

October 22, 2023
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 22:15-25

LIVING IN GOD EARTHLY KINGDOM

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

In our Gospel text this morning, Jesus says:

“... render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21)

This passage is often used to teach about what Martin Luther called the “***Doctrine of Two Kingdoms***” where he made the distinction between the secular kingdom of the world and the spiritual kingdom of God. (cf: LW 45, 88–93) Sometimes we call it the kingdom of the left and right and other times we call it the church and the state.

As Christians we live in the tension of simultaneously living in these two Kingdoms. The left-hand kingdom is the temporal kingdom where we reside physically. It’s a kingdom of law ruled by the power of the civil government. In this kingdom the Christian owes its leaders loyalty and obedience. It’s where we return to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. However, as baptized believers in Christ, we also live at the same time in the spiritual right-hand kingdom of God’s grace and the Gospel. It’s a kingdom where the Holy Spirit, working through God’s Word, calls sinners to repentance and faith in Christ. It’s where believers respond in faith and love to the One who first loved them, with fruits of repentance, love toward God, and love and good works toward neighbor. It’s where we return to God the things that are God’s.

One thing that is often forgotten is – both kingdoms belong to God. They’re His for He created them and rules them both. He rules the kingdom of left with power given to governments instituted by Him for the sake of good order in the world. He rules the kingdom right with His rich mercy and grace.

As a Christian you and I live with our feet in both kingdoms. While there’re many times you might disagree with our nation’s leaders and the laws they enact, they’re God’s instruments for the good of mankind on earth. So, you return to Caesar what is Caesar’s. St Paul says to:

“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.” (Romans 13:7)

We do these things until the point when Caesar oversteps his authority and goes against God’s Word and commands. At that point, Christians ***must push back*** against the government and civil rulers, and obey God rather than men. (cf: Acts 5:29) But in our Gospel, the main point of the Pharisees sending their disciples with the Herodians to interrogate Jesus has nothing at all to do

with questions about Church and State or paying taxes. We know this because the first verse of our text says:

“... the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle [Jesus] in his words.”
(Matthew 22:15)

Jesus is in Jerusalem just days before He will be brutally murdered on Calvary’s cross to win salvation for all mankind. Many people had heard His teaching and witnessed His miracles and believed in Him and they welcomed Him into the Holy City with shouts of:

“Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matthew 21:9)

But the religious leaders saw Him as a threat to their power and prestige among the people.

In the days following He would anger the religious leaders by cleansing the temple of the merchants and moneychangers. He angered them by healing the blind and the lame who came to Him. When they questioned His authority to do such things, He told parables against them – and they, in turn, rightly perceived that He was speaking about them. So they plotted together about how to trap Him in His Words, trick Him into saying something that would give them cause to arrest Him. They schemed until they came up with what they thought was a foolproof plan. They would send their own disciples along with the Herodians, neither of which Jesus would recognize, to ask an innocent but deadly question. When answered either way, Jesus would stand condemned.

The interrogators then come to Jesus with deceit and false flattery, and at the same time, unwittingly confess the truth about Jesus, for Jesus *is the truth* and He *teaches the way of God truthfully* regardless of anyone’s opinion. (cf: Matthew 22:16) Yet the Pharisees and Herodians don’t see it that way. They see Him as an obstacle to their power, a roadblock that must be removed. Just when they think they have Jesus all puffed up and putty in their hands, they spring their question:

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”
(Matthew 22:17)

They thought it was the perfect question dividing the kingdom of the left from the kingdom of the right. The Pharisees had no choice but to pay the tax. They may have been the religious leaders of their people, but they were still under the rule of Caesar, a pagan ruler. But with this either/or question, if Jesus agreed that it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, they could accuse Him of being a friend of Ceasar. He’d lose favor with the crowds who sought to make Him an earthy King over Israel and overthrow the Romans. But if He says it’s wrong to pay taxes to Caesar, the Herodians will have Him arrested for being disloyal to Rome and perhaps even an insurrectionist.

