

Hello everyone. I am Oscar, the Parish Assistant. I am glad to be here preaching today, however, this text is kind of tricky.

Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.

What does this mean?

For many years, my parents were missionaries in Ecuador in South America.

Therefore, I have spent a significant part of my childhood and youth as a missionary kid.

In Ecuador, one of the big questions that faced everyone, both missionaries and everyone else in society, was how to deal with the systemic corruption present at almost all levels of society.

I remember one instance when we were driving from one city to another, and because of hindrances in the road, my parents made a turn that was the only one they could make, onto another road.

Just as they made the turn, a police officer stopped them, reprimanded them for making an illegal turn, and gave them a fine.

My dad responded by saying how sorry he was, acknowledging his fault, and finally offering some money and saying, "why don't you just pay this fine for us?"

The police officer gladly accepted.

That money went straight into the pocket of the police officer, of course, who had stopped us because we were white and therefore had money, and because he was in a position to take

advantage of us. It is not unlikely that his wage was very small and that this was something he did to earn a living.

Now, let's compare this story with Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees and Herodians in today's gospel passage.

Obviously, they are two very different events. They have some similarities though. For example, in both, there are people who are trying to trap someone: The Pharisees with Jesus, the police officer with my parents. Also, in both, people say things not because they're true, but because they follow a social code. They say things because they follow the rules of the game, not because they follow the rules of truth.

In Matthew, the way the Pharisees and the Herodians go about talking to Jesus is very much following the rules of the game.

As readers, we know that they are up to no good, because Matthew writes that they "plotted to entrap him in what he said." But notice the way they go about it.

They start by saying all these nice things about Jesus. We know that you are sincere, teach the way of God, so please can you answer this question that we have really been struggling with.

Imagine being there, listening to these people asking what sounds like a good question, asked in a respectful way. These people are being polite, in fact, they are following the expected social norms.

The fact that they are trying to trap Jesus is not immediately visible, even though it is clear to us as readers. It is not visible or clear, and it is not something that the emperor cares about. The emperor cares whether or not you pay taxes, but not whether you try to trap your friends.

A question we can ask is: Have you ever felt like what you said to someone you said just because you followed the rules of the game?

I'm not saying that you were like the Pharisees exactly, but more that what you said what was appropriate in the situation only because it was appropriate. Maybe it left you with a bad feeling afterwards. Have you ever felt like that?

Asking these questions help us answer why my dad did what he did in the situation he was in. He felt that he was following the rules of the game.

Here is my point: I think following the rules of the game is a little like giving to the emperor the things that are the emperor's. The emperor cares whether you pay taxes, and saying and doing things in the ways that are socially acceptable. But the emperor does not care about the way you treat your friends, or whether you are scheming to trap them.

What giving to the emperor really means is: to follow social norms and obligations. It means paying taxes, obeying laws and social codes.

It is important that we do this, in fact Jesus wants us to do it, but it doesn't mean more than what it means. It doesn't mean more than following laws, paying taxes etc. It has very little to

do with our inner being, and does not provide a sufficient morality, in the true sense of the word.

Notice also, that the actual expectations change a lot from context to context. The situation my parents were in would hopefully not happen as easily in this part of the world.

Giving to the emperor the things that are the emperor's is important, but it can never be good enough. Although important, giving to the emperor can be unreliable, superficial, and sometimes plain wrong.

It's unreliable because it changes depending on where you are. Cultural relativism applies to giving to the emperor. What my parents experienced in Ecuador would not happen in Norway. It's superficial, because there are so many things the emperor doesn't care about. In the story of the Pharisees, we see that they follow social codes, and still do something wrong. The emperor doesn't care whether or not they trap Jesus, as long as they pay taxes.

It can sometimes be plain wrong. Both what the Pharisees did and the whole situation my parents were in are morally questionable. The Pharisees tried to trap Jesus, and Ecuadorian society basically said that corruption is ok. In history there are other more extreme examples. During World War 2, many Christians in Germany did not criticize Hitler because they thought they were giving to the emperor the things that are the emperors.

So it can be unreliable, superficial, or wrong. It's difficult and complex to give to the emperor. I think Jesus recognizes this, because of what he says.

At the time of Jesus, the issue of taxes was a really hot issue. Israel was under imperial Roman rule.

Most Israelites did not like the Romans very much, but people disagreed about how you would signal opposition.

Not paying taxes would get you into trouble. Yet some people thought it was the right answer.

We need to keep in mind the historical context, because in that context, what Jesus says sounds a bit like a trick answer.

He does answer the question, but then again, he doesn't. It seems fairly clear that he is not advocating dissent against the emperor.

He didn't come to lead a political rebellion anyway, and stresses that the emperor should have what belongs to him.

But what he says leaves us hanging, not knowing what to do with that answer.

This is typical of Jesus.

Perhaps he leaves it like this because it is a complicated issue. Sometimes the society does what it should, and it is right to give to the emperor. Other times it isn't. As I said, giving to the emperor can be unreliable, superficial or just plain wrong.

In the story of my parents and the police officer, something was definitely wrong. Perhaps the big problem is not what either of them did in that situation, but rather, the problem was the

larger systemic corruption. Corruption is wrong, and systemic corruption is dangerous. When the whole system encourages corruption, the system needs to be changed. The emperor needs to reform himself. In that situation, it's not that easy to give to the emperor.

I think Jesus was aware of all this, but also aware that it is important to follow laws in society and to pay taxes. For us, though, if the whole thing is a complicated issue, how do we resolve it?

A good way to do it is to lean on the two greatest commandments of Jesus. The two greatest commandments are, 1) You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. 2) You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

When thinking about the command to give to the emperor and to give to God, we can base it on the greater command to love God and to love our neighbor.

In the Second World War, disobedience against Hitler was more in the spirit of the two greatest commandments than obedience was, therefore it was the right thing to do. The same thing is true for the Civil Rights Movement in America.

Loving God and neighbor are the two greatest commandments. They have to come first. That's why they are the greatest.

There is something the two greatest commandments and the commandment to give to God and neighbor have in common. In both of them, God is at the center. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. AND: Give to God the things that are God's.

If we think about it, what are the things that belong to God? Well, God created everything, so everything belongs to God. As Christians we need to actively be aware of that.

The 18th century Anglican theologian William Law writes the following in his work "A serious call to a devout and holy life", and I quote: "We can please God in no state or employment of life but by intending and devoting it all to His honor and glory,"

He goes on by saying: "Worldly business is to be made holy unto the Lord by being done as a service to Him and in conformity to His divine will."

Worldly business, as a service to him, and in conformity to his divine will.

Everything is God's, so we should give everything to God, including the things we give to the emperor. What we give to the emperor we should also give to God.

What do we do, then, when giving to the state – to the emperor – either goes against giving to God, or goes against the two greatest commandments? As I mentioned, giving to the emperor can be unreliable, superficial, or just wrong sometimes. We need to remember that we need to follow God first, and also the two greatest commandments first. If there is a contradiction, we need to choose God.

All this can sound very theoretical. But what does it mean for us in practice?

Well, it can mean many different things, and I'm still working on it myself. However, the most important thing is that it means to think about everything we do as things we do for God. In fact, not just everything we do, but who we are as well. God created us too, so technically we are included in the things that are God's.

In addition to this, following Jesus' words also means to let the two great commandments guide everything we do. The emperor will demand his, but God is sovereign over everything. Amen.