

"SAVE THE TOKENS FOR UNCLE SAM"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 14, 1990

"SAVE THE TOKENS FOR UNCLE SAM"

INTRODUCTION

A sportswriter once asked Joe Louis, "Joe...who hit you the hardest during your ring career?" Joe replied, "Uncle Sam!"

Oscar Wilde, that master wit, once protested about the taxes on his house. He was reminded that by living there he used the protection and the services of the government even while he slept. Wilde is supposed to have answered, "But I sleep so badly." We know the feeling.

There's a story going around that a prominent citizen recently invited our President to play a round of golf. On the first hole President Bush floated a beautiful shot about three feet from the pin. He walked up to the ball and looked over in the direction of the man who had invited him. Bush was looking for the man to concede him the putt. The man ignored him and looked away.

"You're going to give me this putt, aren't you?" Bush asked. The man replied,

"Go ahead and make a pass at it. I want to see your stroke. A putt like that builds character. Besides, it will give you a little feel for the greens"

With a hurt look, our President said, "I work in the Oval Office all day for people like you. And now you're not going to give me this putt?" The man said nothing. "OK" Bush sighed,

"But let's keep moving. I've got an appointment after we finish with the Director of Internal Revenue"

"The putt's good" said the man rather hastily. "It's a gimme. Let's go".

We have to tell jokes on the IRS at times to keep from crying. After all, the two inevitable events in this world are death and taxes. As someone said last week, "At least death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets". Look at the abuse our President is taking over his willingness now to consider some "revenue enhancements" in order to reduce the deficit. Most folks do not like taxes.

DEVELOPMENT

People had to pay taxes back there in the time of Jesus. And even worse, they had to pay them to a despised government. Room occupied their land. Thus a portion of their livelihood ended up in the coffers of Caesar. This was a point of contention with every Jew; for they were a proud people and resented this Roman domination.

Thus the dilemma of Jesus when someone put that loaded question to Him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Would He offend the Jews by siding with the Romans or would He risk the wrath of the Romans by siding with Jewish sentiment? He did neither. He asked,

"Whose likeness and inscription is this on the coin?" "Caesar's" they answered. "Render then", He said, "to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's".

A classic answer. An irrefutable answer. Let's use the answer of Jesus to stimulate our thinking on a very important question: what are those things that belong to God? We know pretty much what belongs to Caesar - a portion of every dollar we earn. That's for sure. What is there that belongs to God?

WE OWE GOD MUCH MORE THAN MONEY

One thing is certain and that is that we owe God much more than money. Don't get me wrong. Our money does belong to God and we should always be moving up in our giving to the Biblical standard - the tithe. That's the goal of mature discipleship. Some need to be reminded of that.

I was amused by a story published by the University of Oregon, in soliciting support from its alumni. I share it with you. "When the King of Siam came to America for an eye operation some years ago, his American surgeon, accustomed to setting prices somewhat by ability to pay, couldn't decide exactly how much to charge His Royal Highness - \$1,000 to be a "good neighbor"? Or \$10,000 to prove the operation worth the trip. After all, a King is a King.

Someone suggested that he check with the King's NY lawyer who might have some thoughts on the matter and so he did. The lawyer said,

"No problem. The King is an honorable man. Like you, he understands value. Simply send him an invoice with no amount indicated and then add a hand-written footnote, 'The King can do no wrong.'"

Well, he did and back came a check for \$75,000. The surgeon was overjoyed. He bought his wife a mink coat, ordered two new Cadillacs and blew the rest on a three month trip around the world. But,

Upon his arrival home, his pocketbook now flattened, but happy and refreshed by all he had seen he opened his mail. In it was a bill from the King's lawyer here in the city with no amount indicated, but with a handwritten footnote, "The honorable doctor can do no wrong."

Many of us are far more honorable in giving to Caesar than we are to God. We need to pray about that amount we plan to give to God's work in the coming days as we consider our pledge to the Church for the coming year. "The honorable doctor can do no wrong." I like that. "The honorable church member can do no wrong." But more than money is owed to God, however. Remember those familiar words, "All things come from Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee."

