our greed that limits our understanding from seeing beyond the boundary of what is materialistic. The problem with the Prodigal Son is that he saw his relationship with his father only in terms of financial transaction. He did not realize that his father looked at the father-son relationship far beyond the materialistic boundary.

We must understand: our whole life belongs to God, and we should be glad that we have been already spoken for. God sees the God-human relationship in terms beyond the limit of the human understanding. Sometimes, and unfortunately, we human children understand their relationship with God not much more than what they can get out of such a relationship. Material wealth is only a small part of it.

We often wonder why Jesus told the rich young man to give up all his belongings and give it to the poor. If we define our relationship with God based on our relationship with the material wealth, then that is all God will require from us—because that is all in our hearts. That is why Jesus told

him to give up all his possessions and follow him. That baggage of the young man just could not co-exist with the discipleship.

If we base our relationship in the similar terms as God does, we will begin to see in our daily lives what it means to become the children of God. When we allow the whole of our being to be God's, that is when we have the whole of God for our being.