

Two and a Half Cheers for Taxes!

Nobody seems to like taxes. I don't either. But taxes and tax collectors have gotten a bad rap.

Consider Zaccheus, one of the most maligned figures from Christian scripture. Portrayed as a swindler and cheat, diminutive in stature, he is treated in Christian teaching as a poor excuse for a man – until he repents and promises to make good on all his fraudulent takings.

I protest. An unbiased reading of the text yields a rather different picture. Yes, he was a tax collector, and therefore lowly regarded in his community. But there's no evidence he ever intentionally defrauded anyone, nor does he confess to such. He declares to Jesus his commitment to make good four times over on any excess taxes appropriated mistakenly in the course of his duties. Zaccheus is like the "good Samaritan," someone others customarily reject and dislike, yet who proves to be exemplary in behavior.

Taxes are not the problem. The problem is who does the taxing, who pays, how much do they pay, and who benefits. When the taxing is done by democratically elected representatives who are accountable to the people, when those who have profited most from society pay the most, when the amounts paid are needed to provide for essential and beneficial services, and when those who are most needy benefit the most, taxes are a great resource. The current problem is that many legislators today are more accountable to rich donors, corporate and vested interests than to the average citizen; the wealthy are grossly undertaxed; way too much tax money goes for weapons, the military, and the costs of high-end medical technologies; and way too little is spent to address the health care, educational, work, and social needs of the least advantaged.

The country always seems to be in the mood for tax cuts, but the current mania is already resulting in funding deficits for needed government services. Meanwhile, new inequities are being introduced into the tax structure. We have great need of leaders who see taxes as a positive instrument of government, to be levied wisely and spent efficiently, rather than routinely disparaged.

When nearly half my federal taxes are spent to build and deploy weapons that kill, fund bureaucracies that succeed in obstructing justice and/or fail to deliver needed services, and enrich the already privileged, of course I don't like it. But taxes and tax collectors are not the problem.

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