

Series: JESUS...INTERRUPTED - May 24, 2009

**CAESAR'S, GOD'S...OR MINE?
Matthew 22:15-22**

1. The element of **surprise** is a strategic part of most attacks. When Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, the Japanese military leaders went to extraordinary lengths to maintain the element of **surprise**. The result was mass confusion—**everyone** was caught off guard.

-You have to be careful when you surprise someone—because when you do, their instincts kick in—and instincts are very unpredictable. In our first church, Lori and I had a couple as close friends, Neil and Lottie—who were our parents age. Know the fudge I sometimes make and throw? Well, Lottie taught me how to make it. I told Lottie my story about having dog-jaw. When it came to the surprise—me barking at her—she jumped and slapped me across the face! I never did **that** again!

-It's called being **caught off-guard**. You're driving along at night—and a raccoon runs across the road right in front of you. You're in the bathroom concentrating on trimming the hair in your ears—and one of your kids suddenly speaks—**right behind you!** You're in a university classroom—when a prof suddenly announces a pop-quiz on the material you were **supposed** to have studied the night before.

-Investigative TV journalists like John Quionnes, John Stossel and Michael Moore **count** on throwing people off balance—when they suddenly appear and shove a microphone in someone's face and ask them about an embarrassing or controversial part of their lives. If you do this well—you can sometimes get a person's unedited, unrehearsed thoughts—and manufacture some dissension! Or trouble.

2. That was the kind of interruption Jesus had the last Wednesday of his life. Only the people who interrupted him weren't just trying to smear his reputation; they wanted him dead. The entire episode was meticulously planned by the religious leaders. Let's read it together.

Then the Pharisees met together to plot how to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. They sent some of their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to meet with him. "Teacher," they said, "we know how honest you are. You teach the way of God truthfully. You are impartial and don't play favorites. Now tell us what you think about this: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus knew their evil motives. "You hypocrites!" he said. "Why are you trying to trap me? Here, show me the coin used for the tax." When they handed him a Roman coin, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. "Well, then," he said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." His reply amazed them, and they went away. (Matthew 22:15-22 NLT)

-Some background information might help you see what's going on—and understand how brilliant Jesus' response was.

- a. The one thing—the **only** think the Pharisees and the supporters of Herod have in common is their hatred of Jesus. The Pharisees hate him because of his outrageous claims for himself—that He’s the Jewish Messiah; the supporters of Herod hate Jesus because of the political threat he presents to Herod and the temple regime.

-The problem is that they can’t arrest him for blasphemy because of his popularity with the people. And he’s done nothing legally wrong to get him in trouble with Rome. So they have to **manufacture** dissent; catch him off-guard and trick him into making a self-condemning comment.

-One of the hottest topics in the culture of that day was the **poll-tax** required by the Roman government. Remember how Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem because of a census taken by Caesar Augustus? **That’s** what this poll-tax was based on. See, conquered peoples, like Israel, were forced to pay for the Roman soldiers and leaders occupying their country. Imagine how enraging—and humiliating—that would be?

- b. What made this even **more** enraging is that right on the face of this Roman coin used to **pay** the tax, Caesar is called *Pontifex Maximus*--High Priest of the Roman Nation. The **background** to that is the fact that Caesar Augustus had been proclaimed to be the Son of God. The catch-phrase in the Roman Empire was, **Caesar is Lord!**

-A Jewish leader named Judas had led a rebellion against this whole thing 25 years before—saying that paying this tax was an offense to God himself. Of course, his rebellion was crushed and he was crucified—but public outrage ran **very** hot on this form of forced taxation.

- c. That’s the background—and that’s why a “yes” or “no” question on this tax was the perfect bait for a trap. To set the trap, the Pharisees would send their disciples—who wouldn’t be wearing the tell-tale Pharisee garb. They would **also** send some supporters of Herod. They way they saw it—there was **no** way Jesus could answer this question without getting nailed.

