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Mark 12:13-17 and Taxes

By

Scott G. Sinclair

A theme in today's gospel is hypocrisy about taxes. The enemies of Jesus try to trap him into making a dangerous or unpopular statement about paying taxes to the Romans. They ask whether it is right to pay taxes to the hated Roman regime. If Jesus says that it is right to pay taxes to the Romans, he will anger the public. If Jesus says that it is wrong to pay taxes to the Romans, the Romans may arrest him. But Jesus evades the trap. He tells his enemies to show the coin used to pay the tax, and they show it. He asks whose head is on the coin, and when they reply that it is the head of the Roman Emperor, Jesus says to give to the Emperor what belongs to him. An implication is that those who use Roman money should not object to paying taxes to produce it. And a larger implication is that if the population of Jerusalem benefits from certain aspects of Roman rule, people should also be prepared to pay for them. The issue was highly relevant at the time. The Romans during Jesus's time were building an aqueduct to bring running water into Jerusalem. Since the Temple in Jerusalem was a major user of water, the Roman governor taxed it to pay for the aqueduct, and the populace bitterly objected. We may note in passing that whether the church which benefits from public services, such as police and fire protection, should remain tax free is still an issue.

In the present United States there is enormous hypocrisy about taxes: We insist on expensive programs but are not willing to pay for them. Consider the federal budget. The vast majority of federal spending falls into two categories, the entitlements, such as Social Security and Medicare, and military spending. Neither of our major political parties are prepared to cut them; and neither are prepared to levy the taxes required to pay for them fully. Many members of the Republican Party would like to reduce the entitlements, but cannot advocate doing so because it would be politically disastrous. The American public, especially older folks like me, depend on Social Security and Medicare and would never vote for a party that would actually reduce them. Moreover, cutting the entitlements substantially would be contrary to Christian values, since Christianity advocates providing for the poor and the sick. The entitlements like Social Security and Medicare were designed to support the poor and the sick, and the poor and the sick are deeply dependent on them. Yet, the Republican Party a couple years ago passed a large tax cut which mostly benefited the wealthy, and an enduring slogan of the Republicans is "no new taxes." The Democratic Party advocates increasing taxes but only on the very rich. Once again the problem is the voters. Since the very rich are a tiny percentage of the voting population, taxing them is not a great political risk to the Democrats. But

the Democrats cannot advocate raising taxes on the rest of us, because we would object. And at this dangerous time no one is advocating reducing military spending. We are indirectly involved in two wars, one in Israel and one in the Ukraine, and we are facing the increasing danger of a war with China over Taiwan. We have made commitments to support the Ukraine and Israel and Taiwan. Whether making those commitments was wise can be debated but is now irrelevant. We did make the commitments and cannot go back on them without betraying our allies and destroying the world's trust in our word. Therefore, we cannot cut defense spending. Probably we need to increase it at least until the international political situation improves.

The end result of insisting on expensive governmental programs and refusing to pay for them is an enormous and rapidly increasing public debt. We owe trillions of dollars to various lenders, many of whom are not Americans. And if we do not raise taxes, we will owe trillions more.

The people who will ultimately end up paying will be future generations who will also be suffering from our present environmental irresponsibility. Here it should be noted that we are not only borrowing financially, we are borrowing ecologically. We are not willing to pay the taxes which would enable us to make a serious effort to avert environmental collapse. Scientists keep warning that time is running out, that major portions of the planet will be uninhabitable before the end of this century, that is in the lifetime of our grandchildren, and maybe in the lifetime of our children. Rising sea levels due to melting glaciers will devour the coastlines where the majority of humans live. Rising temperatures will make sections of the earth too hot for the survival of large mammals. And in case you did not notice, large mammals include us human beings. We must spend more money on saving the planet, and that money has to come from taxes. A crucial first step would be placing a tax on the production of carbon dioxide which is the primary cause of global warming. Economists have long insisted that a carbon tax would be the most effective way to make a transition to a carbon neutral economy which in turn would combat climate change.

Therefore, as Americans and, especially as Christian Americans, we are called to advocate raising taxes. At the heart of Christianity is the belief that God commands us to make sacrifices for the benefit of those who are most in need. We believe that God actually became a human being and suffered death on the cross to help human beings who otherwise would not have salvation. We are to imitate God's self-sacrifice by showing a similar commitment for those in dire

circumstances. And who might they be? I would argue that those who are most in need or, at least, soon will be, are the youth of America and the larger world and the generations to come after them. How are we to help them? Primarily by paying higher taxes. We often imagine that the primary way to help the needy is by giving to charity. Of course, giving to charity is virtuous. But charity will not solve the present problem. The amount of money that can be raised from voluntary contributions is tiny compared to the amount of money that is raised by a tax increase. The amount of money necessary to balance the budget and produce a carbon neutral economy is large. We must end the present hypocrisy of refusing to pay for the expensive policies that we demand and the selfishness of not caring about those who come after us. Yes, paying higher taxes will require self-sacrifice, but self-sacrifice is the heart of the Christian message.