***Matthew 22:15-22 (ESV)***

***“****Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.* ***16****And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “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.* ***17****Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”* ***18****But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?* ***19****Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.* ***20****And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”* ***21****They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* ***22****When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”*

**“Taking What Belongs To Him”**

In the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. The nature of the Devil is to pit one thing against another. It can be family and faith, Law and Gospel, truth and love, or even church and state. This antagonist cares for neither God nor humanity, but only himself. The goal is always to confuse the issues, to cause disorder rather than order, to destroy and never to save. During His last week, the Devil tried especially hard to disrupt what Jesus was to do for a sinful world. He wanted to trick Him and turn salvation all into a lie. The Pharisees were the willing servants who would go after God’s Son. We heard it said they, “went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.” They wanted to break Jesus. They wanted to trap Him. They wanted Him dead. What better way than by the label “traitor.” Of course, Jesus did not fall for it. He only takes what belongs to His glory as Savior. The rest He leaves hidden behind the hands of sinners.

As much as the Pharisees hated the governance of Rome that occupied Jewish lands. They had to use it to their advantage to get at Jesus. Since there was no such thing as tape records, the next best thing was the Herodians. They were a political party responsible for building up and protecting the dynasty of Herod. Just like an extremist, they would turn in anybody who said otherwise. Their presence might not have pleased the Pharisees, but better than Jesus. At least, they could lie before the governing authorities. No one could get away with anything before God’s Son. Along with the Herodians, the Pharisees also sent their less threatening disciples saying, “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.” Words designed to butter up anyone, just not the One born of the virgin Mary, the Word become flesh. Jesus first remark was, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?”

We ought to have praise for God and country, but Jesus tells the truth. The heart of sinful man does not like the fourth commandment. To honor father and mother means also to honor church and state. More than that, it is to recognize God instituted both for saving humanity in body and soul, present life and eternal salvation. Yet, just like the Pharisees, we can end up manipulating it all for our advantage. Luther declares,

“Like those within the civil state, who are rebellious and think that everything belongs to them and do not give Caesar what it Caesar’s, rebellious people exist within the spiritual realm…In short, they wish to be masters of their faith and lords over all of Holy Scripture, even though in baptism they have sworn allegiance to remain true to the Christian faith and to the pure Word” (p.154)

Only God sees through the flowery words of those who are looking to get their way. Only the Savior calls out the sinner to hear the truth of His Word that will not lie. Only Jesus wants to quiet the rebellious spirit to His saving work declaring, “Why put me to the test?” There are plenty of tricks to play in church and state, but Jesus takes what belongs to His glory as Savior. The rest He leaves hidden behind the hands of sinners.

Having to answer the question incited by the Pharisees on paying taxes was a dead end right from the start. If Jesus said “yes,” he would be a traitor to the Jews who had little regard for the unholy authority of the Romans. If he said “no,” it would mean the Herodians would turn him in as a traitor of Rome. The answer was already evident to God’s Son. Jesus knew what they were doing. He said, “Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” There was no way around the fact that God was working through the rule of the Gentiles. They held the proof right in their pockets. As one commentator points outs, “The coin does not merely resemble Caesar’s face and name but represents his face and name. Where the coin goes, there goes Caesar…” (Bul’s notes 7). Yet, as clearly as they could see the image on the coin. These Pharisees could not face the fact of Jesus Christ being the Son of the Father. Even during the week of his death He would still cry out, “And whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:45).

Maybe why we struggle to appreciate government now days is because currency is not always in our pocket? If everything is about using plastic credit/debit cards, checkbooks, or computer based. What does it say about God’s good governance in our nation? Is it just earned numbers of profit empty of any authority or thankfulness? Most of the time the only face of leadership we see are those slandered on TV. Christians pray for their nation and its rulers because God works behind the face of sinners. The Lord used King Cyrus of the Persian Empire to bring back His people Israel. It is the same for the church throughout the ages. Governance in all sphere of life is how God gets things done in a world under the Law. On the other hand, the baptized have the better promise made from the Gospel. It comes with the face of God poured upon our life by water and the Word. It is marked by what we faithful hear preached from the Word. It is what we receive int eh sacrament inscribed with the promise of it being God’s true body and blood. Jesus rules as Lord by the way of the cross. A victory to be present before all the nations under heaven to save them. It is why the church goes to the ends of the earth. Jesus takes what belongs to His glory as Savior proclaiming Himself by Word and Sacrament. The rest He leaves hidden behind the hands of sinners.

There was no need to destroy His enemies. The Pharisees stepped into their own trap. Jesus was not going to have His mission as Savior dragged into the mud playing politics. Instead, God’s Son distinguished His kingdom of grace from the civil kingdoms of this world. He said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” There is no confusion or contradiction. Each has their own call to obedience. One runs by rules and laws of men for keeping peace and good order in a society. The other uses God’s Word for what it says in the Church as Jesus forgives, restores, and save sinners by faith in Him. Both Caesar and God are important, but one is greater than the other. Christ made this apparent before Pontius Pilot at His trial stating, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above (John 19:11a).” Just as at His death the soldiers of Rome confessed in wonderment, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matt 27:54).

Mixing church and state only lays a trap. The Pharisees truthfully cared nothing about Caesar or God. There is no need to fall into the Devil’s chaos. St. Paul praised the Thessalonians for their patient conviction of, “how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” Jesus only takes what belongs to His glory as Savior. The rest He leaves hidden behind the hands of sinners. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting, Amen.