-If Jesus answered **Yes**—i.e., it’s **right** to pay this tax to Caesar, the people he was so popular with would hate him—and the Pharisees could press charges of blasphemy, and have him executed. If Jesus answered **No**—i.e., it’s **wrong** to pay this tax to Caesar, the supporters of Herod, a puppet king for Rome, would have him arrested and executed for inciting rebellion. It was a **heads I win, tails you lose** situation.

-So, they come up to Jesus, appearing like young, sincere followers who admire him—and drop the question. **Bam!**

3. But they had no idea who they were dealing with. Jesus wasn’t just smart—he was absolutely brilliant. The first thing he does is expose motives. “I know exactly what you’re up to—so don’t mess with me!” And He asks for a coin—the **denarius**, a small silver coin used to pay the tax. He asks them whose picture and title are on the coin. **[PICTURE of Denarius]**. See the picture on the coin? It was Tiberius Caesar—a man

who **defines** what a Roman nose really is. And, of course, on that same coin was the title, Highest Priest. **Pontifex Maximus.**

-And Jesus skewers them with his answer.

“Well then,” he said, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” His reply amazed them, and they went away. (Matthew 22:21-22 NLT)

a. What Jesus says to this group makes you want to shout and dance! These leaders who were pretending to be sincere just...**go away!** But, strangely enough, there's no cheering, clapping or whistling from the crowd. Why? I think it's because those listening knew the implications of what Jesus said. They didn't want to **Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar**—they **hated** him! -What Jesus is bringing out, though, is that Caesar was the one keeping peace, running the government, administering justice and protecting them from invasion. Jesus says, “The fact that you're using his coins makes that clear—so it's only right to give him the tax money it takes to do that.” Now **that's** a little unexpected, coming from Jesus, isn't it?

b. See, all the people listening knew **how** Caesar kept order—**pax Romana**. He had soldiers stationed all over the world of that day—absolutely ready to club, butcher or crucify **anyone** who stepped out of line. . This was not a benevolent government set up in the interest of serving the people and making their lives better. That's what the official press report said, but this was actually a brutal government set up to enslave the world and benefit Rome.

-To tap into this emotionally—try to imagine what it felt like to be in France or Holland during the Nazi occupation—and how people felt about Hitler? What Jesus said here must've been **very** surprising. I'm guessing, but it **may** account for how the crowd eventually turned on him. It was unthinkable to the Israelites that the Jewish Messiah would **urge** them to taxes to Caesar—a megalomaniac who thought he was god!

b. Jesus is often described by people as a **Revolutionary**. What Jesus **taught** was revolutionary—in the sense that it flipped the entire value system of the world. But He never taught rebellion—even though people expected that the Messiah would like a victorious revolution against Herod and Caesar.

-That kind of teaching would've effectively eliminated the Romans from ever being His Followers. But they weren't. In fact, the first Gentile convert was a Roman **Centurion**—commander of 100 Roman soldiers deployed to Israel as peace-keeping forces. Jesus brilliance and wisdom here made it possible for the Good News to spread as quickly and peaceably as possible.

c. And Jesus' teaching in these simple words carried over into the attitude and teaching of the Early Church. Listen to what Paul, a leader in the early church, writes to the people who were right in the center of the controversy in Rome.

Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. For the authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you. The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience. Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honour to those who are in authority. (Romans 13:1-7 NLT)

-Remember, when Paul refers to ***governing authorities*** here, he's talking about a Roman system of government that would ***eventually*** imprison him and execute him. And he's not trying to make things easier for Himself. This is a continuation of what Jesus taught his followers. I'll tell you why Jesus can teach this—and why Paul can teach it. Jesus Christ is Lord. He is sovereign over ***all*** things. He sets up rulers. He takes them down. Friends, ***this is not a big deal to Him!***

- d. Here's the question I want to pose: How many of you think that someone could be elected to leadership either in Canada or the US who would ***instantly*** gain the allegiance of ***every*** follower of Jesus—and in their leadership get a 100% approval rating of all Jesus' people everywhere?

