

Hot Air

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Matthew 22: 15-22

Delivered on October 18, 2020

It was February of 2005 and I was sitting on a plane. I was getting ready to take off for El Salvador, leaving from JFK airport in New York, headed down there on a mission trip with two other pastors. And as the three of us sat there on the runway, looking forward to the warm tropical climate of Central America, as we looked out our window, we noticed that on this cold, February day in New York, there was a machine that wheeled up to one of the plane's wings, and then the other wing, and on each wing it sprayed some mixture of chemicals. Now, this mixture of chemicals was apparently meant to melt the thick sheet of ice that sat on each wing. It was comforting to see this de-icing machine because while I know virtually nothing about aviation, I do know that having ice on your wings is not good if you want to stay in the air, and I am a big fan of staying in the air when I fly. And as I sat there with my two traveling companions looking out the window at this machine doing its work, one of my companions, I remember said, "We should tell them they don't really need that machine. Among the three of us preachers, surely there's enough hot air that we can melt the ice on those wings all by ourselves."

What does it mean when people say "You are full of hot air"? Well, it means of course that you are talking but even though there are words coming out of your mouth, those words don't really mean anything. It's just hot air and nothing more. You have probably heard entire sermons, hopefully not one of mine, but you have probably heard entire sermons that went on for fifteen minutes or even longer, and when the sermon was over and the pastor sat down you have asked yourself "What did that sermon really say? It's not that I wasn't listening. I was

listening as hard as I could, but what did that sermon say?" I have read entire books and gotten to the end of the book and asked myself what did that book really say? It seems to be nothing more than a waste of poor trees that were cut down and made into paper.

Well, as I read this gospel lesson that we have for today, I have to admit that I also ask myself what is really being said. It seems to be just a lot of hot air. Now, to give you some background, here is what's going on today. Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees, come up to him and say, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere and that you teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. So tell us then, what you think, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not."

Now, you may say how could these people be Jesus' opponents, they sound so nice? They tell Jesus how sincere and impartial he is. But you see, they are setting a trap. They are acting nice in the same way that when you set a trap for a mouse you leave out a nice looking piece of cheese. But the cheese is the key to making the trap look attractive. And here is the trap for Jesus. When the Pharisees ask 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?' they know that if Jesus says "yes" then he will be seen as a traitor to the Jews, a traitor to God's people, because you see the Romans were seen as an occupying army, a foreign army who were ruling over God's people and so if Jesus said yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome, he would have seemed like a Jewish Benedict Arnold, that infamous traitor in the American Revolution. But what if Jesus said "no"? Well, if he said no, then he would be subject to arrest for sedition, because he was encouraging people to defy the government. Either a traitor or a criminal, Jesus what will it be. So Jesus simply answers give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and to God the things that are God's—or I like the way the King James Version of the bible says it "Render unto

Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Sounds pretty, doesn't it? But what does it mean? It is an evasive answer. It doesn't seem to mean anything.

"Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not. What do you say?"

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God what is God's." That doesn't sound like an answer. But actually, it is an answer. Believe it or not, it is an answer.

Now, in saying that this is an answer, I want to first be clear that I do not mean to say that it did not matter in Jesus' time whether people paid taxes to the emperor or not. I am not saying it does not matter. The political questions of Jesus' time of course mattered. And the political issues of our day matter, too. In just two weeks from Tuesday all of us who are citizens of this country will have an opportunity to vote on Election Day, if you haven't voted already, and I hope, I sincerely hope that whenever we step into that voting booth, we never leave God behind. When you are a follower of Christ you are not just a follower in here, but you are a follower everywhere including in the voting booth, because Christ is Lord over everything. There is no place in this world where Christ is not Lord and so we don't just leave him behind when we step into the voting booth. And so when you cast your vote over issues like abortion, or immigration, or the death penalty or environmental policy or what have you, know that God sees how you vote.

But if that's right, and if these things matter so much, why not say more? Why not say something more than this evasive answer of render unto Caesar what is Caesar and unto God what is God's? Well, if you want to know why, then I think all you have to do is just take a look around you these days and see how divided our society is. And what do people say in a divided

society? They say you are either on this side or you are on that side. You are either one of us, or you are one of them.

