**Matthew 22:15-22**

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.

**“Stop Crowning Around”**

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and savior, amen. Harvest time is now in full swing out in the fields, but there are also others fully committed to a harvest of votes for this year’s midterm elections. You know it must be important, since plenty of stuff goes out in the mail, debates between opponents are on TV, and all political parties know November 4th is D-day. Yet, as much as growing doubt in our culture is against the church, recent info shows the majority of Americans distrust the government. Maybe it is the war against terrorism. Maybe it is issues over jobs and national debt. Maybe it is fear over health scares. Whatever it is, distrust of government is never good not because those elected to govern do it well. Rather, government as in terms of governing is a gift from God.

The two things most never like to discuss “church and politics” ironically end up being fundamental for every one of our lives. Government is for the present peace and good order in this world and the church for the eternal peace and promise in the life of the world to come. When Jesus encountered the political question about paying taxes, it fell during Holy week. Three days before His suffering and death the church and state, the Pharisees and Herodians, rose up against God’s Son. The answer Jesus gives has eternal weight for all to repent and believe in the Gospel. It was to cling to Him for He was going to pay the ultimate debt on the cross for a sinful world. You see, everything was at an all-time high in Jerusalem for both church and state. People filled the holy city to celebrate the Passover just as Roman authority had to increase its presence of power.

First, we notice that Jesus does not frown upon the face of politics. Even when the place for discussion of taxes was at the temple, He was not hesitant to speak. Here His enemies might have felt safe as if the ball was in their court. Here they could challenge Him to play on their terms. Everything came from strategy aligned by those who hated God’s Son. “The Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians…” The Pharisees, like any loyal Jew, despised the Herodians at the deepest level. They were supporters of the dynasty of Herod, which in turn supported the Roman Gentile suppression over the Jews. Yet, as the saying goes, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” As a result, their question came with a united front against a common threat, Jesus.

Approaching Jesus came not with swords and clubs like a few days later, but with compliments and friendliness designed to win him over. “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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” It seems innocent enough, almost as if they were desperate and need of help. Even what they said about Him was true, except they did leave out calling Him the Son of God. In the hands of these men, church and state were their own gods to serve selfish ambitions. A political question on taxes was not the problem. Governance is good and a gift open for discussion. Regardless of the methods, God still has His hands in all the nations. The problem then was in those positioning themselves against Christ and His Word. Their abuse of the Law was to silence the Gospel.

The political game going on was seeking to put Jesus to shame. There was no healthy desire to talk about church and state. Instead, they were trying to turn both against God’s Son. “Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?’” He exposed the trap knowing why they did what they did. As God, Jesus saw right through their devilish lie that looked so good. It was nothing new to Him. He faced this with the Devil while tempted in the wilderness. Behind these planners and their plotting was the true power at work. The Devil never wants anything good for the church or state as God sees it. Instead, the trap was to turn both against Christ. If He denied paying the tax to Caesar, the Herodians would hold Him a traitor to the powers of Rome. If He paid the tax to Caesar, the disciples of the Pharisees would hold Him a traitor to the Jews. These hypocrites had no less of a goal than the Devil, which was to do in Jesus.

The sad fact is opposing God’s Son is far from a few dishonest disciples. Plenty attention has been on the Ebola outbreak wondering what the government will do. Yet, at the same time, what happened last week over a non-discrimination ordinance can leave just as much to wonder. “The city of Houston has issued subpoenas demanding a group of pastors turn over any sermons dealing with homosexuality, gender identity or Annise Parker, the city’s first openly lesbian mayor.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The truth is government is merely a tool in the hands of sinners. We also know what it means to manipulate things for our advantage. Compliments are good, but we can use them for selfish reasons. Our influence in a relationship as husband or wife, employer or employee, or just a friend can turn into power over someone else. Even helping our neighbor can lead to holding him or her in debt to us. All of it dwells in our fallen sinful nature. The hypocrisy in our hearts and lives fails to love God and others more than ourselves.

Jesus ends the politics to render to God what is God’s, which is faith in Him. Those rebuked by the Law of “you hypocrites” also hear the Gospel. “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Asking for a coin diffused the trap by showing the image of Caesar. The fourth commandment meant obedience to his kingdom and paying tax to Rome despite the sinful Gentile ways. Behind any ruler is a promise from God. He told it to His people in Old Testament times under Cyrus a non-Israelite king. “…There is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.” Everyone is a citizen to some governance and it carries responsibility. There is plenty to debate over what good government is or how big it should be, but none goes without governance. That remains a gift of God for civil order and peace for life.

Rendering to kings and rulers come and go just as kingdoms rise and fall. However, no matter where a person lives, the second part of Jesus’ words stand out, “give to God the things that are God’s.” The false ways of men and their idols can never manipulate salvation with God by works. St. Paul boasted over the Thessalonians faith in the Gospel. “…How you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven…” Likewise, Luther tells us what true citizenship in the kingdom of Christ is by baptism. He states, “Our Lord God requires of us the vow to cling to Christ alone, to listen to no other word, and to accept no other belief than the gospel of Christ and believe in him.” (Postils Vol. 7 153). We are to receive the rich blessing of what Christ paid for us. The tax placed upon His suffering and death by the Father put on Him our sin and shame. By Holy Baptism, hearing sins forgiven and partaking of the Lord’s Supper His kingdom rises over all kingdoms removing sin, death, and the powers of the Devil.

The real rendering to God is Christ Jesus who lets us pass through things temporal to receive the things eternal. As is the fashion of the Gospel, “When they heard it, they marveled. And they left (Jesus) and went away.” Those sent to lay a trap were trapped to consider their own situation before God’s Son. The outcome was to repent and believe in the Gospel. Jesus could handle the government for He said to Pilate, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). However, the church belongs only to Christ for His sacrifice is the source of her life and salvation. This bride has traveled through many kingdoms of this world. She has faced many a conflict within her own courts. Yet, the Church remains because Christ has promised to be faithful saying, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). God grant you such faith worked by the Holy Spirit to receive the eternal gifts Christ won for us. The Gospel alone lets us “render to God’s the things that are God’s” which is faith in His Son and fervent love for one another. Amen. Now the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.

1. http://townhall.com/columnists/toddstarnes/2014/10/14/city-of-houston-demands-pastors-turn-over-sermons-n1905119 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)