-***That***, friends, ***will NEVER happen!*** We're just too varied in our philosophies of life, interests, ideas and sensitive spots. You will ***never*** find any teaching in the Bible that tells followers of Jesus to love the and support and get everyone to vote for the leaders ***they*** like—and oppose, raise up political rallies against, hate and slander the ones they ***don't*** like. Now, that's what we sometimes ***do***—but there is not a ***shred*** of support for that kind of stuff in the Bible. Look at what these passages actually teach—with a government like ***Rome*** in mind that thought Caesar was Lord!

****Submit*** to them

*Maybe we didn't vote for them—but those who are in positions of authority have been placed there by....who? ***By God.***

*Those who rebel are rebelling against...***what God has instituted!***

****Whose*** servants are they...? ***God's servants!***

*Why pay taxes? Because **government workers are serving God in what they do**

*So, if someone is in authority we don't like, are we free to covertly slander and shred them? No—**give respect and honour to those who are in authority.**

- e. Even after Paul has experienced being imprisoned by Rome, he writes these amazing words to his son in the faith, Timothy—and talks about the **Why** of all this:

I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth. (1 Timothy 2:1-4 NLT)

-Again—don't complain, slander and condemn—**PRAY! Intercede. Ask God to HELP them. Give THANKS for them.** Do you get his reasoning? When you pray—you are talking to the one who has **ultimate** authority in the entire universe. And we do this so we can live peaceful and quiet lives—and because it is a godly and dignified way to live—and it **pleases God who is trying to bring EVERYONE to Himself.** How many of you think the word **everyone** would include Roman emperors who think they're God?

- f. This is precisely consistent with Jesus' words:

“Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12 NLT)

-How many of you hold—or have ever held a leadership position? How do you **want** other people to treat you? Does anyone here find it enjoyable when people believe the **worst** about you—instead of the best? How does it feel when someone latches onto all the gossip and dirt—and believes that rather than the truth?

-Can I just be frank here? We live in a culture that manufactures dissent—and criticism. And we've grown to like it. We'd rather believe a good conspiracy theory than the truth. And there's nothing remotely loving or Christ-like about that. It's possible to disagree with someone without disrespecting them.

- g. Now, here's the other side—and I want to be **very** careful about what I say. There **is** such a thing as extreme evil in government—where hatred and oppression are systematized—as with Hitler and Apartheid. There are times in life when civil disobedience is necessary to confront evil, but we have to be extremely careful in taking matters into our own hands.

4. The next part of Jesus' comment here is not one that gets talked about a lot.

“Well, then,” he said, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” (Matthew 22:21 NLT)

-I'll tell you what this meant to everyone standing around Jesus that day—and what it meant to the Early Church. It meant that people would give Caesar the money and respect that belonged to him. After all, it was only money—and not worth trading your life—or your peace for. If Jesus is Lord, not Caesar—you can do that. And as brutal as the Roman government was it did, in fact, create a unique situation for spreading the Good News of Jesus.

-When Jesus said, “Give Caesar’s coins back to him”—it probably saved the lives of a **lot** of people! Something else **very** important: It made a way for Roman citizens and soldiers to follow Jesus.

-But...Caesar Augustus and Tiberius Caesar had claimed something that did **not** belong to them. The title **Lord**. The title **Savior**. The title **Son of God**. That kind of authority and power belongs **only** to Jesus. Caesar ultimately wanted **more** than money and honor and respect. He wanted worship. And Jesus said, “No, the worship as Lord doesn’t belong to him...**give to God what is GOD’S!**”

- a. The phrase, **Caesar is Lord** was the choking point for followers of Jesus. Caesar could have their money. They would do what the leaders of this Jesus Movement said--pray for him, honor him, and submit to his authority. But they would **not** call him Lord and join his worship cult. Historical records tell us that when asked to declare **Caesar is Lord** with the sword at their throats, followers of Jesus would say, “**Jesus is Lord!**” and their blood would flow. And it flowed for about 250 years. And the Jesus movement **flourished!**

-When they were hated, because of Jesus--they loved. When they were shoved underground—they **worshipped** underground. When the Roman government made their beliefs and gatherings illegal—they respectfully believed and gathered anyway. And they were imprisoned, had their homes and belongings and freedoms confiscated—and died until Roman executioner’s arms grew tired from beating them, stabbing them and cutting off their heads.

