



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 21, 2013

"20/20" — Luke 20:20-26 (Gospel of Luke Series)

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My good friend Jim Wilson knew me as Simeon B. He called me that all the time. He was a leader in the church in Florida where I served and he also was a tax man. He owned and operated an accounting firm and for years we celebrated a ritual together. The last thing he did on April 15th was complete his own tax return. And just before his, he would do mine. I would bring all my stuff to his office. We went out for lunch together. Then he would do my taxes while I watched and answered questions.

Finally came the inevitable signing of multiple documents—Jim always reminding me to sign it Simeon B. I very seldom sign my full name anywhere, and seldom has anybody ever known me by full name except for the IRS and Jim Wilson.

In mid-April every year I have Simeon B. flashbacks and fond thoughts of Jim Wilson...especially so this year when I was assigned this passage for mid-April involving the IRS of First Century Rome.

Taxes came up big in the sermon last Sunday delivered by our very able visiting preacher, and this Luke passage we just read addresses taxes again. This passage also addresses the hot topic—and a sticky one too—of the relationship between church and state.

A third element that dominates the scene in this passage is the

presence of the people who perpetrated the whole thing. Most translators call them "pretenders." The word in the original language is "hupokrites". It means hypocrite. Most of us know what that means. It means a person who pretends that he or she is honest and sincere; a person who outwardly and publicly appears to conform to every high standard, yet one who in reality—inwardly and privately—rejects all of it.

A good word would be "acquiesce." That's when you don't lie with words, but mostly with actions—the poster child being the elder son in the story of the prodigal son. He's the worst. He's not only in the far country in his heart, he's there while pretending he's not. The prodigal is bad. The elder son is worse than bad. He's evil on top of bad.

Jesus could smell acquiescence a mile away. He knew these people were pretenders. He knew they had plotted against him to get him arrested. They went overboard even to the point of using flattery:

"Teacher, we know you speak and teach only what's right. And we know you don't play favorites, that you won't cave to please somebody in the crowd. So we know you'll tell us what God's will is because frankly we're confused, and we just want to do the right thing."

(Yeah! Sure you do! Baloney!)

And then they put the question to Jesus—a trick question, of course: *"Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

Jesus could have blown their cover. Instead, He blew them away. The last line in this story reads, "They were amazed at his answer, and they became silent." Another translation says, "They were speechless." In Matthew's account of this story he says, "They left Jesus and went away."

Research tells us the issue was over a poll tax that was due once a year. We're told that every warm body between the ages of 14 and 65 owed the state for just being alive.

Tianlang Guan, the 14-year-old who played in the Master's Tournament, would have made that cut just like he did in the Masters. (You'll have to forgive me for that digression—I'm from Augusta.)

So each person had to pay one denarius a year in tribute to Caesar. A denarius in our currency today would amount to just a few dollars. The dollar amount wasn't the issue. The issue was the moral principle involved. Extremely zealous Jews felt that they had one king and that King was God. No way would they give tribute to Caesar. We have to admit they had a point.

However, these Jews took their position to the extreme.

They were willing to hold their position even if it meant paying for it with their lives. And, of course, that hellbent Jewish zeal was one of the reasons for the trick question. If Jesus said the tribute should be paid to Caesar He would immediately loose many of his followers and most of His Jewish support.

On the other hand if He said the tribute should not be paid to Caesar, He would have been reported to Pilate as fast as you could send a text message. He would have been immediately arrested, taken into custody, and imprisoned.

It seems Jesus was caught on the proverbial "horns of a dilemma." The small crowd of Scribes, Chief Priests, and Galilaeans surrounding Jesus probably glanced smugly at each other as they watched to see which jagged horn would impale him.

Jesus said, "Anybody here have a denarius?" Someone in the crowd held up a coin. Jesus said, "Whose image is on it?" They said, "Caesar's!" "Well," said Jesus, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God."

End of story—nothing more to say. "They were speechless. They left."

Jesus' statement ends this story in Luke. And, by the way, this story—this same incident—is recorded not only in Matthew (as I mentioned), but in Mark as well. It's an important statement by Jesus. The statement was more than enough to satisfy the question raised by Jesus' opponents that day, but it raises a question for us. In fact, it raises two questions.

What does it mean for us to give to Caesar that which is Caesar's? And what does it mean for us to give to God that which is God's? I want to try to fully answer that second question about giving to God what is his, because that's the bottom line of the story. And I don't think that answer is a slam dunk. We need to look at it closely. But first I want to look squarely at the first question.