It seemed to be the perfect trap. Regardless of how He answers, they believe got him! But the thing they didn’t consider was that the omniscient Jesus already knew what was in their hearts. He exposes their hypocrisy and as He does so often, He turns the question against them saying:

“... render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21)

They thought it was the perfect question which would make Jesus choose between the government and God... between the kingdom of the left hand and the kingdom of the right. But they forgot that both kingdoms belong to God. God the Father had sent His own Son in the flesh of man to bring His power and gracious rule and reign to earth. The kingdom of the God, that is, the rule and reign of God in Christ Jesus was standing before them in the flesh. And while Jesus honored the temporal authority that God had established in the kingdom of the left while He lived on earth, the bigger issue, the ultimate issue, is the rule and authority God has over spiritual matters. So Jesus instruction to the religious leaders and to you and me is: *“Render to God the things that are God’s.”*

How does the Christian properly render to God the things that are God’s? You could open your Small Catechism to the Table of Duties and review Luther’s list of duties that people in various callings and stations in life have, as both a command and blessing from God. Or, how about I just give you a long list of things you should return to God.

- You should give God praise, honor, and glory in good times and bad.
- You should read your Bible and pray every day.
- You should make God your number one priority, loving Him with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.
- You should love your neighbor as yourself.
- You should give at least ten percent of your income to the work of the church.

But as I just said earlier, both the kingdom of the left and the right belong to God. How is it even possible to render anything to God? As we heard in our Introit:

“5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.”
(Psalm 121:5)

“8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 124:8)

King David writes:

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains.” (Psalm 24:1 NASB)

So while it is good, right, and salutary for you to return to God all of these things I just named along with everything that applies to you in Luther’s Table of Duties – if you merely return these things to God under compulsion, they’re empty and useless gestures. Besides, in all that we do – we fall short of the glory of God. Martin Luther once wrote:

“... you owe God nothing but to believe and confess...” (LW 24.45)

And without the aid of the Holy Spirit, you can’t even do that.

Yes, the earth and all it contains is the Lord’s. All that you *have* and all that you *are* is a gracious gift from your Father in heaven. But God doesn’t stop at merely giving you only material things in the kingdom of the left. In Baptism, He adopted you and made you His own Child in the kingdom of the right where you live under the rule and reign of Christ Jesus. Because of His sacrificial death on your behalf on Calvary’s cross, you are free from the curse of death and the power of the devil. In the washing of the water and the Word, you were clothed you with the righteousness of Christ, freeing you from the wages of your sin. You were given the gift of faith and the Holy Spirit who continues to sustain you in the true faith through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

The sinful nature believes the material things are the important things of life. You judge your position and success in life by what you own. But remember what Job said after he had lost all of his children and worldly possessions? He said:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” (Job 1:21)

Your First Article gifts ***are*** a wonderful blessing from God, but it’s His gift of spiritual things that are your most blessed possession: forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. ***“... you owe God nothing but to believe and confess...”*** Everything else, even your physical life can be taken away by Ceasar whenever he wishes. As Luther once wrote:

***And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Though these all be gone,
Our vict’ry has been won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.*** (LSB 656, stz. 4)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, return to God the things that are God's. What does that look like? It’s a life of repentance, turning from your sinful ways and taking up your cross and following Jesus, trusting in Him as His obedient disciple. It’s confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. It’s the Holy Spirit at work through the Gospel, strengthening your faith and enabling you to serve and love others just as God in Christ serves and loves you. It’s to believe that same Gospel and to recognize that faith in Jesus is the highest worship of Christ, the ultimate ***“rendering to God.”***

It’s to ***“take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord,”*** (cf: Psalm 116:13) receiving the abundance of His grace in the Lord’s Supper, Holy Baptism, and Holy Absolution. It’s to cling to Jesus as the one who paid your tax debt by His suffering and death on the cross. And when you hear Him cry out, ***“It is finished,”*** (cf: John 19:30) you know your tax bill has been stamped ***“Paid in Full.”***

Your heavenly Father rules over all things. He established governments for good order in life and He created His Church to give eternal life to all who believe. Here, in the Divine Service, He gathers us together with the whole Christian Church of all ages to pour out His rich gifts of mercy and grace.

After receiving His priceless gifts of Word and Sacrament, you are freed to return to Him all things that are His: praise, honor, and glory for the riches of salvation freely given for the sake of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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