In these politically divisive times, some of us long for a return to the clarity of the Bible. You know, when everyone knew right from wrong and religious people didn’t argue about politics.

Right. Like our text today, you mean? Two parties of Jews approach Jesus to ask him about paying taxes to the Roman government. It wasn’t even an honest question. It was more like bringing him before a Senate committee composed of opposing parties who would rather make points at his expense than learn what he really thinks. Hmm. In this case, both parties are trying to entrap Jesus so they can keep faith with their constituencies.

We’ll see more about this in a minute. But first I need to say what this passage is not about.

When some of you heard the text read about whether taxes should be paid, I know what you were thinking: I see what you’re doing there, George—using the Bible to go after President Trump on his taxes. Actually, ... no. Our Gospel text today just so happens to have been the assigned reading for this Sunday. And while I wish our tax system weren’t designed so that the wealthy could figure how to avoid paying their fair share, tax avoidance and tax evasion are not the same. We’ll let the courts sort that out with respect to the President.

This passage is also not about the separation of church and state. When Jesus says to render unto Caesar what is Caesar and unto God what is God’s, this is not the root of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Baptists treasure church-state separation. At least we used to. Even the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas was a staunch defender of it. Not the current pastor, don’t you know?! I mean George W. Truett. A hundred years ago, Truett stood on the East Steps of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. at the invitation of Baptists in that area and held forth on what Baptists believe. He called this saying of Jesus one of the most revolutionary and history-making
utterances that ever fell from those lips divine. That utterance, once and for all, marked the divorcement of church and state. It marked a new era for the creeds and deeds of men. It was the sunrise gun of a new day, the echoes of which are to go on and on and on until in every land, whether great or small, the doctrine shall have absolute supremacy everywhere of a free church in a free state.¹

Well, again, I’m all for a free church in a free state, but that’s not what Jesus is up to here. He was not setting forth a new theory of human government; he was answering a trick question in a brilliant way that stumped his opponents and instructs us even now on our loyalties to God and governments.

So, back to the story itself. You know the phrase Politics makes for strange bedfellows? Or what about this one: My enemy’s enemy is my friend? Exhibit A, right here.

The Pharisees were a Jewish group that held scrupulously to the Law of Moses. When it came to paying taxes to a pagan empire whose emperor claimed divine status, they felt like sinners trading in a coin with a graven image of a man on it. The coin read Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of the divine Augustus. Not exactly In God We Trust. The Herodians were more practical. They believed that by going along with Rome they could carve out enough negotiated space to live peaceably and devoutly without compromising their faith.

These two groups could hardly agree on anything, except the need to get rid of Jesus. So, they conspire and ask him whether it is lawful for a Jew to pay taxes to Rome. If he answers the way the Pharisees think, it’s a no. Then the Herodians can tell the Romans Jesus is provoking sedition and he will be arrested. If he answers the way the Herodians think, it’s a yes. Then the Pharisees will call him a blasphemer and the people will turn on him as a Roman collaborator. Jesus is in a lose-lose situation. Or, so they think.

Jesus asks for a coin. He asks whose image is on the coin. Caesar’s, they say. Jesus says—

now watch my wording, *Then, give BACK to Caesar the things that are Caesar's*. The Greek word used here is not to give but to give back, as in repay.

This is easily missed even today when we think about paying taxes. We grumble about having to give something up that belongs to us, that someone is demanding of us by coercion. We may resent that and try to undermine our obligations by criticizing where the money goes and by electing people who will cut our taxes.

The late Sen. Fritz Hollings told the story of a “veteran returning from Korea [who] went to college on the GI Bill, bought his house with an FHA loan, saw his kids born in a VA hospital, started a business with an SBA loan, got electricity from the TVA and, then water from a project funded by the EPA. His kids participated in the school-lunch program and made it through college courtesy of government-guaranteed student loans. His parents retired to a farm on Social Security, getting electricity from the REA and the soil tested by the USDA. When the father became ill, his life was saved with a drug developed through NIH; the family was saved from financial ruin by Medicare. ... Then one day he wrote his congressman an angry letter complaining about paying taxes for all those [welfare] programs created for ungrateful people.”^2 Go figure.

Jesus says we should give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s. Whatever the system of government, all citizens receive some things that benefit us in return for what we pay. If Jesus could tell his spiritual community that they had a political duty to pay back a foreign government they had no control over, how much more should we acknowledge our obligations to one another in a system of government that is of the people, by the people and for the people?

But Jesus doesn’t end there. He goes on to say that we should give BACK to God what is God’s. What does he mean by that? What is God’s? Isn’t it everything? Yes, which is why we can’t limit our Christian stewardship to tithes and

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offerings as if we just pay taxes to the government and tithes to the church and we’re good.

If the first half of Jesus’ answer means we should honor the state, the second half means there is a limit to the state. If Caesar’s image is on the coin the we give back to Caesar, where is God’s image to be found? Stamped on the face of every human being. We are the image-bearers of God.

Which means we are to give back a great deal to our nation—patriotism, respect, service, and yes, taxes. But we should never conflate faith and flag as if they are one and the same. Our conscience is captive to God and our allegiance to universal human dignity and justice stops at no border. The state doesn’t have ultimate authority.

But giving back to God what is God’s also isn’t about claiming our rights to worship without restrictions during COVID-19, as if the state that is trying to protect people is persecuting the church. No, the church should be the one going to extreme measures to protect every image-bearer, and especially those who are most vulnerable.

We give back to God what is God’s when we advocate for neighbors who are being crushed by the systems that always favor those with the coin of the realm rather than those who are being overwhelmed by the realm because they lack the coin. This is always a surprise to people in power. They are used to people advocating for themselves. But when we advocate for others, it’s a powerful witness for the powerless to the powerful.

My heroes are people whose faith leads them out of their comfort zone to stand with and for people who are being left out or neglected. We have numerous CASA volunteers in our church. These are trained court-appointed special advocates for abused and neglected children who are often moved from one foster home to another. They learn about their cases and show up in courtrooms to make sure the kids get the best possible treatment and are not re-victimized by systems they don’t understand. This is one way we give back to God what is God’s. Treating all human lives as precious.

Speaking of precious human lives, how would you feel if
roofing contractors dumped decomposing asphalt shingles in your backyard until they formed a veritable mountain? Seventy thousand unsightly tons of toxic waste piled high in your neighborhood and no one doing anything about it, while people—including children—are left wheezing from breathing the fumes from that stuff. That would never happen in most of our neighborhoods.³

Marsha Jackson and her neighbors in South Dallas also bear the image of God. And while the city, the state, the property owner and the recycling company have been pointing fingers at each for nearly three years, community activists and faith leaders in Dallas have organized and advocated. It’s going to be removed at last. For the love of God.

See, the realm of God is based on love, not duty. And because everything belongs to God, love, more than duty, should rule us in everything—including what we give back to Caesar, as well as to God. Amen.