

This morning I want to talk about God and the IRS. I know that it is a long time until April 15 and I don't want to spread a lot of gloom this morning. Someone has noted, however, that besides being income Tax Day, April 15 is also the day the Titanic sunk and the day that Lincoln was shot. Someone else has said, "*You may not agree with every department of the government, but you really have to hand it to the IRS.*"

Another cynic has said, "*Death and taxes may always be with us, but at least death doesn't get any worse.*"

Arthur Godfrey once said, "*I feel honored to pay taxes in America. The thing is, I could probably feel just as honored for about half the price.*"

One last observer noted that the Eiffel tower is the Empire State building after taxes. God and the IRS. "*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.*"

The Pharisees were concerned about Jesus' growing popularity. They rightfully regarded him as a threat to the orthodoxy of the day. They sought for ways to expose him as a fake and a fraud or to paint him as a revolutionary who was a threat to the government. They sent their disciples to try to trap him. They began by approaching him with flattery. As someone has said, "*The person patting you on the back may only be determining where to stick the knife.*"

"*Teacher,*" they said, "*We know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*"

This must have seemed like the perfect ploy to the Pharisees. Would Jesus play to the gallery and encourage disobedience to Rome? Such boldness would have won him followers but at the expense of pitting himself against the Roman government. If, on the other hand, he sided with Rome, he would alienate those listeners who despised the outsiders who ruled them. **THE PHARISEES COULD NOT LOSE –JESUS COULD NOT WIN.**

Matthew tells us, however, that Jesus was "aware of their malice." He asked, why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the money for the tax." They brought him a coin. You know the rest. **It has become one of the best object lessons in all of literature.** Jesus said, "*Whose likeness and inscription is this?*" They said, "*Caesar's.*" Then he said to them, "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.*"

ACTUALLY, MOST OF US DON'T HAVE ANY DIFFICULTY RENDERING TO CAESAR. The truth is that we have very MUCH CHOICE. There was a trial of the son of an U.S. Congressman. The son had been charged with tax evasion. The Judge showed little mercy. "*Our tax system depends upon voluntary compliance,*" he said. "*Therefore, we must send a signal to other tax cheaters.*" **The son of the congressman went to jail.**

You may be surprised to learn that we have a voluntary tax system. Try telling that to the IRS the next time you are audited.

Rendering to Caesar is no problem. If the government needs your house moved in order to build a highway, you might as well start looking for a new one.

If Congress reinstates the draft, start packing the old duffel bag. What Caesar wants, Caesar gets. And most of us have no problem with that. For the most part, we are happy with the kind of government we have. And we are grateful to pick up the tab—WITH LIMITS OF COURSE.

I personally wish that we had more presidents like Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge we are told, frustrated with the idea of paying \$25,000 for an ENTIRE SQUADRON OF AIRCRAFT, is said to have asked, "*Why can't we just buy one*

aero plane and let the aviators take turns flying it." That's my kind of politician! They don't make them like Cal Coolidge anymore.

We joke about our government but we wouldn't trade it for any other. EVEN TODAY WHEN THEY ARE ACTING LIKE CHILDREN!!! *No, rendering unto Caesar is not a problem for most of us.*

BUT FOR MANY OF US RENDERING UNTO GOD IS PROBABLY OUR GREATEST SPIRITUAL PROBLEM. A recent survey of members of one of our leading denominations showed that among members who had dropped out of church, the number one complaint was that the church talked about money too much. **NOW FOR SOME THIS WAS JUST AN EXCUSE.** But I would offer a prediction that I hope I am wrong about. **I would predict that giving to God will continue to be on the decline for many Christians in the years ahead.**

HERE ARE (2) REASONS...

#1: as a culture we are increasingly MATERIALISTIC... *It is difficult to make payments on a Mercedes, a Rolex, a condo at the beach and all the playthings that people must have nowadays and give 10% to God.*

We are like the little boy in days past who was given two quarters: one for Sunday School and one for an ice cream cone. Walking along the street one of the coins slipped out of his hand and fell through some grillwork into the drain below. The little boy raised his face toward Heaven and said with genuine sorrow, *"Well, God. I guess there goes your quarter."* **WE ARE INCREASINGLY MATERIALISTIC!**

#2: there is something NATURALLY ATTRACTIVE TO US about money. *The more we have, the harder it is for us to give. Money can cost us our soul.* Jesus said, *"You cannot worship God and Mammon..."* Money is like a drug. It enslaves as surely as cocaine. That is why Jesus devoted more of his teachings to warning about the perils of great wealth than to any other subject. He was not saying that it was bad to own things, but he was warning us that if we do not be vigilant we can come to the place where things own us! The worship of Mammon is probably the most practiced religion in our land today. Even prominent religious leaders have bowed down and kissed the feet of this idol.

That was a lesson learned by John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Rockefeller rode the great American dream. He drove himself hard to be a success. He became a millionaire by age twenty-three and by the age of fifty was the richest man on earth. Then, at fifty-three years of age, Rockefeller developed a serious illness which caused the hair on his head, his eyebrows and eyelashes to drop off. Even though he was the world's only billionaire and could have almost anything on earth he desired, he could only digest milk and crackers. He became shrunken like a mummy. As someone noted, "He could not sleep, would not smile, and nothing in life meant much to him at all." Doctors predicted that within a year he would be dead.

