

October 18, 2020

Pentecost 20/Proper 24

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "**Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax.**" And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "**Whose likeness and inscription is this?**" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "**Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.**" ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away. (ESV)

Unto Caesar and Unto God

Have you ever been asked a loaded question? One of the most common is this: "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" If you answer, "Yes," you are thereby admitting that you have previously beaten her. If you answer, "No," you are admitting that you are still beating her. You condemn yourself no matter which answer you give.

Jesus is asked a tricky, loaded question in our text. His opponents were made up of two groups. One was the Pharisees. They hated Rome and its emperor Caesar. The other was the Herodians. They supported the Roman government.

Usually, the two were fierce opponents. But on this day, they formed a remarkable alliance. They did so in order to entrap Jesus.

They came to Jesus with flattery on their lips. Their flattery consisted of three statements:

"Teacher, we know that you are truthful." ... (*Uh oh... watch out, Jesus!*).

"Teacher, we know that you teach the way of God in truth." ... (*Get ready, Jesus!*).

"Teacher, we know that you are not partial to anyone." ... (*Here it comes, Jesus!*).

Now that they've buttered him up, they come forth with their question:

"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (*Let's see you handle this one, Jesus!*).

His opponents knew they had him trapped. If he were to say, "Yes, pay taxes to Caesar," the Pharisees would accuse him of putting men before God. If, on the other hand, he were to say, "No, pay Caesar nothing," the Herodians would charge him of being opposed to the Roman Empire and its current Emperor, Tiberius Caesar.

But Jesus perceives their duplicity and says to them, "**Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?** And so he says to them, "**Show me the coin for the tax.**" So they brought him a denarius, a small Roman coin. And looking at it, Jesus says to them, "**Whose likeness and inscription is this?**" They said, "Caesar's."¹

The answer Jesus gives is utterly brilliant! You couldn't think this up! I couldn't think this up!

But Jesus brings forth an answer that reveals his divine intellect. And, after he gives the answer, we read, “When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”

He says to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” He saw through their duplicitous question and gives an answer that confounds his opponents.

With the words, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s,”² Jesus established the doctrine of the two kingdoms. That is to say, he established the doctrine of Church and State, and, with it, the separation of the two.

Jesus, here, commands loyalty to Caesar and to God. The purpose of the State is to bring about earthly, external peace; the purpose of the Church is to bring about spiritual, eternal peace.

As Christians, we are citizens of two realms, the one to which we belong here on earth, the State, and the one to which we belong spiritually and eternally, the Church. We are to be loyal to both.

What does Jesus expect us to render to Caesar, i.e., to the government? Just this: obedience to its laws, allegiance to its cause, and loyalty ... even though it may have many flaws.

Christians may disobey the government only if it commands something contrary to Scripture. For example, if the government passes a law forbidding Christians to assemble for the purpose of worshipping Christ, we will still assemble.

On the other hand, if the government tells pastors that they cannot condemn same sex-marriages from the pulpit, what then? I will still condemn it.³ I will do so if the state fines me, or jails me, or threatens my life!

Are you a good citizen of the state? Do you pay your taxes? Do you go to jury duty when you are called? Do you obey the laws of the land, even traffic laws? Do you obey your local, state, and federal laws? If so, you are being a good citizen. You are rendering to Caesar the things of Caesar!

But the government has no jurisdiction over the Church! And the Church has no jurisdiction over the State.

The purpose of the Church is to get people to heaven. To that end, the Church is to properly administer the sacraments and to preach and teach God’s Word in its truth and purity.

But in America today, many church denominations teach that the Church should run the State. This is the default position of many Protestant church bodies. And we can see this clearly now when our national elections are only 16 days away.

The Church in America these days sees itself as the forum where the church approves or disapproves of politics and politicians. Let me tell you what I see going on these days.

- I see Antifa activists demanding the acceptance of their liberal social and political agendas ... from liberal church pulpits.
- I see conservative leaders promoting their agendas in conservative churches ... from conservative pulpits.
- I see political candidates promoting their own candidacies ... from church pulpits.

This is more than wrong. It is a confusing of Church and State. As such, it is an offense to God! Politics are matters of the State. They do not belong in the Church. Not now! Not ever!

But throughout history, this same error has been common. In medieval Europe, the Roman Catholic Church ruled almost all the European states. In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull that said,

“It is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.”⁴

This led to such evil things as the Inquisitions and simony, the buying and selling of Church offices.⁵

But we find many cases in history where the State has taken upon itself to rule over the Church. This was the case in Germany in the 1800s. Our own LCMS began when Saxon and Bavarian Lutherans could not worship without state interference. They came to America seeking religious freedom.

We have seen what we citizens must give to the State. But a question arises: What should we give to God?

Before we can render anything to God, we must first receive his saving gift to us. Unbelievers cannot render anything to God.

We who trust in Christ alone freely give what the Holy Spirit has already worked in us, namely, our faith in Christ.

To one and all, I say: Behold the crucified Christ. He is sinless. And yet, he bears all the sins of the world. As such, he becomes, by imputation, the world’s biggest, vilest sinner. And because of this sin (our sin!) God is truly angry with his Son.

On the cross, God makes him suffer the agony of hell. Hear him cry out, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” A little later, he bows his head in death.

But the Gospel is this: Christ suffers and dies for you to pay for your sins. Simple trust in him brings forgiveness and eternal life to your soul. Indeed, the simple truth is this: We are saved not by the gold standard of Caesar’s coins, but by the blood standard of Christ’s death.

Given this, what shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?⁶ I shall give him my faith, the faith that the Holy Spirit has worked in me. I shall also worship and praise what he has done for me. Moreover, I shall be in the LORD's house on the LORD's day. I shall serve him by living as a child of the living God. I shall be a good steward of his Word, by hearing it, reading it, studying it, sharing it, and resolving to live according to it.

What else shall I render to him? Everything! For what do I have that I have not received from his gracious hand? In these ways, we are rendering to God the things that are God's.

May God grant that we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

In the saving name of Jesus: *Amēn*.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

¹See Matthew 22:19-21.

²See Matthew 22:21.

³See [1 Corinthians 6:9-10](#).

⁴Taken from the papal bull *Unam Sanctam*. For the text of the bull, see <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/B8-unam.asp>.

⁵As an example of a church-run state we have Calvin's Geneva where some heretics were physically punished. Michael Servetus, for example, was burned at the stake in 1553 for denying the doctrine of the Trinity. As an example of a state-run church many Scandinavian countries after the Reformation adopted Lutheranism as the official religion of the state. We can also point out that the Emperor Constantine endorsed Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century A.D.

⁶See Psalm 116:12.