



Roanoke, Virginia
Labor Day, September 1, 2004

“The How of Jesus”

Matthew 10:1-4, 22:15-22

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“Labor Day.” What an odd name to give this holiday. On “Giving Day,” we give, on Thanksgiving Day, we give thanks, but on Labor Day we rest. On this secular holiday, we are asked to do what the Sabbath Command calls us to do every Sunday: rest.

Well, rest *and* worship. It is good to see you in church this morning joining worship with your rest.

Worship, among other things, is a pause;
an opportunity to step back and be still,
an opportunity to gain perspective on how to live as God’s children.

The pause helps us not get so caught up in the busy that the busy becomes our faith, and stress and strain our sacraments. Without the pause, we begin to think that our worth is based on what we do and how well we do it.

These worship pauses also help us get some perspective in chapters of cultural exhaustion. Election seasons are exhausting, don’t you think? They certainly are important and require our attention, but they can be exhausting. And with polarizing campaigns in polarized times, they are even more so. Today, I want to take a Labor Day pause- a Sabbath pause- to gain some perspective in these polarizing times. I look to Jesus for that perspective. I heard a pastor say that the one word she uses more than any other to describe Jesus these days is a word that surprised me. She said, the word is “relaxed.” That’s also what she would like more to be. Me too. Teach us how to do that. I want to be more like Jesus who

- could be relaxed when others were anxious,



- who could be calm when others were worked up,
- who could be at peace when it seemed others wanted to fight... even when they wanted to fight him.

First, let's listen to F. Dale Bruner's translation of Matthew 10:1-4:

And Jesus was walking around to all the cities and villages teaching in their synagogues and heralding the wonderful news of the kingdom and healing every disease and every sickness. And when he saw the crowds of people his heart really went out to them because they were harassed, helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then Jesus said to his disciples, **"The harvest is huge, but there are hardly any workers; so pray the Lord of the harvest to thrust workers into his harvest."** And when Jesus had summoned his twelve disciples, he gave them authority over unclean spirits so that they could cast them out and heal every disease and every sickness.

And these are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, who was nicknamed Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James the son of Zebedee and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector: James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed him.

Now hear Matthew 22:15-22:

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, **"Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think, Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"** ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, **"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax."** And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, **"Whose head is this and whose title?"** ²¹ They answered, **"Caesar's."** Then he said to them, **"Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."** ²² When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

Often, it is a mistake to take a passage at face value. That's a huge mistake when it comes to parables when Jesus tells a story about one thing to talk about another. A great example for Labor Day is Jesus' parable about workers who are upset because, having worked all day, they are paid the same wage as workers who worked only one hour. Jesus isn't talking about fair pay and labor relations, as important as they are. He is talking about the unmerited grace of God. No, we shouldn't take that parable at face value.

On *the other hand*, sometimes we preachers over-think passages. I think that has happened with the passage I just read. There are some who so want Jesus to be a revolutionary who would endorse the overthrow of Rome, so they have to find ways to explain why Jesus isn't saying, **"Pay your taxes."** They point out that Caesar claims to be a god and his image on a coin breaking the commandment against graven images of God. So, when Jesus says, **"Render unto Caesar what is his,"** he is simply returning what is unclean to one who is unclean. Others have said that Jesus is



just being practical until the time comes when Rome can be overthrown. And then there are those who say that Jesus is being pro-government here and we should pay our taxes because, as Paul later says, we should submit to authorities.

Over-thinking. I think Jesus is simply saying, “If taxes are owed, pay ‘em.”

What he says is not complicated. What is complicated is how he can get away with an answer that is bound to get him in trouble with some in the crowd no matter how he answers it. Because let’s be clear (“Let’s be clear” is a phrase that is being over-used by politicians these days, so I’m using it here to evoke the political dynamic going on)—Let’s be clear, there is a huge debate about whether or not to pay taxes to Rome, and people on both sides have very strong opinions about it.

Let’s be clear again: Jesus is asked the question not to hear his answer but to force him to take a side and get him in trouble no matter how he answers. The proof is in who is asking him the question; Pharisees *and* Herodians. Pharisees want the Romans gone and the Herodians want the Romans to stay. For the Pharisees, there is that graven image problem, but their bigger issue is the Roman occupation. The only Law they want enforced is the Torah. Herodians, on the other hand, are all about paying taxes to Rome. After all, they are the supporters of King Herod who is in power not because he is in the line of David, but because he was appointed as a vassal king by the Roman emperor. They are political rivals who have joined together in common cause to get rid of someone who has the crowd’s attention. They want to make Jesus choose a side, which would get him in trouble with those who disagree.

