

What Belongs to God

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The words in both our readings today are powerful. In Psalm 99 we hear praise for God because he is a “lover of justice, he has established equity and executed righteousness.” This is wonderful, isn’t it? But wait, I’m confused . . . Often the world does not feel like it is just or equal or righteous. How come God is praised for something that doesn’t happen in our world and hasn’t happened since the beginning of time. What’s the rub? Is God renegeing on a promise? Is he forsaking us? I don’t think so, but let me explain in a somewhat unorthodox way.

How many of us here like to pay taxes? I’m guessing the percentage is low. Paying taxes feels like an onerous burden to most of us. It’s easy to understand why. It’s not like we get something tangible like a new car or a new pair of shoes when we pay our taxes. We work to earn money so that we may live comfortably. I’m guessing that no one here this morning is part of that elite group of folks that hold 32.3 percent of our country’s wealth. More likely, you are in the same niche as me—the 50 percent of folks who hold 1 percent of our country’s wealth.

How did we get here? Clearly our tax policies need reforming. Somehow the message of everyone paying our fair share with the wealthiest paying the most has been lost. The country’s wealthiest individuals sometimes pay no taxes. In 2007 Jeff Bezos, a multi-billionaire and one of the world’s richest men, did not pay a penny in federal income taxes. He achieved that feat again in 2011. In 2018, Tesla founder Elon Musk, the richest person in the world, also paid no federal income taxes. Michael Bloomberg managed to do the same in recent years. Billionaire investor Carl Icahn did it twice. George Soros paid no federal income tax three years in a row. The kicker is that this was all done perfectly legally.

According to *Forbes*, the twenty-five wealthiest people saw their worth rise a collective \$401 billion from 2014 to 2018. They paid a total of \$13.6 billion in federal income taxes in those five years, according to the IRS. That’s a staggering sum, but it amounts to a true tax rate of only 3.4 percent. The average American household—the 50 percent of us who hold the rest of our country’s 1 percent wealth—pay 14 percent of our income in taxes. How is that just?

Something is amiss! Yet we read that the reason our economy is such a mess is because of the welfare cheats, those lowlifes who don’t want to work, or single moms who keep having babies just so they can get more food stamps and welfare. This is the population I work with, and I’m here to tell you this is not the truth. Before I began this work, I often judged people for being on food stamps, always thinking that I understood their financial situation, when in fact, of course, I had no idea what their circumstances were. I too fell prey to the messaging that these people were scamming the system. In my twenty-three years of doing this work, this is what I’ve learned.

Let’s look at some hypothetical situations, all based on experiences I’ve had in my twenty-three years of doing my job. First is a mom with two children. When her partner left, she did not have

a job, a driver's license, or a car, and she was eventually evicted from the only home her kids had ever known. Her former partner refused to pay her child support. For a while she had to live with a friend who did not have room for her children, so they had to live with their father. She finally found a place to rent, with enough room for her children, and a job. She earned minimum wage, but because it was a part-time job, she had no benefits. She cobbled together childcare by depending on friends. She received MaineCare for herself and her children, as well as WIC benefits, LiHEAP (fuel assistance), and about \$450 in SNAP benefits (food stamps). She also got her driver's license and purchased a twenty-two-year-old car. Knowing that she wanted more for her children, she eventually enrolled in college. She had to take her former partner to court to get child support, and this finally came through just recently. This is absolutely a success story, because this woman has turned her life around.

Now let's look at her expenses and income. She takes home about \$1,200 per month from her job and \$700 in child support. She also receives approximately \$550 in food benefits from SNAP and WIC, for a total income of \$2,450. Her rent is \$900, electric bill \$100, cell phone \$50, car insurance \$100, and gasoline and car maintenance run about \$300. Heat runs about \$1,000 per month in the winter. Luckily, LiHeap will pay for about one month's worth of fuel, so she only needs to come up with \$347 per month for heat. I haven't factored in things like clothes for herself and two kids, so let's add \$50 per month for that, and then there is miscellaneous childcare that she still cobbles together using friends and relatives. Both kids are in school now, but school hours and work hours do not mesh, so she often must hire childcare providers, costing about \$100 per month. In other words, she is not getting wealthy or building equity by owning a home. Instead, she is living paycheck to paycheck and praying that her twenty-two-year-old car keeps running so she can get herself to work and school. Where would she be without the safety net programs? Without them, she would have a \$47 deficit in her bank account every month.

Now let's look at another hypothetical mom with one child. She is unable to work because she is disabled and has a disabled child. She receives about \$1,500 per month in disability for both her and her child, plus \$144 in SNAP benefits. She has MaineCare and lives in subsidized housing, paying a small portion of her monthly income as rent. She pays for her cell phone and car insurance, gas and maintenance for her car, and internet, as well as any additional food she may need over that \$144 food stamp benefit.

