

October 22, 2017

Is 45:1, 4-6; 1 Thes 1:1-5b; Mt 22:15-21

“Well ... how much is mine?” This was the question he asked me as he looked a little confused. “How much do I get to keep for myself?” I was helping a young man in his 20’s (who had gone homeless in the past due to poor money management) to get himself back on track. He had a difficult time seeing that all the money he gets in his paycheck is not just free money to spend. I tried to explain that in the check is money that belongs to his landlord, money that he has to give to the cell phone company, money that belongs to the insurance company, money for future car repairs and other emergencies that he has to leave in savings - the rest was his to do with as he pleased. Some of the money is simply not his to keep.

If you have to pay your own bills you know this. The number on the paycheck involves money that you can never use - because it belongs to someone else. Our culture teaches that we should be able keep everything we get for ourselves - but that’s actually not true. It was not true that the young man could spend every dime of his paycheck and not go homeless again, and it is not the case for anyone with expenses or a bill to pay that they can just not pay them and everything will be alright. In the Gospel Jesus is answering questions about money payments: *Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God* - but you know, he’s not just talking about money - there is more he’s talking about than our financial resources. What we have from God, what is in our paycheck of life doesn’t all belong to us.

So what is this “paycheck of life”? The paycheck that we get from our employer, or from the government, or from a pension plan; the money that we get when we do a little something on the side, or as a gift - this is not the whole paycheck of life. We also have been given gifts by God, we have been given abilities and talents, we have been given our energy and time to be used as we decide. Financial resources, resources of our time and energy, resources from our abilities, skills, and training - it’s never all ours. We have to use some of that money to pay our bills, we have responsibilities to school, or work, or significant other, or family that take our time and energy, we are called upon to use our talents and abilities (sometimes against our will) for reasons we didn’t rally want to - it’s just part of life.

We can’t just have all that is in our control for ourselves - we owe something somewhere. God also has responsibility for all good things that we receive. We hear in the first reading God telling us that that we don’t really do it all: *I have called you by your name, giving you a title,*

though you knew me not. ... It is I who arm you, though you know me not, ... I am the LORD, there is no other. We forget that all the successes we enjoy are a result to some extent of God's action. What Jesus is trying to say is that if the government has a claim to some of your resources - how much also God. Sure pay your bills, serve the community, but don't forget to pay back the God to whom you owe more than you realize.

So how do we pay back God? God has given us, in the "paycheck of life," resources that are not actually our to keep. Just like that young man had to realize that a few hundred dollars of each paycheck was actually given to him to give his landlord, we have to realize that God has given us more than we actually need - God gives us financial resources, time, energy, and abilities that are meant to go to somewhere else. God gives us money that is meant to support those who are poor and hungry - that's how God planned to take care of them. God gives each one a portion of the money that is needed to operate his Church on earth - this is the money (which also goes helps others support their families and funds many charitable works) that you offer in the collection at Mass. God has given abilities, gifts, and skills that are needed to help others. This we pay back when we help another, or come together to sacrifice our time and energy as a community on behalf of a good cause. Just our coming to Mass and devoting time to private prayer is paying God back with our time and energy.

So how much of what we are given - that is meant by God to go somewhere else - do we keep for ourselves? It is real easy to do. Lots of companies would like you to spend that money that is meant to to care for the poor or support the Church, on something you don't really need so someone else can get rich. Many people and groups will try to get you to use up all your time and energy that could be spent worshipping God in Church, praying, or helping others. Can we find a way to squeeze a little more time for God in our busy schedules? Can those of you here who are doing just that encourage others to do the same? Jesus was challenging the people in the Gospel, and us today, to be as concerned with paying God those resources belongs to God just like we are sure to pay taxes and bills. When we act as good stewards of our "paycheck of life," we participate in the divine action renewing and bringing about justice in the world. We as Christians do this in the hope of a reward, gained for us by Jesus. A reward greater than the one we can get by controlling our time, ability, and energy for our own plans and pleasure - or by squandering our financial resources on yet another internet purchase or trip to the store. *Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.*