
**PAY TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S AND TO
GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S!**

**Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost 2020
Matthew 22:15-22**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel we just heard read, Matthew 22:15-22: ¹⁵ **Then the Pharisees went away and plotted how to trap Him in His Words.** ¹⁶ **They sent their disciples to Him with Herod's supporters to say to Him: "Teacher, we know that You are honest, that You teach the Way of God in truth. You pay no attention to who people are, since You do not show favouritism.** ¹⁷ **Therefore, tell us: What do You think? Is it right to pay a tax to Caesar or not?"**

¹⁸ **Jesus recognised their evil intent and asked, "Why are you testing Me, hypocrites?"** ¹⁹ **Show Me the coin used for paying the tax!"**

They brought Him a denarius. ²⁰ **He asked them, "Whose portrait is this, and whose inscription?"**

²¹ **They said to Him, "Caesar's."**

Then He told them, "Therefore, pay to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's!"

²² **They were astonished when they heard this. Then they let Him alone and went away.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In his explanation of the Fourth Commandment, Luther says, *"We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents or other authorities, but honour them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them."* God tells us in His Word that the government is His, and the authority it exercises is His. He commands us to be good citizens by telling us to *"be subordinate to the governing authorities! For there is no authority except from*

God, and the authorities that exist have been ordained by God" (Romans 13:1). Many religious leaders will impress on us the need to serve God first - "*We must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). They often suggest that being a good Christian is at odds with being a good citizen of the state. How we divide this up and how we act it out has been the focus of controversy for generations.

I wish we could say that Jesus settled the argument in our text for today, but things are never settled in the church. Jesus has given us guidance, but the debate is never settled among men. It just keeps coming up *again and again*. One generation says "Yes," and the next says "No." There are answers, but the old evil foe does not permit us to rest long on them - the answers are just contrary to the flesh. So we tend to travel from one extreme to the other like a pendulum swinging back and forth. This is why we need to keep coming back to Jesus and the Word to hear how we may properly deal with the issue of God and Caesar, of Church and State, of citizenship in this world and in the kingdom of God.

The setting for our Gospel is late in the ministry of Jesus. His enemies are becoming bolder and more aggressive. The Pharisees and Herod's supporters displayed a common hatred for Jesus that had overshadowed their sharp disagreements with each other. The Pharisees were ardent nationalists who opposed Roman rule and despised Herod's supporters for their cooperation with the Roman government. The Pharisees had now decided that it was time to trip up Jesus. If Jesus told people not to pay taxes to Rome, Herod's supporters would report Him to Pontius Pilate and have Him executed for treason, and if Jesus told people to pay taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees would spread the word that Jesus was unpatriotic.

If Jesus tried to be coy and take a middle ground, or not answer clearly and definitively, they could use that too to damage His reputation and turn the more aggressive and radical groups against Jesus. In any case, they figured, they had Jesus caught in a "no-win" situation. It was politics as usual back then just as much as today. So the Pharisees sent their disciples along with Herod's supporters and sprung their trap on Jesus.

They came to Jesus and asked, **“Teacher, we know that You are honest, that You teach the Way of God in truth. You pay no attention to who people are, since You do not show favouritism.¹⁷ Therefore, tell us: What do You think? Is it right to pay a tax to Caesar or not?”** Of course, there is the double-edged trap. Is it morally and religiously lawful to pay tax to Caesar or not? They expected the answer to be “No.” Is it socially and legally in the sense of Roman law, lawful? They knew that the answer would have to be “Yes.” So they figured that they had Jesus, with witnesses no matter which error He slid into. But Jesus, perceiving their malice said, **“Why are you testing Me, hypocrites?”** Then Jesus did the unexpected. He said, **“¹⁹ Show Me the coin used for paying the tax!”**

They brought Him a denarius.²⁰ He asked them, “Whose portrait is this, and whose inscription?”