One night, however, as he struggled to fall asleep he came to grips with his life. He realized that he could take nothing with him into the next world. The next day he embarked on a new way of living. Rather than hoarding his money and possessions, he began to give them away to persons in need. Establishing the Rockefeller Foundation, he channeled his fortune into hospitals, research and mission work. His contributions eventually led to the discovery of penicillin as well as cures for malaria, tuberculosis, and diphtheria. At age 53 Rockefeller was given a year to live. By learning to live by the principle of giving rather than getting he altered his life so dramatically that he eventually lived to the ripe old age of ninety-eight!

For many people the worship of Mammon is a profound and deadly spiritual problem. The more we have the less we seem able to give. The more things we own the greater the temptation to allow things to own us.

Please do not misunderstand. As you know, the Scriptures do not say that money is the root of all evil. IT IS NOT! Most of us agree with Joe Louis' famous words. *"I don't like money, actually," he said, "but it quiets my nerves."* It is the love of money that is the root of all evil. It is the worship of money that puts it into competition with God.

THE KEY POINT IS THAT SOONER OR LATER IN LIFE, WE HAVE TO MAKE A DECISION: IS IT TRULY GOD WE WORSHIP? IS IT TRULY THE KINGDOM WE SEEK FIRST? IS CHRIST LORD

OF OUR LIVES? Once that essential decision has been made, the question of the use of our resources, our time, our talents, our money becomes an easy one.

The late Danny Thomas lost his life savings of \$600.00 at a time when he was out of work. He and his wife, Rosie, had a baby on the way, and they needed money. Danny worked at part-time jobs so Rosie could buy groceries. He also borrowed money from friends. It was a tough time in his life. A week before the baby was born, Danny had the grand total of seven dollars and eighty-five cents to his name. What would he do? "My despair led me to my first exposure to the powers of faith," Danny would later recall.

On Sunday morning Danny went to church. When the offering plate was passed he put in his "usual one dollar." But something unexpected happened that day. A special missions offering was taken. The priest explained where the mission offering would go, and Danny felt he had to give something. "I got carried away," Danny said, "and ended up giving my seven dollars." He had given away all his money that Sunday. What in the world had he done? He walked up to the altar rail, got on his knees and prayed aloud. "Look, I've given my last seven bucks," he prayed. "I need it back tenfold because I've got a kid on the way, and I have to pay the hospital bill." He went home with a mere eighty-five cents in his pocket--all the money he had in the world. "You won't believe this," Danny Thomas later wrote, "but the next morning the phone rang in the rooming house hall." It was a job offer. He was offered a part in a commercial. The job wasn't much but the pay was good--seventy-five dollars. "I literally dropped the telephone receiver," Danny remembered. "First I whooped with joy; then an eerie feeling came over me." He remembered what he had prayed at church the day before. "The seventy-five-dollar fee," he said, "unheard of for me at that time, was almost exactly ten times the amount of money I had donated to the church."

The important truth about this story is not that Danny Thomas received a tenfold return on his money. He might have done just as well at the racetrack. **The important thing was Danny Thomas' lifelong allegiance to God.** Those of you who know his story know that St. Jude's Hospital for Children in Memphis Tennessee stands today as silent testimony to that allegiance. Often when God asks us, "What will you give?" we take the bit that we can spare, the part we can easily give and offer it to God. The question is: **How committed are you to God?**

Is God first in YOUR life or not? Does HE GET YOUR BEST? OR DO YOU JUST GIVE HIM WHAT IS LEFT OVER?

Years ago, Dr. George Truett was preaching in a camp meeting in West Texas. At the morning service he preached on the text: *"You are not your own. You have been bought with a price."* He was met after the service by a cattleman who had not long been a Christian. The man said, *"Let's go for a walk. I have something to show you."* They went up the canyon more than a mile away. All along the pathway the cattleman did not say a word. His great chest rose and fell, as if some seething furnace were beneath it, as indeed there was. Dr. Truett waited for him to speak, and finally he did. He said, *"I want you to pray a dedicatory prayer for me." "What do you want me to dedicate?"* asked Dr. Truett. Slowly the cattleman began to talk and tears began to stream down his cheeks and he said, *"I did not know until this morning that all of these cattle that I have called my own are not mine at all, but every one of them belongs to Christ. I did not know that these thousands of acres of land out there are not mine. They belong to God. Please help me pray a prayer to dedicate all that I have to Him. It is his. I will be his manager."*

When Truett had finished, the deeply moved cattleman also prayed, *"And now dear Lord may I also give you my wayward son? Please save him."* Dr. Truett said that later that night in the evening service that wayward son came to Christ as well.

That cattleman's vast estate did not BLUR what was really important, his relationship with God and his relationship with his own son.

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." If we hold out on God, God is not going to seize our holdings here on Earth, that He has blessed us with. But He wants us to enjoy the Gifts He has trusted us with-- He wants to share with us in the Glory we have produced. **So, it comes down to a simple decision. How important is God in your life? Amen.**