

SermonBytes: Jesus Clarifies the Bottom Line
Matthew 22:15–22

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Grandpa was telling his young grandson what life was like when he was a boy.

"In the winter we'd ice skate on our pond. In the summer we could swim in the pond, and pick berries in the woods. We'd swing on an old tire my dad hung from a tree on a rope. And we had a pony we rode all over the farm."

The little boy was amazed, and sat silently for a minute. Finally he said, "Granddad, I wish I'd gotten to know you a lot sooner!"

Prayer: Holy Mystery, guide the words I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts. Open our understanding to hear a word of challenge or hope for whatever situation each person finds themselves. In gratitude, we pray. Amen.

Have you had anyone challenge your faith, challenge your actions, ask you to declare what your faith bottom line is?

I remember a time when I met a fine, kind, and articulate Christian man who shared his hospital experience of heart surgery with others who were about to undergo a heart bypass surgery themselves. Bob (Not his real name) was a good speaker and talked to the others as friends, showing them his scars if they asked to see them. I was doing a clinical pastoral care unit at Kingston General hospital at the time, and I was assigned the heart surgery ward to visit and possibly encourage the patients. So I too heard Bob's talk and he was happy to talk more after the patient sessions were over.

One day he asked me: So you are studying to become a minister- don't you believe the bible says in Paul's letters that a woman should stay at home and be subject to her husband. Or she should be quiet in church with her head covered. The minister should be a man.

I didn't want to take the time to point out that Paul told women to listen to their husbands, but also told men to love their wives as Jesus loves us- willing to lay his life down for us. I didn't say that Paul often praises the women who helped him establish many churches and supported his work when he was not there, he didn't mind them leading worship then. I didn't want to spend the next hour quoting scriptures back and forth in support of our own preferences.

I went straight to the bottom line for me: I am not a Paulite, or a Paulian; I follow Jesus the Christ, and he accepted and cared about women and had some of them in his group of close friends. I follow Jesus, the Anointed One, the Christ; that's why I call myself a Christian.

That's the bottom line.

There are all kinds of people in the world. All kinds of people with all kinds of beliefs and faiths.

The way people worship God changes as people change. The church, the Christian church, when the writer of Matthew's gospel wrote the stories of Jesus, was just getting started. It was based on the authority and validity of Jesus as an interpreter of faith in the God, faith in the God who gave the people those sign posts, the 10 Commandments.

Matthew's gospel was written in such a way that it would bring together the people who wanted to preserve the past traditions **and** the people who didn't know those traditions as they moved forward in an uncharted world. That sounds like what we are facing in the world today- how to merge the old and new ideas.

(The gospel of Matthew stresses the moral teaching of Jesus, affirming Old Testament ethics even as it radicalizes or even transcends them at certain points.)

Those who were challenging Jesus in the first passage read this morning- those who asked the question about paying taxes to the oppressive government thought they could discredit Jesus as an authoritative teacher by tripping him.

If he answered- it **is** ok to pay taxes to the new Emperor he would be out of favour with the masses of people who were suffering under the Roman presence and domination. If he answered it is better **not** to pay taxes he would be on the side of those who rejected Roman authority and were in favour of rebellion. He could not chose **either** answer and win as the wise authority.

But Jesus asks his questioners to give him a coin. They produced a Roman coin from their pockets. It had Caesar's face on it- the questioners **themselves** were using the coinage of the oppressive Romans. There were other currencies they could have used. Jesus said: Give to Caesar what is Caesars, and to God what is God's.

In other words, Pay your taxes then, but remember God wants you to live **your life for God**. Remember how God gave you those 10 guideposts. Live that way.

It seems fitting that later in the same chapter we hear more questioners hoping to trick Jesus into picking only one commandment. Which commandment is the greatest? The lawyer asks. Perhaps the lawyer has a particular favourite law in mind himself.

Well, Jesus does not recite all 10 commandments with comments as the lawyer might have expected, or pick only one.

He tells us in a simplified version which is the point of those commands.

The first and greatest commandment is to Love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our minds, and with all our strength – this covers the first half of the 10 commandments. And the second greatest commandment is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. This covers the commands about good and loving behaviour to others.

It is sometimes difficult to understand what God's way involves. We surely do need the guideposts on our pilgrimage of faith. I agree with one commentator who says: there is so much we don't "get" about God's way of love. We don't comprehend it all. But still more often we don't act in accord with what we understand here, in our heads.

Our comprehension though limited, is far ahead of our action. God has commanded us not to kill, but we go on arming ourselves to the teeth.

Christ has told us to love our neighbours as ourselves, but we pay farmers not to grow grain while children starve.

Christ has told us that if we have two coats and our brother or sister has none that we are to give one away, but we live in a world where homelessness increases by the day.

Clearly, we are so much like the Pharisees in Matthew's gospel.

Jesus' tells us to lay aside our efforts and claims to authority and honour, because the real authority and the actual honour belong to God, and greatness in God's eyes is service. Jesus' words set us free from our selfishness and point us to serving others.

To follow Jesus is to love God and love each other as ourselves. That is the bottom line for me. What is the bottom line for you?