Jesus calls them out on it. He tells them he knows they are setting him up with a “Choose-A-Side-question” and they are hypocrites in asking it. Oh he’ll answer the question, but then he will make a larger point. He asks for a coin, points out the image of someone who governs, and then says, “Pay your taxes.” There are costs to governing after all. We travel on Roman roads, we drink water from the aqueducts, the law needs to be enforced, borders need protection.... We pay what’s owed to the Temple, we pay what’s owed to Herod’s government, let’s pay what’s owed to the Roman government. All levels, you know: city, county, state and federal taxes; sales, excise and property taxes; Income and FICA; Capital gains and estate taxes... Too much, too little; too many, too few? Have that debate, but pay your taxes.

Who knows what Jesus thinks about all of that. Who knows if Jesus thinks it would be better for Israel to stay under the flawed and unjust rule of the Caesar of Rome or go back to the flawed and unjust rule of Israel’s kings. Not the point right now. The point right now is that Jesus isn’t going to be pulled into the political polarization that is sucking in all the factions of Israel. So, he adds, “Give to God what is God’s.”

Now that is a statement you can take at more than face value and unpack:

- We can give to God our heart, soul, mind and strength.
- We can give to God our worries and our troubles.
- We can give to God our time and resources.
- We can give our lives to God so we can get our lives back... only in the way they are supposed to be lived.



It's a profound statement, but for right now, let's keep this one simple. With Pharisees and Herodians in his face demanding that he take sides and tell everyone who he is with, Jesus says to them, "I am with God."

So,

- he is saying to the Pharisees who oppose Rome, "I am not on your side, I am on God's side."
- He is saying to the Herodians who support Rome, "I am not on your side, I am on God's side."
- He is saying to both of them, "Sometimes I will stand with you, sometimes I will stand against you, because I do not look to either of you- or to your parties to be my religion."

This is a major point about Jesus' ministry because he lives in a time even more polarized than ours, if you can believe it. In Jesus' day, there were all kinds of parties representing all kinds of agendas.

- Some have theological issues, like Sadducees saying there is no life after death and Pharisees saying there is.
- Some have disagreements about worship, with priests saying that worship should be in the Temple, Pharisees saying it should be in the synagogue, and others saying it should be wherever anyone decides to pray.
- Some have disagreements about the Law with some textualists saying it should be followed to the letter and other intentionists saying we need to consider the intention behind the rules.

All important, and these debates go way, way back, but none of these issues are the leading issues of Jesus' day, at least not culturally. The primary issue of Jesus day is what you heard when we talked about taxes. The primary issue is if you support Rome or oppose Rome. Whatever else the parties and factions within Israel are about, they have all been pushed to stake their flag on one side of that line or the other.

In a bulletin note, you'll find examples that Curtis Chang gave of where some of the parties of Israel take their stand (Chang is featured in the videos some of us listened to in a Sunday School class this summer). On the "Opposed to Rome Side" are

- Pharisees who teach why Rome doesn't belong,
- Zealots who plot and bide their time until they have the strength to overthrow Rome,
- and Sicarii who can't wait and are terrorists who assassinate not only Roman occupiers but also Tax Collectors and their families.

On the "Support of Rome" side are

- Herodians who support Rome for supporting Herod,



- Sadducees who are wealthy aristocrats who benefit financially no matter who is in charge,
- and Tax Collectors whose livelihood depends on collecting Rome's taxes.

The *pressure* to take sides and show where you stand is tremendous. By being a public figure, Jesus steps into this highly political and polarized world and refuses to play the game. He refuses to stay on one side of the divide or the other.

This is not to say that Jesus addresses *issues*. You can't be about God's business without taking sides on issues so you can do something about them. Jesus gets into trouble all the time doing this,

- touching the untouchable leper,
- talking theology in a respectful way with a Samaritan woman,
- healing a Roman centurion's child,
- extending the benefits of his ministry beyond Israel's border to Samaritans- to Gentiles,
- paying taxes because they need to be paid.