Have we? Do we? Think about it and let me move on and suggest to you three more important things that belong to God.

OUR BODIES

Our bodies belong to God. One of the questionable remarks we often hear now-a-days is something like this: "It's my body and I'll do with it as I please." That statement to me is dumb, because it's not true. Our bodies are God's creation. We are only temporary inhabitants. We are renters, or even squatters, using another's property.

Even more important, scientists have recently discovered that there is constant feedback going on back and forth between our brains and every cell in our body. Our minds and bodies have a unity that we are only now appreciating. You may not be aware of it, but this fits in beautifully with Christian theology.

It was the Greeks who contended that there is a division between mind, soul and body. The Jews, however, knew that wasn't true. When the Jews spoke of the soul, they were referring to the total person - including mind and body.

The body as part of our total being gives new emphasis to Paul's writing in I Corinthians, chapter 6 that we are not to be joined to a prostitute. Why? Because our bodies are joined with our spirits which are joined to Christ. Joining our body to immorality is a desecration of the temple of the living God. Thus it is questionable to say, "It's my body and I'll do with it as I please". We are God's creation.

"Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...which you have from God. You are not your own. Glorify God in your body".

And this, too. When we do what we please with our bodies, we usually end up doing ourselves harm. Our bodies are such wondrous, miraculous gifts. I like the way Zig Ziglar puts it. He asks,

"If you had a million dollar race horse, would you allow it to smoke cigarettes, drink whiskey and stay out all night? How about a thousand dollar dog? How about a five dollar cat?"

If you wouldn't treat a million dollar race horse like that, then how can you abuse a six-million dollar body? Something to think about.

Sal was thirty years old - vigorous and athletic - when he developed a form of bone cancer from which he died. It was a very painful and disabling form of bone cancer but in some ways, Sal's last two years were the richest of his entire life. Though he lived in considerable pain and though he was encased in a full body cast (because of multiple bone fractures), Sal found great meaning in his life by being of service to others, especially young people. He toured high schools in the area and gave advice to teenagers on the hazards of drugs. He used his cancer and his visibly deteriorating body as powerful leverage in his mission. He was extraordinarily effective. The whole auditorium trembled when Sal, in his wheelchair and frozen in his cast, exhorted:

"You want to destroy your body with nicotine or alcohol or heroin? You want to smash it up in cars? You're depressed and want to throw it off the Golden Gate Bridge? Then give me your body. Let me have it! I want it! I'll take it. I want to live!"

No, my friend - it's not your body. Not entirely. Our bodies belong to God!

OUR BRAINS

Now if our bodies belong to God, then certainly so too do our brains. As fantastic as our bodies are, they pale in comparison to the wonder of the human brain. Recent research has discovered that we have more than 100 billion neuron cells in our brains. Each one of these neuron cells can store more data than the most sophisticated computer on earth.

At the beginning of this century, psychologist Williams James estimated that on the average we use perhaps 5 to 10 percent of our full mental potential. And recent research indicates that we may only use an average of less than 1 percent of

the brain cells available to us in a lifetime! Think of it. And you and I probably know some people who are using far less than that.

So the question is: how are you treating your brain? What kind of nutrients are you giving it? What kind of exercise? I have a perfect diet for shrinking the brain. Put it on a steady diet of soaps and sit-coms. Garbage in. Garbage out. Really, I'm astounded by the number of hours the average American spends in front of the TV and we wonder why the college entrance scores are going down.

I get concerned when I see young children as well as grown adults going into the R-rated motion pictures where they soak up graphic scenes of sex and violence and obscenities. What happens to all that garbage that goes in? And don't tell me it doesn't matter. Our brains form meaning out of those symbols...the images and the vocabulary we feed it. A steady diet from the gutter helps to fashion all those meanings we bring to life.

