

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24A)

October 19, 2014

Text: Matthew 22:15–22

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Several weeks ago I mentioned that I had the somewhat unenviable task of preaching about religion and politics. For as you know, you're not supposed to talk about those things in public. But here we go again...religion and politics. A few weeks ago, it was the apostle Paul teaching about these things in Romans 13. Today, in Matthew 22, it's the Lord Jesus Christ exposing a trap set by the Pharisees and Herodians.

This is a rather odd situation. The Pharisees and Herodians despised each other. The Herodians were Jewish supporters of Herodian family, the puppet rulers given authority over Israel by the Roman Empire. The Pharisees considered the Herodian Dynasty to be an enemy of God's people and of God's Holy Land. Putting them together in close proximity to each other was about as safe as an opened case of dynamite surrounded by a room full of lit candles. Sooner or later, things will explode.

But here they are, working together. For they had a common enemy: Jesus! For very different reasons, both parties want Jesus eliminated. The Pharisees consider Jesus a religious and theological threat; all that talk about Him being the Son of God, the Messiah and Savior of the world. The Herodians considered Jesus a political threat; all that talk about Him being a king coming to establish an eternal Kingdom. In this case, the proverbial saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" proves false.

But you would expect Jesus to throw our conventional wisdom into a tailspin. And you'd think these religious and political leaders would learn their lesson. Every time you try to corner Jesus into your nice little ideological box, He ends up demolishing the box, leaving you shaking your head. Jesus does it again! We're still wrestling with implications of the Lord's teaching with that famous and enigmatic phrase, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (vs. 21). But that's the Lord's answer. We need to start with the original question.

This unlikely alliance of the Pharisees and Herodians begins their assault with a little flattery. Vs. 16, “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.” Beware when people start buttering-you-up. The Pharisees and Herodians have been calling Jesus anything but a true teacher of God. It’s an old, old trick. Disarm your enemy by treating him as a friend.

But since you’re such a great teacher Jesus, tell us your astute and formidable opinion on a rather difficult question. If anyone can sort this out, it’s you Jesus. You’re a teacher of God, after all. And the opinions of men are useless chatter to you. Here it is, vs. 17, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Pretty straightforward question. It has the advantage of avoiding all the theological wrangling and debate that so often accompanies the religious types.

Taxes. That’s pretty concrete, everyday stuff. And everyone has an opinion about taxes. It was true back then, true now. I could ask a tax question of everyone gathered here today and get dozens of different ideas and opinions. But this tax question forms an almost perfect trap.

If Jesus says “no”, it’s not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar then the Herodians would report Jesus to the political leaders as inciting rebellion against the state. We’ve got a revolutionary out there named Jesus telling people to quit paying taxes. Well, you know how governments feel about their taxes. They kind of take them pretty seriously. If Jesus says “yes”, it’s lawful to pay taxes to Caesar then the Pharisees would inflame the crowd against Jesus. He’s a pawn of the Roman Government bent on taking away your freedoms and your money. The Jewish crowd, by and large, hated the Romans and all their supporters. They would abandon Jesus.

So tell us, O man of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? I like to imagine some rather smug faces beaming with sinister joy. We’ve caught Him. The Jesus problem will soon be over!!

According to vs. 18, Jesus is aware of their malice. And He takes the verbal gloves off. “Why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites?” A blind man can see through your play acting. You aren’t concerned about taxes. I see your trap and I’m not fooled.

Vs. 19, “Show me the coin for the tax.” Someone gives Jesus a coin, a denarius. Using their own money, Jesus drops His bombshell of a question, “Whose likeness and

inscription is this?" I really do wish they had cameras back then. I sometimes imagine Jesus flipping the coin back to the person who handed it to Him. And I'd love to have see their faces as they choked out their one-word answer, "Caesar's" (vs. 21). And I'd really love to see their reaction when Jesus said, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (vs. 21).

Is it lawful to pay taxes? Sure it is. The face and name of Caesar are on the coin. Since it belongs to him, give it to him. Paul would say decades later in Romans 13:7, "Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." What could be simpler? If it belongs to him, give it. Otherwise you're guilty of stealing.

There certainly can be debate about what belongs to Caesar. To this day, people argue about what rightfully belongs to legitimate government. When does the tax rate become oppressive and unjust? Can government really make people travel a certain speed on highways? Or serve on juries? Or draft men and women into the armed forces? Or mandate health insurance? Can it tell you who should and shouldn't get married? Some of these are simpler than others. But Jesus' teaching remains clear enough in all these examples. Whatever belongs to government should be given to government.

What's harder is the second half of His famous statement. It takes the conversation into an area the Pharisees and Herodians didn't expect. Render to God the things that belong to God. We can fuss and fight about government taxes and statutes but God requires more. He's not so much interested in your money as He is in you! And not just part of you but all of you, body and soul.

Since we're talking about money...have you ever considered the purpose of taking up offerings? The "practical" answer is we've got to pay the bills. Running a church isn't free. True enough. Bills need to be paid. But that's not the real reason for offerings. The weekly collections is an act of worship. By giving a portion of your material resources you are declaring to heaven and earth it all belongs to God. He's entrusted you to use it faithfully, wisely, and joyfully. But it really all belongs to Him. Your loving God isn't so much interested in the material gifts He gives you but in you.

The denarius bore the image of Caesar; it belonged to him. You bear the image of God; you belong to Him (*Thanks for this observation Pr. Cwirla!*). Genesis 1:27 twice says that Adam and all humanity are created in the image of God. You belong to God.

Every man, woman, and child belongs to God. So give to God what belongs to Him starting with yourself: body and soul, heart and mind, emotions and strength, will and desires, money and talents, every breath and heartbeat. The Small Catechism teaches us that the 1st Commandment, “You shall have no other gods” requires that “we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” We belong to Him. Now give to Him what is rightfully His.

Sound easy? There’s nothing harder, at least not since Adam and Eve’s original sin which we inherited as our own. The cross of Jesus stands as the immovable beacon that says “You can’t give to God what belongs to Him...not without Me.” The eternal Son of God the Father took on our human flesh and blood in order to bring us back to God. Because of our sinful actions in thought, word, and deed, we became thieves: taking from God what belongs to Him. Jesus fixes that damnable problem by offering up Himself. The apostle Peter declares that we were ransomed from our sin not with the gold and silver of Caesar but with the precious blood of Jesus (I Peter 1:18–19), like that of a spot lamb who could take away all of our sins including the sin of not rendering ourselves to God.

You were created in God’s image. Sin has marred that image. God the Father repairs that broken image in your baptism. When water was splashed upon you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit the perfect image of God’s perfect Son, the Lord Jesus was indelibly imprinted upon you. So yes, by all means, give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. But know this, you have been given over to God, body and soul, by the Lord Jesus. You belong to Him. His name and His image are pressed upon you. And Jesus loves you too much to lose you. He’s done what you couldn’t do for yourself: rendered you, body and soul, to His heavenly Father.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.