I What does it mean for us to give to Caesar that which is Caesar's?

Let me rephrase that question. How are we to give service, allegiance, respect, obedience, and honor to authorities over us—be they one or many—if they are corrupt, dishonest, immoral, or pagan; or all of those things at once? That's the real question.

Of course, the first thing that comes to mind if we are familiar at all with the Bible is the passage in the Book of Romans, Chapter 13.

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed. . . . For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants . . . Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes is due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."

And Paul writes again telling Titus to: *"Remind [all those in Christ] to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work."* (Titus 3:1)

Someone may say, "I can't pay respect to my boss, and I don't

honor her because she needs to earn my respect and she has not done that. So respect and honor are not her due." Look carefully at these Bible passages and you'll see we are instructed to respect our superiors not due to their personalities, but due to their position.

Let's suppose you live down the street from a Law Enforcement Officer who is immoral. Let's say you've seen him intoxicated on weekends and you could not help but see he is openly cheating on his wife.

One day you are pulled over by a policeman for a traffic violation. When he hands you the citation you recognize him to be your immoral neighbor. You are free to tear up that ticket, right? Wrong. He has a shoddy immoral personality, but his position is one of authority over you. You have no respect for his person, but you are called upon to honor and respect his position. He has been placed there by God. If you resist him the Scriptures tell us you are resisting God.

Listen to what Peter says in his first letter:

"...Be good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God's emissaries for keeping order. . . exercise your freedom [in Christ] by serving God, not by breaking the rules. . . You who are servants, be good servants to your masters—not just to good masters, but also to bad ones. What counts is that you put up with it for God's sake when you are treated badly for no good reason." (The Message)

I think most of us would agree that in our world today respect for authority is at an all time low. Certainly in this country we are warned to "Question all authority".

I have seen that bumper sticker dozens of times—maybe hundreds. The implication is that we should examine each authority to determine if it's corrupt or not, and if corrupt we are free to disobey it.

Those in authority have to share some of the blame for that. I was in the same Presbytery as Key Biscayne Presbyterian Church of Miami when Richard Nixon was President. He attended that church whenever he vacationed in Florida. His presence there was a great boon for that congregation.

Then came the Watergate scandal. The opposite occurred. Nixon's presence became a blemish. Could it be the President of The United States now tarnished whatever he touched rather than blessed it? It was true. It was as if not just Nixon has fallen, but it seemed to many millions that the presidency itself had lost its honored position, and that the last sacred cow had fallen. That's when the bumper sticker started, "Question Authority."

I think Watergate was a watershed. Genuine respect for authority is now a rare thing. You almost have to be on a military base to observe it. I heard Lou Holtz, the football Hall of Famer and motivational speaker, address this subject a couple of weeks ago. He said he felt it wouldn't be a bad thing if every American citizen was required to spend one year in military service. I partly agree.

This is a difficult subject but I'm pushing on it hard because I think it's a character flaw among many Christians and in our Christian training today. There are literally hundreds of books on the market on Christian Leadership, but not many on Christian "followship" —

not many wanting to be good Indians. Having said that, I need to acknowledge that the best leadership books do have chapters on followship.

This is a difficult subject but it's also a risky subject. I think there will be those who won't quite agree with where I'm going with this, and therefore either take offense or write it off as old school thinking. I've had some experience along those lines. I'll not forget the time I spoke on this subject years ago. It was, in fact, during the Nixon administration.

It was about the time President Nixon resigned to avoid almost surely being impeached. I was invited to speak at a college weekend retreat for Christian students. It was a major secular college in Florida. The Christian fellowship group was a recognized campus organization. The retreat was held at a retreat center about 25 miles from campus. I can't remember exactly, but somewhere between 50 and 75 students attended the retreat.

In my first talk on Friday night I hit this subject head on. I can't remember all the passages I used but I explained through the Scriptures that God cannot use us to fullest unless we first go home. And by going home I meant committing or recommitting to parental authority—honoring the wishes of parents or guardians. I explained further from a biblical perspective what I felt it meant to go home.

It meant that no matter how ornery parents may be, to forgive them. It meant asking forgiveness for any wrongs done to them. It meant submitting to their rules as long as that submission didn't break a written command of God.

It did not mean to allow oneself to be abused. (When they started throwing rocks at Jesus, He ran for cover. We should do likewise). And It did not mean becoming a dumb and silent doormat.