Our brains belong to God. They are a wonderful and extraordinary gift. And we need to feed them with knowledge and information that will help them to grow. We need to spend more time reading the Scriptures and letting those great passages infiltrate and become part of those billions of cells that God has given us. The Scriptures after all do contain the vital word of life that we need from now and for eternity. Our bodies belong to God. So, too, do our brains.

OUR HEARTS

Finally, our hearts belong to God. If we say to that person who is our life partner - husband, wife, sweetheart - "I love you with all my heart" we are saying:

"I'm committed to you. And all that I have is yours.
I trust you enough that I am willing to share with you
everything I have, everything I am, and everything I
hope to be."

That's the kind of commitment that God is asking of us as well. For truly, it is all His in the first place. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's".

There's a delightful story that's going around that makes a powerful point about where many of us are right now. According to this story, Pope John Paul II was in need of a heart transplant. There was much concern and deep concern throughout the Roman Catholic world. Each day thousands of people gathered outside the Vatican screaming and waving their hands, "Take my heart, Pope...take my heart, O holy Father".

The Pope really didn't know what to do so an idea popped into his head. He asked everyone to please be quiet for a few minutes and he told all of them gathered below that he was going to throw down a feather. Whoever the feather landed on, he would take their heart for the transplant. Pope John Paul II then threw the feather down upon the people. Everyone was still screaming and waving their hands. "Take my heart, Holy Father". But with one difference, they were leaning their heads back and blowing the feather back into the air. "Take my heart, Pope" (blow). "Take my heart, Holy Father" (blow!)

As I see it...that's where many of us are. We're willing to give a few tokens to God. But what about our bodies? Our brains? Our hearts? "Take my heart, Lord". Save the tokens for Uncle Sam. And remember that God wants everything we have and everything we are and everything we hope to be. Total commitment is what we call it. So,

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
and unto God the things that are God's".

PRAYER

"SAVE THE TOKENS FOR UNCLE SAM"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 14, 1990

"SAVE THE TOKENS FOR UNCLE SAM"

INTRODUCTION

A sportswriter once asked Joe Louis, "Joe...who hit you the hardest during your ring career?" Joe replied, "Uncle Sam!"

Oscar Wilde, that master wit, once protested about the taxes on his house. He was reminded that by living there he used the protection and the services of the government even while he slept. Wilde is supposed to have answered, "But I sleep so badly." We know the feeling.

There's a story going around that a prominent citizen recently invited our President to play a round of golf. On the first hole President Bush floated a beautiful shot about three feet from the pin. He walked up to the ball and looked over in the direction of the man who had invited him. Bush was looking for the man to concede him the putt. The man ignored him and looked away.

"You're going to give me this putt, aren't you?" Bush asked. The man replied,

"Go ahead and make a pass at it. I want to see your stroke. A putt like that builds character. Besides, it will give you a little feel for the greens"

With a hurt look, our President said, "I work in the Oval Office all day for people like you. And now you're not going to give me this putt?" The man said nothing. "OK" Bush sighed,

"But let's keep moving. I've got an appointment after we finish with the Director of Internal Revenue"

"The putt's good" said the man rather hastily. "It's a gimme. Let's go".

We have to tell jokes on the IRS at times to keep from crying. After all, the two inevitable events in this world are death and taxes. As someone said last week, "At least death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets". Look at the abuse our President is taking over his willingness now to consider some "revenue enhancements" in order to reduce the deficit. Most folks do not like taxes. The rich as well as the poor and those of us in between!

DEVELOPMENT

People had to pay taxes back there in the time of Jesus. And even worse, they had to pay them to a despised government. Room occupied their land. Thus a portion of their livelihood ended up in the coffers of Caesar. This was a point of contention with every Jew; for they were a proud people and resented this Roman domination.

Thus the dilemma of Jesus when someone put that loaded question to Him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Would He offend the Jews by siding with the Romans or would He risk the wrath of the Romans by siding with Jewish sentiment? He did neither. Remember what He did. Taking a coin in his hand, he asked:

"Whose likeness and inscription is this on the coin?" "Caesar's" they answered. "Render then", He said, "to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's".