- b. We’re in a different kind of situation, aren’t we? We still have to give the government the **coins** they mint—pay our taxes to Revenue Canada. I mean, we try to give as **little** as we possibly have to—legally, of course. Right? **Right?** Wouldn’t it be cool if we could **give Caesar what belongs to Caesar**—and it didn’t cost us a **penny?** Won’t happen—not in my lifetime or yours! -I think the most subtle—the **deadliest** struggle in our lives is with Jesus’ command to **give to God what belongs to God**. We don’t mind giving Him our worries, our sins, our troubles, our guilt and shame, our illnesses. But what is it that **belongs** to Him?

-According to everything Jesus said--and everything we know about God—it **ALL** belongs to Him, right? **Jesus is LORD!** That means that He leads, we follow. He is in charge, we submit to Him. It means that He is not only brilliant, He’s right about everything. And where we disagree? We’re wrong. He’s not

just Lord of Heaven and Earth—everything... **out there**—He’s Lord over me. Over my money and stuff. Over the things I have **every** intention of holding onto.

-It’s quite easy to come to a building and sing about that—and notice what He should be lord of in **other’s** lives—we’re experts at that. But living it out? That’s a tough one! Because that has implications for **everything**.

-Think about it. If Jesus is **Lord of all**, does anyone know what that leaves out? To the best of **my** knowledge—**nothing!** Jesus made this pretty clear. We are called, in obedience to the One who is over everything, to love Him with **all** our heart, **all** our soul, **all** our strength and **all** our mind. I don’t think it’s possible to say, “Well, God, in the soul arena—down **deep** inside--I **truly** love you, but in all the other arenas—how about **like**. I really **like** you, but I **love** me more. And the truth is that **we** are the competition when it comes to loving God. “Will I love and serve and honor **ME**...or will I love and serve and honor **God**—and truly **put Him first.**”

-In the Early Church—whether or not Jesus was Lord in a person’s life got called out. It usually meant suffering—and it had a way of weeding out the people who were faking it. For us, this is largely hidden. I mean, the people closest to us probably know what’s going on, but it’s possible to give lip service to Jesus, throw Him a few leftovers, and spend most of our time, money and emotional energy on ourselves.

- c. Friends, this issue of giving to God what **belongs** to God has huge implications for every part of our lives. Including what we do with our bodies, our time, our money, our relationships—everything! Paul, this early leader who tells us to give honor and respect where it is due—also says:

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. (Romans 12:1 NLT)

-Let’s be clear on this. What is the way to truly **worship** God in a way that is acceptable and pleasing to Him? **Give your bodies to God—let them be a living and holy sacrifice!** Why? Paul, in the context of dealing with sexual immorality tells us:

Don’t you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NLT)

5. Here’s the deal. You can’t do what Jesus says--**give to God what belongs to God**—and keep it all for yourself. Does that make sense...you know, that you can’t be 50% or 67% or 93% devoted to Jesus—and pretend He’s Lord? That you can’t say, “Jesus, I want to give you **everything**—but you **can’t** have my list of things **I** want to control;

my temper tantrums, my mouth, my ego, my thought life, my sex life—that's **so** mine! Oh, yes, and you can't have my money or my time.

-And can I just be right up front with you? We withhold from God what belongs to Him—because we think in **doing** so--we'll have a **better** life for ourselves. In reality, refusing Jesus as Lord—keeping for yourself what truly belongs to God—is a recipe for life that **doesn't** work. Does Jesus understand that it takes **time** to trust Him and learn to follow Him and submit to Him? Of **course** He does! But if there's no movement, no progress, no desire--not even any stirring in that direction? It doesn't work—because, see, **Jesus IS Lord! JESUS is Lord, not me.**

a. I'll tell you what is at the root of withholding in my life. A couple of things. First--fear. Fear that I can't do without something; fear that God will take something I cherish and wreck it; fear that, like Revenue Canada, God will just keep asking for more and more and more. John, one of Jesus' closest disciples and followers, says that perfect love—truly knowing and loving God **expels all fear**. -Second, when I withhold my life, it shows that I don't know God. That somehow I have never understood how **deeply** and **vastly** he loves me, and the He is the ultimate Giver, not the ultimate taker.

b. Now, why do we **...give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar**—i.e. pay taxes? It's **not** because we love the government so much that we just want to **give** them money! It's not because we believe that they love us! It's because we're a **little** concerned about what might happen if we don't. No one likes to have a federal agent knocking on their door, saying, "If you don't pay your taxes, we'll shut down everything—and put your sorry butt in jail!"