²¹ They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then Jesus said those famous words, **“Therefore, pay to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s!”**

Jesus answered the question by implying that there were things that were properly under the regulation and possession of the government, and things that were not. He also suggested by His answer that the Pharisees were guilty of confusing what belonged to God and what belonged to the state - and apparently were “paying” to neither one the appropriate things. They were not giving the government its due, and they were withholding from God what truly belonged to Him.

So the question today is, which are the things that are Caesar’s? Logically and necessarily, we then also need to consider what are the things that are God’s?

First of all, we recognise that everything is the Lord’s. Psalm 24 says, *“The earth is the LORD’s and what fills it, the world and those who live in it”* (v.1). All creation belongs to God, the Creator. Since God has created government and all the authority which government exercises are from God, generally the things that are Caesar’s are what Caesar says they are. The things that are Caesar’s ultimately change throughout time. As the government changes, so do its demands and controls. In our nation, we do have a great deal of freedom.

We acknowledge as a society the right to certain freedoms that people in the time of Jesus, for example, did not enjoy.

Caesar's things include whatever Caesar chooses, except when the government attempts to take the things of God, and so, to understand Caesar's things, we must recognise what is truly God's, and God's things are very simple and basic. God has created us, so God has the right to tell us how to live. We owe Him obedience. We owe Him thanks for the simple fact of our existence. Besides all of this, God has created everything we need for life, and daily and richly provides. For these things, we owe God genuine and heartfelt appreciation, great thanksgiving, and unwavering trust. As Luther said, "*We should fear and love God!*"

That isn't how we feel or how we behave as a rule. We take the good for granted and grumble about the difficult or painful. We disregard God's plans and will for our lives and our behaviour, and we serve ourselves and hurt one another. We sin against God, and by our sins, we deserve to be wiped from the face of creation and forgotten by God as a bad investment. His Word even says that this is what we deserve. But God does not discard us. He does not destroy us. He does not wipe us away, but has redeemed and rescued us. When we had set ourselves up as His enemies, He still sent His Son Jesus to face our sins and die our death and receive on the cross all that our sins merit before God.

God has taken our sins out of the way by punishing them in the body of Jesus by sufferings, pain, and death on the cross. He has demonstrated that our sins are forgiven by raising Jesus from the dead, and now God declares through the preaching of His Word that anyone who knows what He has accomplished in Jesus Christ, and trusts Him for what He promises because of Jesus Christ, has forgiveness of sins and eternal life, *starting right now!*

Therefore we owe God thanks and praise, to serve and worship Him with holy lives and to give ourselves freely to our neighbours for Him. The things that are God's are our intellects, and our wills, and our affections and values. The rest is Caesar's.

We are to pay taxes cheerfully, for the government is simply a servant of God for the purpose of social order. We are to obey the laws, even the ones we do not like or agree with because the state exercises God's own authority - and

we owe God obedience. When we give **“to God the things that are God’s,”** we end up being good citizens because servicing our neighbour by good citizenship is the will of God - it belongs to the things of God which we should give to Him. We owe Caesar good citizenship, for when we disregard the government, we disregard God. When we disobey the government, we disobey God. When we rebel against the government, we are rebelling against God Himself, with the single caution that when the government commands us to do what God forbids or commands us not to do what God commands us to do, then we must recognise that the government has itself rebelled against God and has no authority, and then *“We must obey God rather than men”* (Acts 5:29).

But even then, when we disregard Caesar for the sake of faithfulness to God and for the sake of conscience, we owe it to God to endure whatever standing for the truth costs us in terms of pain, or social pressure, or fines, or prison, or even death. Those are the **things that are God’s**. We owe it to God to bear faithfully the cost of being faithful, whatever that cost may be. Sometimes the cost is faithfulness to the government when we don’t want to be faithful, and sometimes it is bearing government sanctions for being faithful to God by disregarding the government.