A classic answer. An irrefutable answer. Let's use the answer of Jesus to stimulate our thinking on a very important question: what are those things that belong to God? We know pretty much what belongs to Caesar - a portion of every dollar we earn. That's for sure. What is there that belongs to God?

WE OWE GOD MUCH MORE THAN MONEY

One thing is certain and that is that we owe God much more than money. Don't get me wrong. Our money does belong to God and we should always be moving up in our giving to the Biblical standard - the tithe. That's the goal of mature, responsible and committed discipleship. We may not like to hear it, but...

I was amused by a story published by the University of Oregon, in soliciting support from its alumni. I share it with you. "When the King of Siam came to America for an eye operation some years ago, his American surgeon, accustomed to setting prices somewhat by ability to pay, couldn't decide exactly how much to charge His Royal Highness - \$1,000 to be a "good neighbor"? Or \$10,000 to prove the operation worth the trip. After all, a King is a King.

Someone suggested that he check with the King's NY lawyer who might have some thoughts on the matter and so he did. The lawyer said,

"No problem. The King is an honorable man. Like you, he understands value. Simply send him an invoice with no amount indicated and then add a hand-written footnote, 'The King can do no wrong.'"

Well, he did and back came a check for \$75,000. The surgeon was overjoyed. He bought his wife a mink coat, ordered two new Cadillacs and blew the rest on a three month trip around the world. But,

Upon his arrival home, his pocketbook now flattened, but happy and refreshed by all he had seen he opened his mail. In it was a bill from the King's lawyer here in the city with no amount indicated, but with a handwritten footnote, "The honorable doctor can do no wrong."

Many of us are far more honorable in giving to Caesar than we are to God. We need to pray about that amount we plan to give to God's work in the coming days as we consider our pledge to the Church for the coming year. "The honorable doctor can do no wrong." I like that. "The honorable church member can do no wrong." But more than money is owed to God, however. Remember those familiar words, "All things come from Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee."

Have we? Do we? Think about it and let me move on and suggest to you three more important things that belong to God.

OUR BODIES

Our bodies belong to God. One of the questionable remarks we often hear now-a-days is something like this: "It's my body and I'll do with it as I please." That statement to me is dumb, and dangerous and not true. Our bodies are God's creation. We are only temporary inhabitants. We are renters, or even squatters, using another's property.

Even more important, scientists have recently discovered that there is constant feedback going on back and forth between our brains and every cell in our body. Our minds and bodies have a unity that we are only now appreciating. You may not be aware of it, but this fits in beautifully with Christian theology.

It was the Greeks who contended that there is a division between mind, soul and body. The Jews, however, knew that wasn't true. When the Jews spoke of the soul, they were referring to the total person - including mind and body.

The body as part of our total being gives new emphasis to Paul's writing in I Corinthians, chapter 6 that we are not to be joined to a prostitute. Why? Because our bodies are joined with our spirits which are joined to Christ. Joining our body to immorality is a desecration of the temple of the living God. Thus it is questionable to say, "It's my body and I'll do with it as I please". We are God's creation.

"Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...which you have from God. You are not your own. Glorify God in your body". (I Corinthians 6: 19 and 20)

And this, too. When we do what we please with our bodies, we usually end up doing ourselves harm. Our bodies are such wondrous, miraculous gifts. I like the way Zig Ziglar puts it. He asks,

"If you had a million dollar race horse, would you allow it to smoke cigarettes, drink whiskey and stay out all night? How about a thousand dollar dog? How about a five dollar cat?"

If you wouldn't treat a million dollar race horse like that, then how can you abuse a six-million dollar body? Something to think about.

