

I Pledge Allegiance

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10 and Matthew 22: 15-22

A disciple: one who engages in learning from another. Discipleship: teaching others to be Christ-like. These are our Christian understandings of these two words. So, as followers of Christ, we are both student and teacher. Believing that, then how is it that we live our lives, practice our faith, and yes, even address our governmental responsibilities in ways that reflect Christ? How should our faith shape our daily decisions?

These are the questions at the heart of this parable. That simple. That difficult. And, doable when the Lord is the one ruler of our hearts. With that affirmation comes the gift of the Spirit that guides the heart and mind to be the disciples we have been commissioned to be, through the very simple to the most complex issues of life. Just ask Eric Liddell.

It is hard to beat an uplifting, inspiring true to life movie, and when you pair it with an extraordinary theme song, it is going to win our hearts every time. And that is what *Chariots of Fire* has done for countless audiences, including me!

For those of you who have not seen it a brief summary. The movie is based on the life of runner Eric Liddell, reported to be the world's fastest runner in 1924, winning him a spot in the Paris Olympic Games. His race was the 100 meter sprint. Or at least at first. But Liddell, devout Scottish Presbyterian that he was held to the conviction that Sunday was the Lord's Day and as far as his sport, it meant he would not put competition before church. When the heats for the 100 meters were announced as being on Sunday, he chose to compete in the 400-meter race instead, a distance for which he had never trained, but the heats were not on Sunday. And yes, he won the gold medal!

In the scene, which may not may not be completely factual, where the British Olympic Committee is trying to convince the young runner that his loyalty for this great event should lie first with king and country, then with God, the Committee does indeed discover a true fact. Nothing could shake the allegiance, the loyalty, the dedication Liddell had to one King, the Lord, his Savior. No matter how prestigious the gold medal was, Liddell would not give up the Lord's Day for it.

The tension between our commitment to God and the pressures of the world are evident in his story, but so too in a much earlier story where the characters are Jesus, the Herodians, Pharisees and the Roman government. The gospel of Matthew continues to march us, step by step, closer to the cross. And in spite of what looks like doom for Jesus, people are still being drawn to him. It is certainly not Jesus' sleek charisma or sales pitch that intrigues others, it is their desire to be more like him. To be Christ-like. To be his students and learn from him the teachings and gifts that he shares with and for others: his compassion, his truthfulness, his humility, and his message of hope in a world that seems bent on suppressing hope.

Under the thumb of the Roman Empire, and even the Jewish leaders who were courting favors with the Empire's powerful, Jesus' promise of a different kind of life was enough to bring hope to the suffering Jews and fear to the hearts of those who saw an other-worldly, a heavenly kingdom kind of power in Jesus.

And so, what do you do if you are having trouble with someone? Well, in the case of those who are threatened by Jesus' popularity, you try trickery. So why not start with the pocketbook! Taxes. Money has that way of inviting divisiveness, along with loose or lost loyalties. In seeking to catch Jesus off guard, the powers-that-be ask a Jesus a response to a question that has the potential to go south no matter how Jesus answers. So, tell us, Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Tell us what you think. What a line! So much potential. Tell us what you think!

It is an open invitation to hear the views of others. That is, if you really cared about hearing them, which, in this case, they did not. It is that old, tell us what you think because we know what you think is not what we think, and someone (aka Jesus) is going to be in big trouble! Entrapment at its best.

These tricksters were Herodians and Pharisees, both Jewish, but on opposite sides when it came to spiritual allegiance. The Herodians had, in essence sold out to the Roman government in exchange for wealth and favoritism and a little power in a world where they were essentially powerless.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed that any Jew willing to live in compliance with the rule of a foreign or secular power, aka Rome, was nothing less than disobeying God. That kind of disobedience, they believed,

would keep God from sending them a Messiah to rescue and save them. That is a big difference!

And yet, in spite of their differences, they came together in this ploy to discredit Jesus, believing more popularity will only give him more power. These two opposing forces coming together just emphasizes how big of a threat they believed Jesus. And not surprising that money gets caught in the mix, is it?

