

Sunday: Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: October 18, 2020

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Title: Render unto God

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

Please pray with me.

By a show of hands, anyone here like paying taxes? Anyone, anyone? That's what I thought. No one.

In Jesus' day, no one wanted to pay taxes either. The fact that the tax had to be paid to the occupying government of Rome, added to the animosity toward taxation. No one liked the Romans and to pay them just compounded the pain and suffering the people endured.

What a great subject to raise with Jesus as a way to trap him and be rid of him. The Pharisees choose one of the most inflammatory subjects, taxes paid to Rome, as a means of backing Jesus into a corner and forcing him to take a position that will turn the people against him, or lead to charges of sedition and/or treason against the Roman occupiers. Brilliant they think. They have found the perfect question. A simple question. Inquiring minds want to know.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

Ah-h-h, there it is. 10 simple words. A question to unravel years of preaching by Jesus and to push the Pharisees to the top of the leadership heap. Confident in their ploy, they send some of their disciples along with some Herodians to ask Jesus the “perfect” question. There was no way Jesus could win addressing this political hot button issue.

If Jesus said “No” it is was not lawful, he would be accused of encouraging people to break the law and the Romans would have reason to brand him a traitor and imprison or kill him.

If Jesus said “Yes” the people would view him as a Roman sympathizer and reject him as a traitor to Jewish faith and traditions. A no-win situation for Jesus. At least they thought.

Jesus' response is beautiful in its simplicity.

“Show me a coin. . . . Whose likeness and inscription is this” They said “Caesar’s.” To which he responds, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”

Upon hearing this the Pharisees, their disciples, and the Herodians walked away shocked by his response and how he avoided their well-crafted trap.

As Christians, and especially as American Christians, we like this parable. Jesus put the Pharisees in their place. He outwitted the lawyers, turning the tables on them and making them walk away with their tails between their legs. Jesus showed he is not someone to be trifled with.

As people look at Jesus’ response today, it is often viewed only as requiring us to pay the taxes imposed by the government. The question *was* about paying taxes on the part of the people. So we grudgingly relent and pay what we have to. However always finding ways to minimize what we give to government, in legal and not so legal ways. When taxes go up, we grumble and complain. When a new tax is imposed we get angry and vow to vote for change. As I thought about my reaction to these taxes, I realized that I am angry because they are taking what I have worked so hard to get. It is a selfish motive. It is all about me. I have lost sight of where these gifts come from and love for my neighbor.

The Pharisees’ motive to box Jesus in, is akin to what we do with Jesus’ response. We relent and concede that we must pay “Caesar” what is “Caesar’s.” We will give to the government the money they demand, but not a penny more. We view Jesus’s message as one of conferring on government the right to tax. This literal reading, limiting the application of Jesus’ words to the tax context, is not the full message Jesus is intending to convey.

Jesus is not saying that the people of Israel must give to Caesar every coin that has his likeness and inscription on it. He is not giving people an out if they find another currency to use that does not have his image and inscription on it. Jesus is talking about something much broader, that includes the obligation to pay taxes.

This morning let’s go deeper into Jesus’ response to see how it reflects God’s grace freely given to us and our opportunity to reflect that grace in our actions.

As members of the kingdom of heaven, we understand that all that we have is a gift from God for our use while we live in this earthly kingdom. As we exist in the now, awaiting the not yet manifested kingdom, we are blessed. If you look at the cover of our bulletin today, behind the quote “And give to God the things that are

God's identifies some of the gifts we receive from our Father. That being Time, Treasure, and Talents. We understand that we come into this world with nothing and we will not be able to take anything out of this world when we die. All that we have is a gift from God for our use. And how we use it is a reflection on us as Christians and on God who gives the gifts to us..