Sal was thirty years old - vigorous and athletic - when he developed a form of bone cancer from which he died. It was a very painful and disabling form of bone cancer but in some ways, Sal's last two years were the richest of his entire life. Though he lived in considerable pain and though he was encased in a full body cast (because of multiple bone fractures), Sal found great meaning in his life by being of service to others, especially young people. He toured high schools in the area and gave advice to teenagers on the hazards of drugs. He used his cancer and his visibly deteriorating body as powerful leverage in his mission. He was extraordinarily effective. The whole auditorium trembled when Sal, in his wheelchair and frozen in his cast, exhorted:

"You want to destroy your body with nicotine or alcohol or heroin? You want to smash it up in cars? You're depressed and want to throw it off the Golden Gate Bridge? Then give me your body. Let me have it! I want it! I'll take it. I want to live!"

No, my friend - it's not your body. Not entirely. Our bodies belong to God!

OUR BRAINS

Now if our bodies belong to God, then certainly so too do our brains. As fantastic as our bodies are, they pale in comparison to the wonder of the human brain. Recent research has discovered that we have more than 100 billion neuron cells in our brains. Each one of these neuron cells can store more data than the most sophisticated computer on earth.

At the beginning of this century, psychologist Williams James estimated that on the average we use perhaps 5 to 10 percent of our full mental potential. And recent research indicates that we may only use an average of less than 1 percent of

the brain cells available to us in a lifetime! Think of it. And you and I probably know some people who are using far less than that.

So the question is: how are you treating your brain? What kind of nutrients are you giving it? What kind of exercise? I have a perfect diet for shrinking the brain. Put it on a steady diet of soaps and sit-coms. Garbage in. Garbage out. Really, I'm astounded by the number of hours the average American spends in front of the TV and we wonder why the college entrance scores are going down. Hello, you "couch potatoes"!

I get concerned when I see young children as well as grown adults going into the R-rated motion pictures where they soak up graphic scenes of sex and violence and obscenities. What happens to all that garbage that goes in? And don't tell me it doesn't matter. Our brains form meaning out of those symbols...the images and the vocabulary we feed it. A steady diet from the gutter helps to fashion all those meanings we bring to life.

Our brains belong to God. They are a wonderful and extraordinary gift. And we need to feed them with knowledge and information that will help them to grow. We need to spend more time reading the Scriptures and letting those great passages infiltrate and become part of those billions of cells that God has given us. The Scriptures after all do contain the vital word of life that we need from now and for eternity. Our bodies belong to God. So, too, do our brains.

OUR HEARTS

Finally, our hearts belong to God. If we say to that person who is our life partner - husband, wife, sweetheart - "I love you with all my heart" we are saying:

"I'm committed to you. And all that I have is yours. I trust you enough that I am willing to share with you everything I have, everything I am, and everything I hope to be."

That's the kind of commitment that God is asking of us as well. For truly, it is all His in the first place. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's".

There's a delightful story that's going around that makes a powerful point about where many of us are right now. According to this story, Pope John Paul II was in need of a heart transplant. There was much concern and deep concern throughout the Roman Catholic world. Each day thousands of people gathered outside the Vatican screaming and waving their hands, "Take my heart, Pope...take my heart, O holy Father".

The Pope really didn't know what to do so an idea popped into his head. He asked everyone to please be quiet for a few minutes and he told all of them gathered below that he was going to throw down a feather. Whoever the feather landed on, he would take their heart for the transplant. Pope John Paul II then threw the feather down upon the people. Everyone was still screaming and waving their hands. "Take my heart, Holy Father". But with one difference, they were leaning their heads back and blowing the feather back into the air. "Take my heart, Pope" (blow). "Take my heart, Holy Father" (blow!)

CLOSING As I see it...that's where many of us are right now. We're willing to give a few tokens to God. But what about our bodies, our brains, our hearts? "Take my heart, Lord". Take all of me. Save the tokens for Uncle Sam. For Mayor Dinkins. And remember this that God wants all of you - everything we have and everything we are and ever hope to be! Total commitment is what we call it. So, remember this word of Jesus:

"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.
And unto God the things that are God's."

PRAYER Let our prayer be a silent searching of ourselves, O God. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me. Mold me. Fill me. Use me. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Amen