I heard a story once about Northern Ireland, whether it's true story or not I don't know, and all of you I think probably know Northern Ireland to be a place that has been deeply divided between Protestants and Catholics for a long, long time, and apparently in this story, again whether it's true or not I don't know, one time a rabbi who was an American tourist was walking alone through the streets of Belfast in Northern Ireland and he suddenly found himself face to face with a man who pulled a gun on him, but this man wasn't trying to rob the rabbi, but what he said to him was, "Are you Protestant or Catholic." And the rabbi of course said, "I'm neither, I'm a Jew."

"Well, are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?"

And the rabbi, not knowing anything about Protestants or Catholics just said, "You know what sir, I don't know, but whatever answer is going to make you put your gun down and let me walk away, that's what I am." But how about that? There is no neutrality, you are either Protestant or Catholic, you're either on one side or the other. And you know what, in America, this dividing people up into sides is not just a part of our political life, it's a part of our religious life, too. Maybe not to the same extent as Northern Ireland, but it's there.

I can't tell you how many people I have started a conversation with whom I have just met, and they have said to me, "Now Rich, now Rich tell me about yourself. What do you do for a living?" And I'll say "I'm a pastor." And then they're next question is oh, ok, so you're a pastor, well, what kind of pastor are you?"

“Presbyterian. I’m a Presbyterian pastor.”

And then they’ll then say, “Well, I don’t know anything about Presbyterians so tell me, Presbyterians are they liberal, or are they conservative? Are Presbyterians liberal or conservative, are they this or that?” Now, usually I’ll try not to answer that question because I don’t like that question. But if I find myself having to answer it, then, I’ll say, well, you know, it depends on what you’re talking about and it depends on which Presbyterian you ask. Are you liberal or conservative? Now, you see, I don’t begrudge people the right to ask if Presbyterians are liberal or conservative, but when those are the first words out of your mouth, what that says to me is “Don’t tell me what God means to you as a Presbyterian. I’m not interested in that. Don’t tell me what it means to you to see a child baptized in these sacred waters or to take the wine and bread in a holy supper and to believe that the risen Christ is mysteriously there with you. Don’t tell me what it means to you to pray with someone as you hear their dying breath get fainter and fainter. Are you liberal or conservative? That’s all I want to know.”

But isn’t it nice, isn’t it so nice to be able to put people in categories, to be able to define people in this group and that group. Because when we divide people up into this group and that group, we don’t have to listen to what they have to say, because we already know what they’re going to say. But the problem with that is that to define people is to degrade them. To define people is to dehumanize them, and if you don’t think that’s right, tell me how much you like being defined. I bet you don’t like it, because you say there is so much more to me than that.

You have probably heard people say from time to time that they need to find themselves. It’s such a strange thing to say I’m going to find myself, isn’t it because if you took them literally

you might say “Why don’t you just look in the mirror? You’re right there.” But people say they have to find themselves because part of what it means to be a human being is to find out what it means to be a human being, and we do that in a way that only human beings do. A gorilla doesn’t wake up in the morning wondering what it means to be a gorilla. A chimpanzee doesn’t wake up in the morning wondering what it means to be a chimpanzee, but human life is much more complicated than the life of a chimpanzee or a gorilla, and so we are all on a lifelong quest to find out what it means to be us.

And what are we told in our faith about who we are? What we are told in our faith, in the first chapter of Genesis, in the very first chapter of the bible, before we are told anything else about ourselves we are told that we are made in the image of God. But how is God described in the bible. God is described in a hundred different ways. Sometimes God is described as a king, sometimes as a warrior, sometimes as a lion, sometimes as a lamb, sometimes as a dove, sometimes as a mother hen, sometimes as a fortress, sometimes as a rock, sometimes as a potter, sometimes as a shepherd, sometimes as light, sometimes as a Father, sometimes as a Son, sometimes as a Spirit. And if there is no one way to define God, if scripture resists all attempts to put God in some box, or some category, then how can there be any one way to define us if we are made in the image of God?

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s. A lot of hot air? A lot of empty words? Maybe, but maybe it’s a lot of hot air only for those who want to define everyone and to keep this world as divided as possible. Those who say I’m not interested in what you have to say I just want to know what side you’re on, and I just want to know because if I know that, then I

can already tell you what you're going to say. That's not the way of Jesus, and that's not the way of God, and that's not the way of anyone who is made in the image of God.