The poll tax in question was one forced upon all Judean adults, including women and slaves. Taxed, just to be an adult is bad enough, but taxed by a foreign government that has told you how you can and cannot live! Jesus is in a tough spot. This is not just about money, actually it has very little to do with money. It is about loyalty, commitment, a willingness, like Liddell demonstrates, to God above all else. Saying yes to Caesar would mean that Jesus is no longer considered the possible long-awaited Messiah. A “no” answer to Caesar means resisting the ruling government.

This quandary is made more difficult because the “image” of Caesar is stamped on one side of the silver coin. Carved in stone and etched in the hearts of Jews are those commandments carried down the mountain by Moses. And right now, the one sticking in their minds calls for the making of or bowing to graven images. Beside the image of Caesar on one side of the coin, the other side made the claim that he was the son of a god! Small “g.”

And this was not just a coin used to pay taxes for better water ducts or roads or libraries; this was a tax that solidified allegiance to Caesar, the person. As one commentator put it, “It was a pay to play world; full participation required a serious commitment to the emperor.”

Just to have the coin in your possession put you in better graces with Caesar. By way of compromise, the Roman government had allowed the Jews to make their own copper coins with no engravings, no images. Oh, that they could have left it there. But no. Caesar insisted that the poll tax be paid with the idolatrous silver coin, featuring none other than his face!

The political and religious leaders believed themselves to be clever, but Jesus even more so. Did you notice what he said? “Show me the coin.” In other words, Jesus does not have a graven image in his possession. That is good

news for the devout Jews. But one of the Jewish leaders does, and what follows is the famous scripture: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; to God the things that are God's.

And from here, well that is where the real stuff of theology-the study of God-comes into play. For Jesus, this choice is more than a decision about finances; it goes to the heart! Where your treasure is, there too is your heart! Jesus was not, and is not, looking for a debate about money; he is asking for us to examine the loyalty, the commitment, the values of our heart.

He is asking of us disciples to tell the truth about our discipleship. Are we truly students committed to learning the ways of Jesus, and are we serious about teaching those Christ-like ways to others? How close are we to giving up the gold, willing to go the extra distance, standing up against the ways of the world in order to put the Lord first in our lives?

This is such a timely message for us as we are pulled in so many different directions by our world, especially now with politics and pandemic, with race and religion, with faith and fear. Jesus is here reminding us that none of these worldly things can hold a candle to the power of God.

Jesus is addressing a real life and very present issue for us. When we let ourselves get so worked up over the powers of the world that we become divided, child of God against child of God; brothers and sisters in Christ against brothers and sisters in Christ, our spirits are weakened and more susceptible to running away from, not to, Christ-like behaviors. Jesus says staying united and focused on the sovereignty of God allows for the kind of kingdom living Jesus was preaching and living. Do not let the world have our hearts. Instead trust that the Kingdom of God is both earthly and spiritual both here present and yet to come. Live that.

Like a watermark, we bear the mark of baptism that identifies us as a child of God's kingdom; not the graven image of an earthly king. More importantly, we are made in the image of God. The world entices us with riches; in Christ, God says, you are already rich. Oh, that we had the courage to fully live in that richness like the Christians in Thessalonica.

Paul is encouraging the people to do exactly what Jesus has asked of those in his time, asks of us in our time. Hang on! This world in which we live where

violence and greed and oppression and one-sided power is the world from which God has already saved us through Christ on the cross.

If we but endure, keep our commitment, run the race with the Lord as our guide, the true treasure of our hearts is a life like none we have ever known. We have earthly duties that include governmental responsibilities and in even those, Jesus says, practice discipleship. Be Christ-like. Teach others to be Christ-like. And do this in how we live, how we practice our faith, and how we address our governmental responsibilities.

The decision on how to run the race of life is still ours. What shapes the allegiance, the loyalty and dedication of our hearts is a daily choice. May putting our faith and trust into Jesus as the one Lord and Ruler of our hearts be the Good News, we choose in our everyday race we call life.