



We the Taxpayers

Resource

Lesson 2 – The Taxes We Pay Video Script

Have you ever filled out one of these? Or been handed one of these? Or bought one of these? The truth is, no matter what you're earning, spending, or saving, taxes are a part of shaping every day. Wait! Don't turn this off yet! I know, I know, it's not easy to start a fun, informative, exciting, and hopeful conversation about taxes. But that's my plan – and – if you stick with me, well, I won't be the only one trying to convince my friends that they should seize the moment for conversations about our tax systems.

As a person of faith, I learned early on about my call to care for the people around me. “Loove ‘chother” was my earliest interpretation of my Christian faith, and probably still gets to the heart of what I believe Jesus taught us. This message didn't come only to me though – kids of all kinds of religious backgrounds learn about the need to think about their neighbors, their brothers and sisters.

I grew up, and as many people do, I learned to connect my faith to loads of personal choices: I've attended church, volunteered at an Earth Center, soup kitchens, and afterschool programs, started drinking fair trade coffee and even dabbled in vegetarianism. My faith even moved me, literally, to teach high school in a developing nation and work for affordable housing in my hometown. But I never talked about faith and . . . my taxes.

For some reason, my spiritual life and my financial plans seemed to operate in two unrelated spheres of life. But when I started to think about all the things I knew we needed to adjust in order to care for neighbors, brothers, and sisters, one of the best tools for addressing need was already in my hands. It was taxes – the whole system! From what we pay to what we don't to what good we see because of them.

And with just a little digging, I learned that in many faith traditions, my idea wasn't a new one. Since their earliest days, religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam have concerned themselves with how our money does or does not contribute to economic justice and a healthy spiritual life.

Let's take just a quick look at what these different folks are saying:

Judaism has long preached about justice, and a just social order. In the earliest stories of Abraham, he is praised for doing what is right and just – observing “tzedekah” – when he shares generously with strangers who approach his home in the desert. The word tzedekah is connected to the obligation we have to make acts of financial charity towards people who are poor, carrying with it the idea that wealth is from God, and that those with financial means have the responsibility to ensure that those who lack resources are cared for and given the opportunity to eventually succeed on their own.

From the same religious foundation, Christianity embraced the ideals of social justice preached by Jesus. Early Christian communities stressed collective well-being and called upon one another to sacrifice for those who were poor and marginalized. Often, they created funds from community collections in order to provide goods and services to the widowed and poor. Most Christian religions continue to emphasize acts of charity and just economic practices that incorporate concern for the poor.



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And Islam upholds the practice of zakat. Initiated by the prophet Muhammad, zakat requires giving of a portion of one's wealth as a tax in order to redistribute wealth out of concern for those who are poor or dispossessed. In addition to its obvious use on earth, zakat is seen as necessary for one's salvation.

All of these faiths work toward an ideal of increased fairness, opportunity, and equality among humankind, and each of them points toward organized financial systems as one crucial way to get there. So if you, and I, think about organized financial systems today . . . you can guess where we end up.

Taxes, paid to our government, don't start out complicated, scary, or even boring! They're supposed to provide for the needs of our national community. So let's take a look at whether or not this system really does create that ideal world our traditions call us to.

Taxes have done their fair share of history making – from sales taxes inspiring an early tea party in the Boston Harbor to poll taxes impeding our nation's efforts to fully embrace democracy to the debates on debt and deficit and the resulting sequester today.

At first, it seems strange that taxes always seem to find themselves in the middle of these messes, but they really are one of the most direct ways that we – the people – are connected to each other and to the society we share. The way we use and share resources can bring us closer to each other, and to our faith, or drive us apart.

Taxes aren't just what we pay – that's only the beginning. Tax systems today are the meeting place of what we pay, what we don't pay, and what we get.

Individuals, and businesses, pay taxes in all kinds of different way and at different rates. We'll look at who is putting money in, and how much, to better understand what we're working with.

We'll look closer at what we don't pay – it sounds a little strange, but the things we excuse from taxes are a pretty big deal. We hear about loopholes all the time. These loopholes, and other credits and tax-exemptions and deductions, play an enormous role in deciding the money flow, and who-gets-what in our society.

And we'll examine what we're left with because of these revenues. What kinds of benefits do we, and other members of our community, see?

It's up to us to decide what we want our taxes to do, and we are called to a common purpose and concern for the common good. With this vision, we can reject the reality of economic injustice in our nation today, and trust in a God who desires a common good and a common purpose, where each person in society has enough. Moving from our commitment to each other, we can begin to understand the importance of our nation's conversation about taxes, and the opportunity we have to make a positive change.