

Sermon Trinity 23 2020

November 15, 2020

Matthew 22:15-22

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

As we hear the predicament of Jesus in the Gospel lesson, I think if we look around it's one we can relate to. I have been speaking with regularity about the division that we see in our country, how we see it increasingly becoming divided, especially in politics. There's the left, there's the right, and the two are going farther and farther apart. In that division, then, the members of both sides want to claim as many as they can. They want this person, or that person to be clearly seen on their side. Or if the person appears to be on the other side, then they become outcasts, *personae non gratae*. For example, I don't know if you saw any of the conversation about the rapper Ice Cube just before the election. He had reached out to the campaigns of both candidates in hope of having conversations about how those candidates could help black people with the specific issues they face. He made it known publicly that President Trump's campaign had reached out and spoken with him, but Vice President Biden's campaign had not. What was the response? "Ice Cube is endorsing Trump!" And along with that a mass rebuke from those who wanted Biden to be elected! Of course, Ice Cube never actually expressed an endorsement, but that's the way this went.

But, that's how social media goes altogether now, isn't it? Either you're on my side, or you're on their side. It appears Jesus could likely identify with that as we see Him in the gospel lesson today, doesn't it? Here He is, and as seems often to be the case, He's in a spot where people are trying to trip Him up. Matthew tells us it's the Pharisees this time. He says, **"the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words."** They're setting Him up to fail, the word there is like a snare has been set. The trap is being laid out so Jesus will step in it and be caught up in His own words. In what and how do they do this? They ask Him about how the Roman Empire should be viewed. They say, **"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."** They of course start with some flattery, to butter Him up, then comes the question, **"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"**

Now you might wonder how this is a trap. What does it matter how Jesus responds? To their point, He's pretty clear about not caring whether or not He upsets the Pharisees. So, what's the issue? That's because the Herodians are there too. You see the

Pharisees would likely have been aligned with the idea that Rome shouldn't be there and shouldn't be paid. They were known for their zeal and purity, and would have wanted freedom from this Caesar who would demand that they follow his rules and would insert his people into things even like their worship. This Caesar would not deserve their taxes. But then you have the Herodians. They would have been aligned with King Herod, the Jewish King. The king who had been installed in that role by this government of Caesar. To them, Caesar would have been AOK. So, if Jesus says to pay the tax, there are the Pharisees ready to pounce. If not, there are the Herodians. If Jesus says to pay, The Herodians call Him their own and the Pharisees will call Him *persona non grata*. If not, vice versa.

So, what's the decision? Ultimately, the decision is that Jesus is wise. The decision is that Jesus knows hearts. Matthew says that Jesus responds, "**aware of their malice.**" Jesus is aware of their malicious intent. He sees right through their façade, He doesn't look upon their faces, their appearances just like they know He doesn't—or claim they do. In other words, Jesus is aware of their evil. What evil is that? It's the evil of their sin. It's the evil of Jeremiah 17:9; the evil we all bear: "**The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.**" Jesus knows the sickness that they don't trust in Him, and Jesus knows the sickness, the evil in which they do trust. They trust in earthly kings and princes to accomplish their salvation.

And so, He responds, "**Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.**" And when they do, what happens? He points out the nature of the coin, "**Whose likeness and inscription is this?**" And whose was it? Caesar's. So, what does Jesus say, "**Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.**" He says give what is deserved to Caesar, and give what is deserved to God. And the people marvel, they go away in awe of the wisdom of this man. And that's the thing for us to take away most of all from this. There is this wisdom of Jesus. Jesus is the One who is wisdom incarnate, the One who demonstrates the knowledge, the prudence, the discretion described in our reading from Proverbs. That's absolutely the takeaway here. But as I say that, I think that's something we all recognize. We all know that Jesus is so amazing as God in the flesh. Of course, we don't get that in its fullness, but we know this to an extent. So, is that it?

Well if you're keeping track we're only about half way of the usual sermon length, so it would seem not. But it's especially not in view of this division that we have in our country. It's not even in view of how we ourselves as Christians often respond. You see, we so often get sucked into the same perspective. Either the government is illegitimate,

in a sense, compared to God, and so needs to be ignored. Or we think the government is our salvation. And what is the Word for us to hear in this?