I spoke of my friend Jim Wilson, the tax man. Jim loved to have issues with the Internal revenue Service. He would use every tax weapon in his arsenal to fight battles with the IRS. He often won. But when he lost, he never got angry. He complied with grace. The same for us with authorities over us. Let us present our best case, but if the authority is not convinced then let us yield with grace.

And it matters not if our parents are non-believers and even oppose our Christian commitment. It matters not if their personal lives are shoddy and immoral. We have to go home and accept that this first and basic authority in our life was instituted by God, and God will guide us through it.

The cabins at the retreat center were spread around a lake. Mimi was with me and we had just about gotten settled into bed on Friday night. I recall it was about 11:30 when there was a knock on our cabin door. It was my good friend who had invited me to speak at the retreat. He said they wanted to talk with me in the staff cabin.

I sat in a circle with five or six camp staff, most of whom I knew well. They told me there had been complaints from the students. They said this had never happened before, but the student leaders said that either I leave camp or all the students would leave. I said, "I'm being fired?!" The said, "Correct." I said, "You folks sure know how to make a fellow feel good. I'll bet never in the history of Christian retreats has a speaker ever been fired!"

They smiled and said essentially, "Sim, we love you and we'll miss you." They said they felt I did not understand the background of these students and the kind of parents they had, and that the students had come looking for spiritual food and inspiration and they had been disappointed.

I asked that they go back to the student leaders and see if they would give me a grace period. I asked that they give me one more chance the next morning, and if they felt the same way I would leave. They got word to me from the student leaders that it was a deal. I had one more chance.

That night was a difficult night. Could I be wrong? I prayed. I struggled. I poured through all the scriptures that had any bearing on the subject. I looked back at my own experience as well as the experiences of others.

Finally, in the wee hours of Saturday morning I came to peace with God about it. I would stick to my guns. I was confident that I was standing on solid ground and that God had my back. However, Mimi and I both sensed the presence of a dark power.

On Saturday morning my entire talk was essentially a personal story, a very personal story. I had not told it before. Now I tell it in all the marriage classes that Mimi and I teach and I may have told it partially in the past from this pulpit. Bear with me again if you've heard it.

Earlier I spoke of the pretender, the person who rebels inwardly but puts on a good outward show. I used the word acquiesce where you lie, not with your tongue, but mostly with your actions. I said the elder son in the prodigal son story was a perfect example. I knew the

routine well, because it described me and my relationship with my father for about the first half of my life. I did not like my father. I disliked him very much. That all changed.

It all came to a head in a golf game with him while on vacation. We weren't playing on the Augusta National Golf Course, but we were playing in Augusta. I wasn't playing well, and my father who was a good golfer was giving me pointers as we went along: "Son, keep your head down." Tighten up your stance. Follow through. Try loosening your grip."

With every tip he gave me I winced with anger. Why was I angry? I didn't know, but by the time our golf game was over I was practically a basket case. I was a Christian. I was a pastor. I was a husband and father. I had my devotions that morning. And yet I was extremely angry at a person who knew golf and who was trying to help me get better at it. It didn't add up. I prayed a desperate prayer, "Lord, show me my problem!" He did.

Back home after vacation sitting in a lounge chair on our back porch there came to me out of the blue a sort of vision or certainly an epiphany. I heard no voice but the sum of it was this: "Sim, that golf game is a microcosm of your life with your dad. He knows life. You don't. He wanted to guide you but you wouldn't let him. You pretended to keep all the rules but inwardly you rebelled. You have thought that you need to forgive your father because of his wanting to be proactive in your life, when you need to ask him to forgive you for your pride and arrogance in resisting his guidance."

And that's exactly what I wrote in the letter I sent my dad. I said,

"Please forgive me for all the ways I have resisted your guidance in my life. I have been filled with pride and arrogance. I have not had a teachable spirit. I was wrong towards you. Please forgive me."

It was a longer letter but that was at the heart of it. It was a difficult letter to write because my father and I had never ever communicated about anything except weather, sports, fishing, or hunting. It was even harder to mail. What would my father think? Would he think I had gone berserk or that some cog had slipped somewhere? Or worse, suppose he had no idea what I was talking about?

Five days later I answered our phone about dinner time. It was my father. He had waited at his law office until everybody had left so he could talk privately. He had gotten my letter. He said it was one of the best letters he had ever received. Then he said those words that were like magic. He said, "Son, I forgive you." He knew exactly what I meant. My confession was on target. At that moment my heart for him melted. We grew close from that day on.