We owe God our values. We owe God our love and our affections (that is, what we choose to value here on earth). We owe God our intellects - to use them for Him and His purposes, which means for the welfare of our neighbour, and we owe God our wills - to desire and to will what God desires and wills. The rest of the stuff, our time, our money, our property, and even sometimes our lives in this world, fall into that category of the things that are Caesar’s. **“Therefore, pay to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s!”** Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord God, heavenly Father, You are our shelter and strength. You are always ready to help us, and never leave us. We praise You for the great mercy You have shown to us sinners in the gift of Your Son Jesus Christ. We glorify Him because He has come to remove our sins by His sacrifice on the cross, so that

whoever believes in Him may not die but have eternal life. We praise You, O Father, for Your great love to us, for rescuing us from the power of sin and death, and for opening to us the gate of heaven.

We confess that we are worthless sinners, guilty of flouting Your will more than we realise. We humbly repent of our evil, and trust for our forgiveness only in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Pardon us, and cleanse our lives for His sake. Grant that we may continue in Your kingdom as Your dear children.

Renew us by Your Spirit and teach us to love what is pure, holy, true, and good. Take captive our every thought, word, and deed, and make them obey Christ. Give us the desire to walk in Your ways, to follow Your Word, and to grow in it. Touch us with Your grace, that we may be transformed in character, firm in faith, joyful in hope, patient in troubles, and persistent in prayer. Fill our lives with the hope that Christ will transform our humble bodies and make them like His glorious body.

Fill Your Church with Your Spirit, that it may have a power and wisdom superior to all human knowledge. Give to all preachers and teachers the conviction and courage of true prophets, that Your people may be built up in faith and love, strengthened in service, and kept faithful to the end.

Spread Your truth and love among the nations, that they may receive Your truth in repentance and faith. Rescue them from error and godlessness, and move them to offer You true worship and praise. Bless our country. Help all to understand that personal advantage, public opinion, and party politics do not make a nation great, but obedience to Your will. Give us public servants and leaders in management and labour who are unselfish and far-sighted, and whose concern is for the public good and the God-given dignity of every person.

Be gracious to our homes. Give to all families the gifts of faith, love, and obedience to You, so that each home may be a first taste of the joy and blessedness of our heavenly home.

We pray you to heal and comfort all who face sickness, pain, hardship, suffering, or danger. Teach them to turn to You for help, and to trust in Your mercy. Give them hope and a joyous release from all their burdens.

These things we pray in the name of Jesus, our sure refuge and eternal hope. Amen.

**The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
(Proper 24)**

Isaiah 45:1-7

¹ This is what the LORD has said to Cyrus, His anointed one, “whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him, whom I shall use to undo the weapon-belts of kings and to open doors before him, so that the city-gates will not be shut: ² ‘I Myself shall go before you and smooth down the elevated places. I shall break bronze gates in pieces and cut through iron crossbars. ³ I shall give you treasures from dark places and riches stored in secret places, that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, and that I am calling you by your name. ⁴ For the sake of My servant Jacob and Israel, My chosen one, I have called you by your name. I am giving you a title of honour, although you do not know Me. ⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no one else. Apart from Me there is no other God. I shall equip you for action, although you do not know Me, ⁶ that people from the sunrise

to the sunset may know there is no one except Me. I am the LORD, and there is no one else. ⁷ I form light and create darkness. I cause prosperity and create calamity. I am the LORD and I do all these things.”

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

¹ Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you!

² We always thank God for you all when we mention you in our prayers. ³ We continually remember before our God and Father that your faith is working, that your love is toiling and that your hope in our Lord Jesus Christ is enduring patiently. ⁴ For we know, fellow-Christians, whom God loves, that He has chosen you, ⁵ because our Good News did not come to you simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with great conviction. You know what kind of men we were among you for your good. ⁶ You also became imitators of us and of the Lord when, although you suffered greatly, you

received the Word, with joy, given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ As a result, you became models for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ For the Word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only through Macedonia and Achaia but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning you what kind of reception you gave us, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son to come from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, namely, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Matthew 22:15-22

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