First, in view of how Jesus says that there is something to be rendered to Caesar—and this word for rendering has roots in giving what is owed in particular in view of retribution. Return what is owed to Caesar in retribution for what Caesar has done. And retribution has negative connotation, but make that a bit more neutral. Give back to Caesar in payback or justice for what Caesar has done. How do we understand that? Well, Paul uses the same word in Romans Chapter Thirteen. Speaking of the Government—this same Roman government Jesus describes—saying **“one must be in subjection [to the government], not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.”** So, God puts the government in place and we are to be subject to it—not because it executes God’s righteousness perfectly, but because He uses it. And then Paul uses this same word from Jesus to give: **“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.”** There is what Caesar is owed. The government is owed taxes, revenue, respect, honor. Why? Because this is God’s servant for our good, for the ordering of society. Not always perfectly—never perfectly, but that honor is owed.

But then there’s the flip side. However, render to God what is owed to Him too. While we certainly always need to hear that aspect of rendering to Caesar what is Caesars, right now, I think we need all the more to hear that we should render to God what is His. As I speak of this division, I think this comes down to a problem. I think those on the left and those on the right are falling into the trap where they want to render to Caesar what is God’s. You might be thinking, “how so?” You might especially be thinking, “I see how the people on the other side do it, but I’m not!!!” And to be fair you might not be. Afterall, I think those faithful Christians who would be inclined to the left see things like how the left purports to be seeking justice and care for all peoples, and all the more they might see how President Trump has acted in a way that is inconsistent with the Christian faith in His words and life, and they see the right as incompatible with the faith. Then those one the right see how the left in many ways is seeking to do away with a society grounded in the understanding of God’s order for creation and His care for life and the unborn, and they see their policies economically as the most beneficial for bringing us to the closest we’ll be for economic justice, and they see the left as incompatible with the faith. In either case, the decision is being sought in view of things oriented toward the faith. However, look at the reactions we have. Many on the right

are distraught at the thought of Biden having won the election. Many on the left were distraught at the thought that Trump was going to win, especially when there was the expectation for a landslide. What does such anxiety indicate?

It indicates that we think the government is our savior. Again, this is found on both sides, and I'm not saying we shouldn't vote or have passion about political things, but when we are so anxious about political outcomes what does it indicate? It indicates that we are putting our faith in human governments rather than in our God. Think about that explanation for the First Commandment. What does Luther say about it? **You shall have no other gods.** *What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.* When we have this anxiety, we are trusting that the government is our salvation, just like the Herodians. Or we're trusting that God's kingdom will be of this world like the Pharisees.

Again to be clear, I'm not necessarily rebuking your political views. As I've heard many of them, I think they come from a place generally grounded in faith. But we all need that rebuke of our political trust. Christians, the government is not your savior. The promise is not that the government will save you, nor that it will bring about a utopia. If your attitude is along those lines, and to some degree or another, I am guessing it is, there needs to be repentance. It is not promised that the government will take care of you.

It is however promised that God will take care of you. So, as you look at the political situation, remember that: GOD will take care of you. He is the One who will do it. He is the One who sent Jesus as Wisdom Incarnate, who sent the Son into the flesh as Wisdom Incarnate to redeem you. GOD will take care of you, not the government, nor the political circumstance. Likewise, God will take CARE of you. This Jesus who has redeemed you has taken your sin to the cross and taken care of it. The retribution that is owed to you, what should be given to you by God because of your sin, that has been suffered by Jesus that you would be forgiven. And in the promise of His resurrection, it is shown that you are cared for. In fact, in your baptism, in the preaching of the Word, the forgiveness of your sins, in the Lord's Supper, it's proven that God will take care of YOU.

Rest, then, in this God, Christians. Don't rest in being on your side of the political division, rest in Christ. Rest in His wisdom and His knowledge and His care. Render to Caesar in that what is Caesar's, and Caesar is owed something. But make sure to render to God what is God's. After all, He is owed much more than we can ask or imagine in His love for you. That love found in the Christ who has taken what should be rendered to you and relieved you of that by His grace in the Wisdom that is His forever. Amen.