In short, we have no claim to anything we have as it applies to God. Our hymn "We Give Thee But Thine Own" (LSB 781) reflects this thought in the first verse:]

We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be;
All that we have is thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

All that we have is from God, including the authority we have over the world around us. In the Garden of Eden, God gave to mankind "dominion" over the world. In the fall into sin, our proper understanding and use of that dominion was distorted and broken. Jesus, God incarnate, confirms the source of authority in his parting comments to the disciples at his ascension, when he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus receives the authority from God the Father. The Godhead, the Trinity has all authority over heaven and earth. In his parting words, Jesus affirms his authority and delegates a portion of it to his followers.

This authority is given in trust to humankind in our various vocations. In the explanation to the Fourth Commandment, Luther identifies what it means to Honor your father and your mother, saying

We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them. (Small Catechism)

According to Luther, governing authorities derive their authority to govern us under this commandment. This is supported by Paul's writings in Romans 13 where he says

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. (Romans 13:1).

And Peter in 1 Peter 2:13-17

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

The authority given to governments is God ordained. They are the recipients of authority over civil affairs just as mothers and fathers are given authority over family affairs. We are obliged as children of God to be obedient to God and those in authority over us.

Can those in authority go too far. Absolutely. Luther in his treatise, "On Civil Authority" says government oversteps their authority when they "command thee to adhere to the pope, or to believe thus and so, or directs thee to put away certain books." Thanks be to God that he has protected us from a government that attempts to impose beliefs on us or take away our scriptures. Luther's point reflects what we see in Daniel 6, where we encounter Nebuchadnezzar ordering that people only bow down and pray to him for 30 days. Daniel properly rejects the efforts of government to impose beliefs on him. This is affirmed in God's miraculous protection of Daniel as he sleeps with the Lions.

Jesus' message to the Pharisees, to the crowds in the Temple courtyard, and to us today, is that we are to give to the government what is theirs and to God what is God's. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus who has delegated authority to civil authorities. They exist under the authority of God, which means we must submit to the authority delegated to Caesar just as we submit to the authority of parents and to the authority of God.

This is not some arbitrary work of the Law. Our obedience is a manifestation of grace. The Law of God, given to Moses, is summed up in two commandments.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40).

The love poured out on us through the grace of God, is shared with our neighbor as we fulfill God's Law. In love we do the things that we do. We are obedient to the governing authorities, recognizing their authority over our daily civil lives, out of love. Love for God and love for our neighbor.

This can be incredibly difficult to say the least, until we realize the true extent of the love God has for us as Paul reminds us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Romans 5:6-10).

The love of God poured out on us, in the incarnation of his dear Son, in Jesus' fulfillment of the Law, in his death where he paid the price for our sins, is the reason we are obedient to God and his agents. We love because he first loved us.

Just as we sin and fall short of the glory of God, so do our elected and appointed officials. All of our sins as well as the sins of our governing authorities were carried to the cross by our Savior. The price paid by Jesus, we to forward in the grace of God, showing honor and respect where it is due, being obedient to all in authority, living in God's ordained order.

To show love to God and to our neighbor, we submit to the everchanging rules regarding the pandemic we are mired in. We submit to masks, temperature checks, physical distancing and the other requirements out of love for one another and for the neighbor we know and those whom we have not met yet. We do not comply out of fear of death or illness, but out of trust in God to care for all mankind through those he has put in charge of us. To show love to God and to our neighbor, we pay sales tax, gas tax, income tax, property tax, and all the other taxes assessed. To show love to God and to our neighbor we drive our cars on the right side of the roadway, we don't steal from our neighbors, and we refrain from bearing false witness.

All this obedience blossoming out of the gift of grace given to us. This is Christ for you, Christ for me, Christ for all. This is showing the love of Christ to the world. ¹⁰ For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10).

Dear brothers and sisters, forgiven, washed in the blood of the Lamb, may the peace of God fill you and empower you to walk in faith, hope, and love, even in this difficult time of pandemic and confusion. Living in the grace given to us may we be strengthened by God's grace and share his mercy, peace, and grace with our neighbors, wherever we find them.

Amen