Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

YOU CAN BE SURE THERE WILL ALWAYS BE DEATH AND TAXES
(Originally posted in [2015](2015))

Matthew 22:15-22
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer

15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. 16So 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. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Jesús y los fariseos (Jesus and the Pharisees) From [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Jesus is changing the system. Instead of working hard at being good in order to be rewarded with God's blessings and kingdom, Jesus is offering the kingdom of God to those who don't qualify.

Diagnosis: Taxes and Death Are from God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): There Is a Hidden Agenda

Why try to entrap Jesus? Not because he was so popular (21:1-11, entry into Jerusalem to cheering crowds); not because he ruined your business (21:12-17, cleaning out the temple); not because he said that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God ahead of you (21:31); and not because Jesus said, "The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom" (21:43). Such things could make you envious, mad, or insulted. But you can deal with those kinds of events. People deal with those things, and worse, every week. They fix a business, find new friends, and try to be better, one day at a time. Why would people want to discredit Jesus? It's the same as when people entrap God by saying after a tragedy, "I can't worship a God who allows bad things to happen."
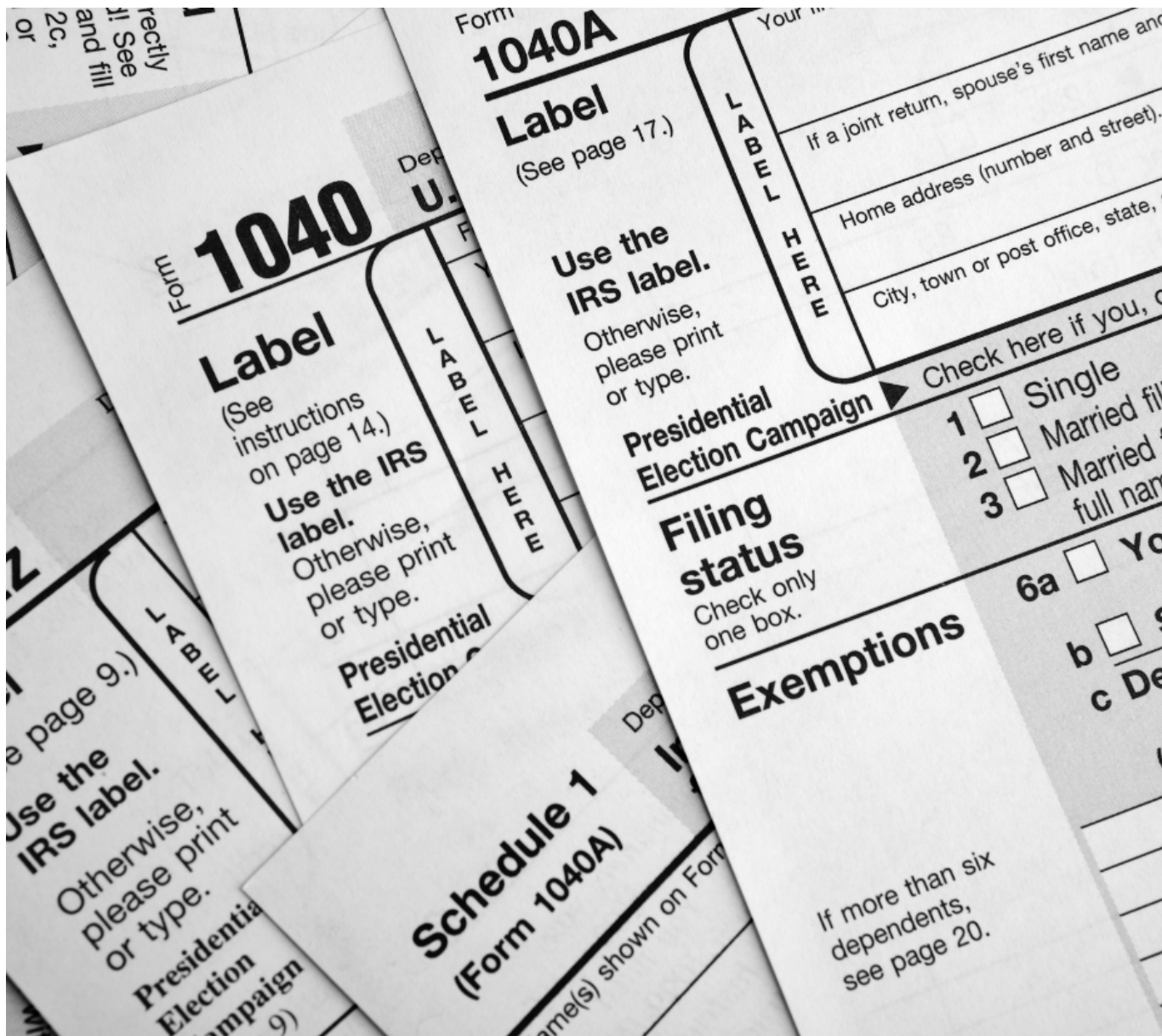
Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem): We Trust the System of Working Hard