Twenty three years later my brother, who was executor for our father's estate, brought out our father's bank lock box. There wasn't much in it. There was his award gold watch. My brother took that. He gave me the gold pocket watch the law firm had given our father. He then pulled out a letter. He said, "Sim, I don't know what this letter is all about. It's from you. You can keep it if you like or just throw it away." The letter is in my lock box now. It was the letter I had sent my dad 23 years before.

When I finished telling this story that Saturday morning at that college retreat, something very strange and wonderful happened.

It was like a warm invisible blanket slowly moved across the room coming from my left to right and melting every heart as it advanced across the room. It still remains the most vivid instance I can recall of the Holy Spirit's presence at a gathering where I've been.

There was nothing ecstatic that happened, but there were tears and some quiet confessions. The one dominating element that seemed to prevail that morning and throughout that weekend was a sense of genuine love one for another. And, by the way, they asked me to stay for the weekend.

Jesus asked the crowd that day whose image was on the coin. He said to give that coin to one whose image was stamped upon it. He didn't ask this next question. He could have. He didn't. But I'm going to ask it.

Whose image is stamped upon you and me? It's the image of God. God has given no other creature the ability to create and appreciate beauty; the ability to love goodness; to have hope and compassion; to experience the whole range of emotions from joy to anger; the ability to process knowledge and the mind to comprehend the universe. These things are just like God—in His likeness.

Upon each of us is stamped indelibly on the label of our lives the simple statement that can never be erased, MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD. And Jesus said to give to God that which is God's.

II How we do that? How do we give ourselves to God?

God tells us in Romans, Chapter 12, how to do that.

The first eleven chapters of the book of Romans tell us how the image of God has been marred in each human being. And again like in no other creature there is the ability not only to do evil, but heartlessly to invent it, organize it, and applaud others who do it.

In Romans 1 there is the spiral downward—from hatred, to envy, to murder, to God-haters, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, heartless, ruthless. After what happened in Boston Monday do we really need to be reminded of the human ability to accomplish evil?

That list of evils in Romans that spirals downward lists about 25 evil practices each one more heinous than the one before it. We should note that near the bottom of that list is "rebellious toward parents"—right down there with "inventors of evil, heartless, and ruthless".

But thanks be to God he has set things right again. Here's the good news as Paul progresses through those eleven chapters.

"We've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, [so] God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.... God's gift is real life, eternal life, delivered by Jesus Christ, our Master." (Romans 3:23,24; 6:23 - The Message)

Then we come to the passage we read at the beginning, Romans 12:1:

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a

living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship."

The word "bodies" in that verse is misleading. It sounds like we are to take only this body and give it to God—only this skin and muscle and bone. The word translated body is much more than that. It is the word "soma" and it means "the body as a whole, the whole instrument of life."

It means if I drew a circle up here on this platform and asked you to come and stand in it and give everything in that circle to God it would include not only your body but your mind, your passions, your future, your past, your troubles, your ambitions, your gifts and talents, and on and on and on. You know, it's kind of impossible to go through everything like that—giving knowledgeably every part of our lives to God. It would take us a lifetime to place our lifetime before God.

Here's the way I like to think about it. I have here in my hand a whole packet of keys. If this packet represents my life, I give my whole life to God. And then as my life opens to each individual key I sort of rededicate that part of my life to God. He has the whole thing but I have to renew each new key as it's revealed. And there are a lot of keys here.

For instance when I came to Christ I committed my whole life to Him—my whole packet of keys. But it would have been difficult to commit my dating life and marriage to God. It wasn't there yet. I was a late bloomer. Even though I was 17, I didn't do girls. My brother and I did sports, not girls. But that key in my packet popped out big time two years later and I had to deal with it.

I like The Message translation of Romans 12:1: *"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him."*

The title of this message is "20/20" for two reasons. One, I don't want us to forget where this passage is found in the Bible. It's found in Luke, Chapter 20 and verse 20. And you won't forget it's Luke either, because he was a physician—a medical doctor—and I imagine in a day with no specialists he was no doubt an ophthalmologist, too.

And that's my real reason for the "20/20." I sincerely believe that if our spiritual vision is 20/20—that if we have come to terms with the authorities God has placed in our lives, and we have placed our lives in the hands of God through Jesus Christ, the way will be clear for God to guide us as we live for him.

"Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

How is your vision? How is mine? Let's pray. Lord, help us as we each imagine an invisible circle around us, to receive your grace to give everything within that circle to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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