

Pastor John Koester
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, year A
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Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax^[a] to Caesar or not?”

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Do I need to say more than what Jesus says to the Pharisees who ask him their question? Can I add to or improve upon the answer he gives to a question that seems to have no right answer? The lesson is clear, straightforward and one we have learned. The question posed by the Pharisees was not, “What is the relationship between the church and government and what is the Christian’s duty to each?” That would have been a good question and that is, essentially, the question that Jesus actually answers. Of course, that would have been the question coming from a place of genuine curiosity and a true desire to learn. The Pharisees had no such genuine desire. Their purpose in asking the question, as the gospel writer Matthew makes very clear, was to trap Jesus and to make him say something that would discredit him before either the religious leaders or the governmental rulers. Either way, Jesus was going to make enemies who would have every motive and right to put him to death. It was one of those ‘gotcha’ questions.

The question was, Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? You see what they were trying to do. If he says, “Yes, it’s right,” then he is a traitor to his people and denouncing God. If he says, “No, it isn’t right,” then the Herodians, Jewish leaders sympathetic to and supportive of the Romans, charge him with insurrection and have him executed. For the Pharisees, it’s win-win and for Jesus, it’s lose-lose. But Jesus, being divine, saw through their trap, saw through their flattery and he responded with a sentence that, I’m guessing, the Pharisees never saw coming. Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s. Jesus does not present this as an either/or situation with no correct answer. He changes the question. He turns this into a lesson and a truth that no one can refute, a teaching that settles into our hearts and minds to which we cannot object. And while the Pharisees asked the question with the intent of ruining Jesus’ reputation, Jesus answers the question with the intent of giving us a true understanding of what it means to live in this world as a citizen of God’s Kingdom.

Because that is what we do and that is who we are. And that is vitally important to remember, especially the 'who we are' part. We, brothers and sisters, are citizens of God's Kingdom. We belong to that nation and even though, in some ways, we don't reside there at this moment, that's our true home. Maybe you remember the words St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians: But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. That's our place.

How did we become that? It was through no doing of our own. There was no pathway to citizenship with all of these steps laid out for us, our duty and obligation being to follow these steps and do the things necessary, to make our declaration that this is the country to which we belong. That's not how it works with citizenship in God's Kingdom. When we are born into this world, we wanted nothing to do with his Kingdom. And in God's Word, he lays down a list of things, steps we take to achieve the right to live where he is. These are his laws. But we want nothing to do with those either. So, if God says, "Here is what you must do to become a citizen of heaven," we would say, "No." And if we didn't say "no," we would say, "I've tried, but I can't." Because for us who are born in sin, who carry it with us wherever we go, God's laws are impossible for us.

And yet, Scripture tells us we are citizens of heaven. And that is because of what God has done for us. All of the laws that we were unable to carry out, all of the steps necessary to become a part of his nation that we could not accomplish—Jesus came and did that for us. He went through the steps and he earned the right to say, "What you demand, I've done." And then he says, "Now make it count for them." His life makes us righteous, his death removes our sins just as God demands, just as is necessary to become a citizen of God's kingdom. He does the work and he rescues us from the sinful life that was ours by nature; like refugees looking for solace and relief, God welcomes us and brings us into his family, into his kingdom.

And what a privilege that is, to live under his rule. How blessed to be under his authority that no one can match or even challenge and which he establishes for our good, our benefit. In his kingdom, we worry about nothing. In his kingdom, our lives are secure and our faith is held firm. In his kingdom, the enemies of this world stand no chance against us. Even if they take our lives, we live forever in God's Kingdom. It is sure, it is strong, and it is our home.

How fitting, how logical that Jesus would say that we give to God what is God's. It isn't a payment plan, it's not how we make ourselves square, reimbursing him for all that he has given to us when he saved us from sin and death. Such a thing would be impossible. We give to him out of thanksgiving. We give to him as a way to say, "This is how important you are to me, this is how much I love you, more than anything else I have in this world. This is my way of demonstrating how much worth and value you have in my life." Of course we give to God. There is no one greater both in terms of how much love he has poured out on us and how much power he has over everything.

Of course, one of the ways in which we show our love for God is by living out his commands and we live out his commands by loving others and living peaceable lives with others. And to create this peaceful order in society, God blesses us with people and institutions on earth to provide it.

These are our governments. We heard in Paul's letter to the Romans, Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Remember, while we are citizens of God's heavenly kingdom, we are residents in this world with its earthly kingdoms. And the earthly kingdoms under which we live have been put here by God to do the job of keeping the peace by providing law and order.

Which means that if the government tells us, "You must give us 80% of your paycheck," or whatever number it might be, "so that we can provide this law and order and provide other services and protection," then that's what we'll do. Because whether those rulers realize it or not, they're working for God. So, we give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. As Paul also says in Romans, This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. They are God's servants and as such, worthy of our income and worthy of our respect.

Which can be difficult. The Pharisees figured they could trap Jesus in his answer if he told them that it was good and right and proper to pay the imperial tax to Caesar. How could Jesus affirm that the Roman government was the recognized authority? How could Jesus say that their power was legitimate? How could Jesus not declare that the Romans had no authority over them and that the only legitimate government was that of the sovereign nation of Israel? How could Jesus not stand up on a stone, raise a fist and say, "You are not our leader, Caesar! You can't tell us what to do!"

Well, we know why. But how often do we feel it our duty to defy the government because we don't like their laws, we don't like their policies, or we just don't like their personalities? How often are we tempted to disobey because those leader and those institutions are so corrupt, they don't deserve my obedience. How often will we use our words to tear down those authorities established by God because we have decided that they are not worthy of our respect? How many times have justified our disobedience and disrespect by declaring that God would never approve of these rulers or governors and therefore we are exempt from submitting to them?

We are guilty of such things. As I said, it's difficult. And it's mostly difficult because we're sinners who don't want to be told what to do and don't want to follow any laws we don't like and feel we should never be under the control of anyone else. So, instead of loving God so much that we follow his established earthly authorities and loving God so much that we trust completely that he is still our true King and we are members of his kingdom—instead of doing that we love ourselves and we defy and disobey.

But there is something we need to always remember as we study this text from Matthew, this lesson from God on how we live both as citizens of heaven and residents of this world. When we recognize our guilt, our lack of trust, let's find what can be so easily missed and is perhaps the most important part of this section of Scripture. The Pharisees laid a trap for Jesus, or tried to, because they wanted to stop him. And if they had succeeded, perhaps Jesus would not have gone to the cross and would not have died a guiltless death. They could not succeed. Jesus deftly answered their question and avoided their trap and without missing a step continued his journey to the cross to do what he came to the world to do: take away our sins and save us from eternal death.

When we recognize that we have not always lived as the citizens of heaven that we are, let us remember that: nothing could stop Jesus from dying for our sins. When we recognize that we haven't given to our earthly leaders what God says they deserve, let us remember that: nothing could stop Jesus from dying for our sins. When we recognize that we haven't always trusted in God to take care of us through governments or, at times, in spite of them, let us remember that: nothing could stop Jesus from dying for our sins. As you live out your life here in this world, and when doubts and worries assail you as you live under earthly rulers, remember that: You get to live a life of service and love to others as a member of God's kingdom because nothing could stop Jesus from dying for your sins. Amen.