When Jesus says that the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to others who will produce fruits, then that threat makes you promise that you will produce fruits just as good as anybody else. But that is not what Jesus is saying. He is saying that he will give, without cause or reason, he will give the kingdom of God to those who are not good, who don't try as hard as you do. In other words, Jesus is changing the system. Instead of working hard at being good in order to be rewarded with God's blessings and kingdom, Jesus is offering the kingdom of God to those who don't qualify. Jesus is offering forgiveness from God as a gift. Jesus is offering peace with God as a gift. Jesus is offering heaven to people who are disobedient, unbelieving slobs. That makes us want to entrap Jesus. We are not disobedient, unbelieving slobs. Why should Jesus give them God's kingdom? They don't deserve it. We want the system of working hard to do good and get heaven to remain in effect. Jesus can't just change how we deal with God. We will show he can't by

entrapping him. We will attack him instead of his policy of giving God's forgiveness. Get rid of him and his policy is also gotten rid of.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Render unto God What Is God's

Our preference for the system of working hard to do good as the way to get the kingdom of God means our hearts trust our actions. Our hearts trust the law that defines what actions are good. "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (19:16). We always think we can be good enough. When we trust the good deeds we do, then we are quite against those who do not do those good deeds, like those tax collectors and prostitutes. We are blind to our own disobedience to the First Commandment of loving God most of all; we love our good deeds more. So we come under our own judgment that says people who do wrong must be gotten rid of. Oh, it's not just our judgment that says so. It's God's judgment. Death is God's judgment against all people, for no one loves God more than their own good deeds. And if we don't have good deeds, we still trust our bad deeds as the determiners of how God deals with us. No one can change the system of law. We must render to God what is God's—our lives.

Taxes (from Canva)

Prognosis: Life and Love Are from Jesus

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Renders unto God

Jesus evaded the trap about taxes, but he did not evade the trap about whether or not he was the Son of God. The law made it clear that no son of God would give God's kingdom to tax collectors; Jesus was guilty of being the Son of God who wrongly

gave God's kingdom to unbelieving slobs. Jesus rendered to God his life. Yet God declared Jesus not guilty; God declared Jesus to be the Son of God who has the authority (28:18) from God to give God's kingdom to all people. God did both by raising Jesus from the dead (28.1-10). The system has changed.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Jesus Renders to Us

Jesus gives us faith in him by saying, "You can believe me." Trusting him gives us the faith he offers. We render to God faith in Jesus, not that our faith is a good deed, but that our faith, little as it is, is in Jesus whom God raised from the dead. We trust he gives people the kingdom of God. We no longer trust our good deeds or the law. Faith takes away our desire for the law and replaces it with a desire to love our neighbors with Christ's love and mercy.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Taxes Say, "I Love You"

The trap about whether paying taxes to Caesar was lawful (a good deed to God that gets one eternal life) is not about us paying taxes to our government. The trap was about paying taxes to an enemy government. There were Roman coins and Jewish coins. To give Caesar his own coins could have been a patriotic statement: "Let them take what's theirs and get out." That verse about giving Caesar what is Caesar's and giving God what is God's is used to divide our lives, as if some things and activities are ruled only by the government and God has no say about them. Some say rightly to keep religion out of government because ideology can cause bad governing. But all belongs to God (Romans 13:1: "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."). Taxes are what

citizens pay to work together to provide roads, energy distribution, clean water, medicine for those in need, and safety for the nation and local government. In Christ, we do not ask, "What is lawful?" That is, we do not ask about what we must do to please God or to get eternal life. We only please God by our faith in Christ. So we ask, "What is loving for my neighbor?" Taxes are a way to love our neighbor, because neighbors belong to God. And if people still want to trap God (as one who allows bad things to happen), they are like the Pharisees and think they have done nothing wrong. They trust the system of doing good to get life. They do not see tragedy as a call to repent, to change what their hearts trust to get them eternal life. It is natural for people to think that righteousness comes from the law ("For human reason only focuses on the law and does not understand any other righteousness except obedience to the law," Book of Concord, Kolb and Wengert, 154.229, also 151.206; 165); it is not natural to trust Jesus who died on a cross to give us eternal life. So Jesus is proclaimed to us and our neighbor so that we might believe in his name and have life; the thing we render to God is faith in Jesus. We render to others our love, including our care for our mutual citizens—even in the form of taxes.