Our Newly Elected Tax Collectors

Call it happenstance, but in the gospel proclaimed in many Christian churches on Sunday, October 24—about a week before the election—Jesus admonishes those "convinced of their own self-righteousness," then makes a tax collector the hero in the parable cited. Actually, tax collectors seem to come out okay in a lot of religious stories; take the Buddhist one about the brahmin Dhananjani, an unscrupulous tax collector who exploited both the king and the public, yet still could at death attain a happier rebirth. Not to downplay these religious themes, but I couldn't help seeing a secular twist: more than in any recent period, our newly elected representatives, many of whom ran on platforms of self-righteousness, are called to be our tax collectors.

Tax collectors have never been particularly popular. In ancient Israel, the Roman tax collector got to keep some of what he collected, leading to unfair assessments and corruption. Even though federal and state tax collectors today number among the most honest and dedicated people around, folks who work on the take-away side of the budget still usually get a bum rap, especially compared to those on government's give-away side—the folks who send us checks and benefits. Neither the gospel nor the Buddhist story would have the same impact if the hero had been a provider of free well water.

Politicians prefer working the give-away side of the budget, too, even when they have to reduce spending or increase taxes—or borrow still more from China—by a dollar for every dollar they pass along. As John Shannon, a dean of public policy analysis once told me, no politician ever won office by promising to cut benefits or raise taxes.

But, guess what, all you politicians who just got elected in 2010? The nation's long stretch of giveaways is ending soon. The temporary budget surplus of the late 1990s gave the government leeway to enact some tax cuts. But September 11 meant more defense spending. Then, a mild recession early in the 2000s led to more tax cuts. Meanwhile, extra drug benefits for the elderly passed unsupported by additional revenue. Ditto for a range of programs from education to child care. Then the Great Recession hit, requiring subsidies to get the banking system back in gear, as well as a stimulus to increase demand, encourage home buying, and deter layoffs. This year, the government expanded health insurance, but we're already cutting back on collecting some of the money needed to pay for it.

Some of these actions were good, some bad. But for close to 15 years now, all major congressional actions have basically been giveaways. Now, even if you believe we need more temporary stimulus, the long-run budget is so out of whack that our newly elected officials must restore some sort of balance. That's right, our elected officials must become tax collectors in the broadest sense of the word: they must ask us to give up something.

Campaigners have ignored this critical fact. Some have rumbled a bit about the deficit but rarely touched on what we should give up to deal with it. Somehow, at election time, the parable gets turned upside down. The self-righteous are extolled; the tax collectors (who would really say what price you and I have to pay) are put down. Appeals to us voters are essentially self-righteous too, telling us that we virtuous ones are being attacked by those who want our money. "They"—and we know who "they" are—want to increase our taxes, reduce our Social Security benefits, make us pay more of our health care costs, ignore our veterans, and stop repairing our highways—in other words, deprive us of those things we clearly have earned. "They" want to take away the rewards of our hard labors and the benefits we are so justly owed by government.

The great success of attack ads—and, let's admit it, they work—is that they make us feel superior to the people attacked. How could we possibly vote for such idiots who are after our money and, indignity of indignities, also live such despicable private lives compared to us.

Still, at day's start, many of us wake up with a bad taste in our mouths. Even if we didn't really overindulge at last night's political revelry, we're not proud we took part. If our candidates won, we're
not really sure we trust them. If we backed the losers, we already know we don't trust the winners. And, if we're independent, we're already trying to figure out how to throw the new bums out.

This predicament costs our government, our elected officials, and us dearly. Self-righteousness feeds on itself. The winning candidates start believing some of what their handlers told them to say during the campaign, that all the forces of evil are within the other political party. Not to be left behind, we voters are tempted by deepening cynicism. When we don't get the policies we want—as we rarely do in a world of compromise—we punish and act superior to those forthright enough to make compromises.

But that self-defeating attitude is doomed. If we don't start paying for what we get, our children are going to be punished as we add to their debts, cut back on our investment in them, and threaten economic stagnation.

Instead, we must take the view that compromise means finding common political ground rather than simply and self-righteously protecting our own entitlements. We can no longer pretend that we are different from other Americans and somehow don't have to contribute to reducing the gap between $30,000 of federal government spending per household and $20,000 in taxes.

And, yes, you, our newly minted leaders, have just won the honor of being our tax collectors.