Or the mom who receives TANF (temporary aid for needy families). The maximum benefit for a family of three is \$628, plus a possible \$300 in housing subsidy. SNAP benefits are \$90 per month because she is living with her parents, who charge her \$50 per week for room and board.

It is clear that these families are not getting rich off the system, while the rich are getting exponentially wealthier. These so-called welfare queens are not the cause of our country's financial woes, except for the fact that they are likely to continue this cycle of generational poverty, making us weaker, less educated, and more of a drain.

Matthew's story of Jesus's take on taxes is interesting. Clearly the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to trick Jesus when they asked him if he thought it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Now, the emperor's taxes on the Jews were excessive and unfair, but Jesus answered, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Matthew 22:21). What are the

profound lessons we are taught in the Bible? Love God first and love our neighbors as ourselves. These are the things of God. Jesus was advocating for a fair tax system, but with the emphasis on giving to God.

We know what God wants us to do, but sometimes it is really difficult. We know that to live in a civilized society, we must pay taxes for the greater good. It is also the law, and as good Christians, we should obey the law. Has it become easier to pay our taxes (and then complain about it) than to do what God wants us to do? Is it easier to complain about people who we perceive as taking from us our hard-earned money, than it is to give to them? We give to our church and to some charities, but there is no way that what we give in this way could become the safety net for people less fortunate, let alone fund our country's infrastructure, defense budget, and so on.

Let's look at another possibility. What if we could voluntarily give what we pay in taxes, to the things that mean the most to us? Do you think there would be equity and justice? No, of course not. I would prefer not to have any of my tax money going toward defense. If I could spend my tax money as I see fit, I would love to give everyone a guaranteed monthly income. I have always believed that if our government prioritized the wellbeing of all its people, we would have a strong country with a strong defense and the ability to work together for the greater good. If everyone knew they could pay their monthly bills and have a decent place to live, equal educational opportunities, and food in their bellies, there is nothing we could not do. A guaranteed monthly income is not a ticket so you don't have to work; it just equalizes the playing field.

The child poverty rate has skyrocketed since Covid benefits have ended. Just a year ago, child poverty hit a historic low of 5.2 percent, but the most recent figures put it at 12.4 percent, the same as the overall poverty rate. The surge happened as inflation was rising at record rates and a lot of pandemic relief was running out, but census officials and other experts say a key was the child tax credit. The child tax credit lifted so many families out of poverty. For about a year, families earning less than a certain amount received a monthly dollar amount from the child tax credit. This monthly income helped so many families.

When kids are not living in poverty, they learn better because they are not thinking about how hungry they are, and they can sleep well in a safe home so their brains can be ready for learning. When kids grow up in chaotic homes in dangerous neighborhoods and do not have money for the basics like food and rent and heat, their brains are impacted. There is actual physical evidence that these children's brains are damaged by the constant wash of stress hormones throughout their growing bodies. The child tax credit program has ended, thus the climb back to the 12.4 percent child poverty rate.

I often hear people talk about the scourge of drug abuse in our county and around the country. It is a huge problem, but if our youth were not victims of poverty, the drug epidemic would begin to fade. Neighborhoods would improve, crime would be reduced, and jobs would be created. Pride in our communities would begin to rise, and we would see our youth want to continue their education in some form after high school. This would all take time and would not be easy, but it is achievable. How can we not imagine this as a positive way to improve all our lives.

WWJD? (What would Jesus do?) We all probably know what he would do. He tells us in the scripture passage we just read. Twelve verses later, he tells us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind, and that the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments, Jesus tells us, hang all the laws and prophets.

How do we move forward towards what God and Jesus ask of us? It's going to be messy. We know what he wants—equity, justice, and righteousness, but how can we get there? There are a few things we can all do. We live in a democratic country, and our right to vote is paramount to making the change we want. Please, always use your right to vote—and not just during presidential elections. Go to town meetings and vote for your community leaders, because that is where change begins. Pay your taxes with complaint, and know that while the tax laws and loopholes need a massive overhaul, the only way that will happen is by voting for the candidates you believe will help make those changes. We need to have the very wealthy pay their fair share of our tax burden so that we can begin to make this country a place where equality and justice for all is finally realized. Counter the notion that welfare queens are why we are where we are now.

Remember always what God wants of us: “Strong king who loves justice, you are the one who established what is fair. You worked justice and righteousness in Jacob” (Psalm 99:4). This is our job. God has given us the powerful message of what he wants and expects from us. Have we let God down? Yes, we have, for thousands of years, but God keeps giving us new chances every single second of every day to change that.

We can and we must heed the message in Psalm 99 and determine how we can best make positive change in our lives and model that for others. What new missions can we as a church imagine? What notions and bad habits can we change personally? This great democratic experiment needs to continue so we can realize that dream. This is what God wants for our world. We are small, but we can learn to be mighty, by working towards the justice, equity, and righteousness that God expects of us all.