-Once you **pay** your taxes, you don't worry at all, do you? You just file the stuff away—and if you haven't been messing with the truth—you don't worry about it.

c. Our motivation for **giving to God what belongs to God** is much different. We don't give because we're afraid He'll nuke us or hurt us; we give because we love Him and because we trust Him. We give because, unlike the government, He's given us all we have. **Everything**. And when we give, He changes us and He changes the world.

-And something unexpected happens. Over time we don't worry as much. We learn to trust. We give God what belongs to God—and we find that we don't have to stew and worry about it. When it's all in our hands we do—but not when it's all in His hands.

6. I want to get very specific about a few areas where I think we need to do some tough thinking about giving God what **belongs--BELONGS...**to Him.

a. It's clear from the passages I read above that our bodies belong to God. He made them—when we choose to follow Jesus, His Spirit takes up residence in us. And we are called to not give our bodies over to the myriad of desires that confront us every day. He didn't just create us—Jesus paid for us on a cross.

-Have you ever given your body back to God for Him to use? Your hands. Your feet. Your eyes. Your mouth. Your ears. Even, to put it crudely, your sexual organs. See, He can only redeem and renew and restore what is **given** to Him. And it **all** belongs to Him—would you give it back?

- b. There's another area of our lives that we hold **very** tightly to. It's our time and energy. We are **all** called to engage fully in what Jesus is up to in making everything right on this planet. No exceptions. We have **all** been given gifts, passions, opportunities—and time—in increments of minutes, hours, days, weeks and years--to engage in serving others, serving the poor, making this world a better place.

-You and I can't do everything. So. Have you ever decided what you're going to **stop** doing so that you will have time to engage in the most important mission on this planet? If not—will you?

- c. And one other area—a painful area—a **sensitive** area. Our money. Sometimes our immediate thought on this is, "What does God expect? Geesh! I mean, I don't have all that much anyway—and the bills just keep coming in!" -God won't pester you. He won't send threats, or soldiers, or bill collectors, or the re-po man. But, friends, **everything** we have has been given to us by God. And there is a part of what we earn and what we have that **belongs** to God. The Old Testament called it the **tithe** or the **tenth**—and said that the people who kept it for themselves and threw God leftovers were robbing Him. And, in reality, robbing themselves.

-Think that's just an Old Testament concept? When you read through the New Testament, what you find is that when people were transformed, giving their resources—and living on less so that they could give more—became pretty typical of a transformed heart. When Jesus had lunch with Zacchaeus, this crook responded by giving half of what he had to the poor—and paying back the people he'd ripped off four times over.

-Giving God 100% of yourself involves learning to give. And then finding out that, just like Jesus said, **It IS more blessed to give than to RECEIVE**. So. Will you **choose** to do it? Even in this time when everything seems to be headed in the wrong direction, will you choose faith, not fear—and will you **give to God what BELONGS to God?**

7. This morning we come to the cross—and we remember Jesus—nailed between Heaven and earth on that thing. Jesus laid **everything** on the line to give us life. He stepped out of Heaven, didn't consider equality with God something to cling to like it was a life jacket. He laid aside His power, His honor, His dignity, all He had—and eventually his life. For us. Paul, and Early writer puts it like this:

He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them. (2 Corinthians 5:15 NLT)

- a. As you come to receive the body and blood of Jesus—the call on your life is to **live**, not for yourself--but for Him who gave himself for you. To give to God what belongs to God. I want you to think about it: What belongs to God? Can you just throw Him a nickel bag of yourself in response to what He's done for you—and given to you?
- b. This is our chance—as we look at the cross—to **give to God what belongs to God**. In faith, **will** you?