He will address issues, he won't do what political parties of his day expect everyone to do: have a political ideology, then choose a party that represents that ideology, then decide on the policies that express that ideology. Then, when people disagree with your policies, you know that they are not your people.

Jesus not only refuses to do this, he goes out of his way to do the opposite. If Jesus is a radical, he is radical in this sense.

I mean look at who he parties with. In Luke 7, we are told how he accepts an invitation to dinner in a Pharisee's home. Then at that dinner, the Pharisee asks Jesus why he also dines with sinners and tax collectors. You see, the Pharisee will bring Jesus into his circle, but needs Jesus to leave others out. Jesus answers the question by saying that grace should define the circle. Then, a few chapters later in Luke 19, Jesus actually asks one of those tax collectors, Zacheus, to invite him to dinner in *his* home... maybe partly to make a point

Let's put an even finer point on it. Notice who Jesus invites into the inner circle of his 12 disciples. You heard their names when I read them at the beginning. Judas, who is identified by what he will later do. He's the betrayer Others are identified in the way Jews are often identified and that is by their people; "the son of," "the brother of." But Chang points out that Matthew's Gospel makes a special point of identifying Simon *as a Zealot*- zealots being those who want to see Rome overthrown- and Matthew as a Tax Collector—one of those who collect taxes in support of Roman rule. Chang had fun imagining how tense it must have been when these disciples first had dinner together—the Zealot and the Tax Collector giving each other a look letting the other know he should be in that room.

In a way, Jesus is forming his own party, but here is how he goes about doing it. He doesn't start with ideology. He starts with the person. He starts with making a relationship with the person in front of him: Jew or Gentile, Samaritan or Roman, somebody or nobody, acceptable or



unacceptable. Jesus gets to know the one in front of him. Then through meals, through conversation, through study and prayer with them and through other spiritual practices, he builds a community around him. He embraces debate among them as they try to figure out together what it means to keep the command of God to love God and others. They do not ignore the issues of the needs of the day. Of course they don't. But, it is on the basis of relationships and as a community that they do so. It is not Ideology first. It is not Issue first. It is relationship first.

I know you hear echoes of polarization today in my description of polarization then. *We feel* it. We feel it among friends and family members. We have seen how party allegiance has become so strong a thing it has actually ended friendships and torn families apart.

It has even become hard for some faith communities to resist that pressure. Members in churches that have become blue or red are made to feel that they are more or less Christian by where they stand on the policies of a political party.

I understand the temptation. But what the world needs more than ever are Christians and faith communities that are stubborn in not buying into the polarization because they are stubborn about putting relationships first and building communities that actually make a witness to God's love... that are stubborn about loving others in the way God loves them... even at their most unlovable. The world needs Christians and faith communities that practice mutual forbearance in disagreement, but study, talk- even debate- in order to find common ground to do something graceful about the issues everyone is arguing about. These Christians and faith communities become agents of hope in helping bring people together rather than tearing them apart.

And these Christians and communities of faith can gain confidence in remembering what happened with the movement Jesus started. The movement outlasted the polarization of that day. More and more Romans found in Jesus a greater ruler than Caesar. Jews and Gentiles learned to live and worship together, and the church became known for coming from the Jews and embracing Gentiles. They survived Israel's fall when the Zealots thought the day had come to overthrow Rome (they got it wrong). They also survived what many Christians thought would be the end of the world, the fall of Rome itself. They survived and even thrived. Yes, Christians and churches can lose their perspective and giving into the false hope that a single party is the way, the truth and the life. But always there have been Christians and churches that remember to give a bottom-line allegiance to the ways of God, no matter who is governing at the time.

So, on this day of rest and worship, let's keep perspective on what it means to give our lives to God and be a body of Christ in the world. By all means, be a good citizen and study the issues. When Nov 5 comes, render unto the ballot what is owed the ballot, your vote. Try to make a good decision about who to vote for, because it is important, there are consequences. But as strongly committed as you are when you cast your vote, don't for a moment think that you have just declared who is in and who is out when it comes to God, or even to your church. Our hope does not lie in a side winning. Our hope lies in God's love and the reconciliation of the cross. When we are humble enough to see and accept that, we can do some graceful things in this world, and we can be a part of its healing.

