

# God's Prenup

*Sermon by Bob Arbogast*

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**Scripture: Luke 20:20-26**

## Sermon

I wonder if Jesus got frustrated. He had such important work to do. There were so many lost sheep to gather, so many sick people to heal, so many prisoners to set free. And he had so much to say, so much to tell, so much to teach. But people kept missing the point!

ONE TIME JESUS WAS TALKING TO HIS DISCIPLES AND TO A LARGE CROWD. He was teaching them about God's justice, about the dangers of discipleship, and about God's protection. Big deal stuff, all of it. But then somebody from the crowd pipes up and says, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide our father's estate with me."

Wha?!? Jesus is teaching them big deal stuff about the Kingdom of God. And someone interrupts to ask him to settle a property dispute? You've got to be kidding!

But that's the real world, isn't it? When someone owes you money, but refuses to pay up, that nags at you. And if you see a chance to get it settled, you go for it. Well, Jesus has been looking and sounding a lot like Moses-all-over-again. And Moses used to settle disputes for the people. Besides, it was a question of justice. And if God is about justice and if the Kingdom of God is about justice, then why not ask Jesus for justice?!

QUESTIONS ABOUT PROPERTY ARE A BIG DEAL. Questions about who owns what. And questions about who owes what. A few hundred years ago, a philosopher argued that the only reason governments exist is to protect property. So obviously property is a big deal. No wonder the Old Testament has so many laws about property—and stories, too.

Property is a big deal. No wonder divorce lawyers stay in business. People will spend good money to make sure that the property they shared as a couple is divided up fairly when they get divorced. (They'll even settle for the property being divided up unfairly, as long as the unfairness is in their own favor!)

WELL, TODAY'S GOSPEL LESSON IS ABOUT PROPERTY. About who it belongs to. About who is owed what. It started with a question, a question about paying taxes, about paying taxes to the Roman Empire.

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The question came in the middle of a running dispute between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. Those leaders felt threatened. They felt threatened because Jesus was cutting

into their territory. They had staked out a pretty comfortable position for themselves. Sure, to get there they had to compromise with the Romans. But that was a price they were willing to pay. The same way a shopkeeper pays protection money to the mob so he can stay in business.

But now the Jewish leaders saw Jesus as a threat to their religious and political franchise. So they were pushing back, pushing back any way they could. They were trying to undermine Jesus, to undermine his standing with the people. But that wasn't working. So they decided to get him into trouble with Rome. That's where the question came from, the question about paying taxes.

THEY START WITH SOME FLATTERY. "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right. We know that you are not influenced by what others think. And we know that you teach the way of God truthfully." *There, that ought to do it. He's all buttered up, so maybe we can make him slip up!*

Then comes the question. "Teacher, tell us: is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Once again it's a question about property. Only this time the people asking don't really care about the answer. They don't care about their own tax bill. No; all they care about is backing Jesus into a corner. Either he comes out in favor of paying taxes to Rome—and that would take him down a notch or two in the eyes of the people, because the people hated the Romans. Or he comes out against paying taxes to Rome—in which case they can report him to the Romans as someone who is stirring up rebellion.

So they've got him. Jesus is cornered with no way out!

BUT JESUS DOESN'T TAKE THE BAIT. Instead he answers their question the way a wise and learned teacher would. He zeroes in on the issue that needs to be settled in any property dispute, the issue divorcing couples fight over, the issue the interrupting man in the crowd was concerned with. The issue is who owns what and who owes what.

"Show me a coin," Jesus says. "You know, the money you use every day." So they take out a coin, and that's when Jesus asks them, "Whose coin is this? Whose image is on it? Whose name is on it?" And all of sudden the trap is broken. Jesus has found a way out! Because the image is Caesar's, and the name is Caesar's. So the coin belongs to Rome. "Go ahead," Jesus says. "Pay your taxes. If you're going to use Rome's money, then don't hesitate to pay Rome's taxes!"

BUT JESUS DOESN'T STOP THERE. No; he moves on to a larger issue. He says, "While you're giving Rome what belongs to Rome, don't forget to give God what belongs to God." What does he mean by that? Probably lots of things!

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For starters, though, let me get this out of the way. Because there is one thing that Jesus certainly does not mean. He does not mean: Rome has its property and its territo-

ry over here and God has his property and his territory over here, so do right by Rome when you're in Rome's territory and do right by God when you're in God's territory. No! That's not what Jesus means. Not at all. It's not okay to split up your loyalty. It's not okay to follow God on Sunday and to follow the world the rest of the week. It's not okay to follow God in church and to follow the gang out on the yard.

You might think that Rome stakes a claim and the gang stakes a claim and God stakes a claim. And you might think that the issue is figuring out the borders between all the competing claims, so you know what rules to follow where. But God does not stake a competing claim. No; God stakes a complete claim. Because the earth is the Lord's, every bit of it! So no matter where we are, we are in God's territory. No matter where we are, God rules.

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And then there's this. Jesus says, "Show me a coin. Tell me whose image is on it and whose name." The answer is "Caesar's." The coin bears the image and the name of Caesar. That's clear enough. But how about us? Whose image do we bear? Whose name is on us? Well, that too is clear enough. We bear the image of God. And the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is on us through Baptism. So if we're going to give God what belongs to God, that means we will be giving ourselves to God, giving ourselves completely to God. Because we belong to God completely.

THE KINGDOMS OF THIS WORLD WANT TO DIVORCE THEMSELVES from the Kingdom of God. Rome wants nothing to do with God and with God's Kingdom. The gang wants nothing to do with God and with God's Kingdom. But the property settlement in this divorce does not divide things up equally. In fact, it doesn't divide things up at all. You see, God brought a prenup into the relationship. That's right. Everything was his in the beginning. So everything will be his in the end. And everything is his right now.

So sure, give Rome what belongs to Rome. Just be sure to give God what belongs to God. And don't forget: You belong to God.

So, how are you going to give yourself to him tomorrow?

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Glory and thanks be to God:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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