

Twenty-Second Sunday in Pentecost
October 20, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

A Christian Lives in Two Kingdoms

1. Giving to Caesar what is Caesar's
2. Giving to God what is God's

Matthew 22:15-21

NIV Matthew 22:15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. 17 Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" 21 "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This fits well. Just as the 2002 political season here in California is winding its way to a November 5th culmination, our Gospel lesson today has Jesus answering a thorny political question. The question was, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" In the audience were some Pharisees, who tended to regard paying taxes to Rome as propping up an idolatrous regime. But also in the audience were Herodians, supporters of King Herod Antipas, who viewed the payment of taxes to Rome as an important element in maintaining a delicate political balance that had Herod ruling under Roman authority. Though the question, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" was prefaced by all sorts of flattering talk about Jesus' integrity and impartiality, it was also cunningly designed to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If Jesus said, "Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Caesar," then he would disappoint all those Jewish nationalists who hated paying taxes to Imperial Rome. On the other hand, if Jesus said, "No, you should not be paying taxes to Rome," he was sure to be viewed as a security threat by Herod and Pontius Pilate.

Jesus' famous answer, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," did more than show that he was able to think well on his feet. It also outlined for us a basic truth about our life as Christians in this world. Jesus shows here that we Christians live in two kingdoms. The one kingdom is political, the other is spiritual. The one is under the rule of law, the other is established and maintained by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus said it much more succinctly. By way of guidance for Christians living in a society made up of all sorts of religious beliefs, Jesus said: 1] Give to Caesar what is Caesar, and 2] Give to God what is God's.

1. Giving to Caesar what is Caesar's

When Jesus was asked, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" he asked for one of the coins used to pay the tax. They brought him a coin called a denarius, which had a value equivalent to a day's pay for the average worker. With the coin in hand, Jesus asked two questions. "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" The answer to both questions was the same: "Caesar's." This coin was stamped with an image of Tiberias Caesar and his name was inscribed on it. When he had the answer to his question, Jesus said simply, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's..."

What is Caesar's? To begin with, the tax money. That's the case because, as St. Paul teaches us in Romans 13, all governing authority is established by God. More than that, the government is God's agent to do us good. God wants to bring us blessings through our government by punishing wrongdoers and thereby preserving peace and order. Paul in Romans 13 actually calls the governing authorities "God's servants, who give their full time to governing." Since this is true, we are to give God's servants in the government what we owe them. Romans 13 again: "**If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.**" (Rom. 13:7) This held true when Paul wrote it and Nero, a wretched persecutor of Christians, was emperor of Rome as it was true when Tiberias Caesar was in power. It was true of Cyrus, the king of Persia, mentioned in today's Old Testament lesson, and it's true of our governing authorities today: the President, as well as our senators, congressmen, governor, and mayor. It's true whether we share their faith or not. It's true whether we share their political views or not. And it's even true whether we deem them to be competent and honest in carrying out their responsibilities or not. Jesus didn't attach any qualifications. He simply said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's."

One of the kingdoms, then, in which we Christians live is a political kingdom. And in this political kingdom, God himself has set authorities over us. Praise God for that! Without a functioning government, life would be a chaos of anarchy and violence. To protect the blessings of peace and order, God has given us the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother." As Dr. Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, this commandment requires not only that we honor, serve, and obey our parents, but *all those* in authority over us. We are not to dishonor or disobey any God-ordained authority. That means that any show of disrespect for our leaders, our flag, or the country for which it stands, is a sin. That also means that if we've ever lied on a tax return or understated our tax liability, we've sinned. Rationalizations about immoral or incompetent leaders or their unwise policies don't change anything. Jesus still says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." It's awfully hard to get around that.

We Americans have received a special blessing from God that wasn't much known in the world before 200 years ago. We live in a democracy, that is, we enjoy government of the people, by the people, for the people. We have a voice in choosing our governing authorities. We're free to select those whose announced policies we judge wisest and best, whether it has to do with fixing potholes or disarming rogue nations. We can even vote for someone who promises to work to institute policies that will curb our nation's drift toward open immorality, as long as we bear in mind that government is not in the

business of changing hearts. It can only prohibit and punish the external act. For us as Americans, then, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” is a call to be good citizens, obedient to the laws, respectful of governmental authorities, and to participate in the democratic process by casting our votes.

While this question about paying taxes guides us in living as Christians, it also tells us something important about Jesus. Actor Martin Sheen was interviewed by *Reader’s Digest* this past spring. The interview noted that Sheen is a Roman Catholic, who twenty years ago returned to active participation in his church. He said practicing his faith made his life more difficult. Asked why, he responded, “Because religion, if it’s real, can’t be a sometime thing. It can’t be a Sunday thing.” (So far, so good.) But then he said, “Christ was killed because—well, because he was a rebel. They didn’t kill him because he was a nice guy. He was a troublemaker. He was changing the law, the letter of the law...” (June 2002, page 86)

I disagree with Mr. Sheen. How was it rebellious to say, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”? Jesus didn’t come to change laws but to keep them—as we see here—even if it meant providing the monetary resources for a pagan emperor’s administration. Jesus didn’t plot a Bethlehem Tea Party. He didn’t organize a sit-in at the governor’s palace with protestors chanting, “No taxation without representation!” He obeyed the 4th Commandment. He told others to do the same. He said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” This is crucial. Because if Jesus was an authority-defying rebel, his death on the cross would have meant nothing more than the execution of Barabbas: just the death of one more failed insurrectionist. Jesus was not a rebel. The Bible never says that. It says he was obedient. Jesus himself said that he had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. (Matt. 5:17) In the chapter following this incident, Jesus urged his disciples to obey even the hypocritical teachers of the law and the Pharisees, the very people who were plotting his death. Why? Because they, too, derived their authority from God. It is not a rebel who is our Savior, but an obedient Servant. Jesus exchanged his obedience for our disobedience so that now, through faith in him, we meet the demands of God’s law.

In Jesus we have a perfect Savior. His life was perfect. Even his words were perfect. He gave the perfect answer to this delegation of detractors. There was no “deer in the headlights” look on his face. He didn’t, as some politicians do, talk for five minutes without ever answering the question. He did not evade or avoid or stumble. In fact, he gave such a perfect answer that the closing verse of this section says, “**When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.**” (Matt. 15:22)

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” is only half of Jesus’ answer, however. In the second part of his statement he said, “and (give) to God what is God’s.” Let’s look now at the second part.

2. Give to God what is God’s

When Jesus says, “and (give) to God what is God’s,” he is placing limits on the authority of government. Government’s sphere of authority is broadly spelled out in the Bible.

Government rules by law and by force to preserve peace and order and provide for the common defense. It was quite common in the ancient world, though, for governing authorities to attempt to acquire a far broader authority. For example, the Roman senate once voted to give Julius Caesar the status of a god. And it's quite possible that the coin handed to Jesus that day included not only the name of Tiberias Caesar, but also the title "Pontifex Maximus," which is Latin for "highest priest." History tells us that the Egyptians regarded their Pharaohs as deities. And we know from the Bible that Darius, king of Persia during the time of the prophet Daniel, once issued a decree that for thirty days no one could pray to any god but him.

When governing authorities require of us the worship that is reserved for God alone, or when they prohibit activities that God has commanded, or require of us what God has prohibited, then we must do as Daniel did and passively resist. Daniel didn't take up arms against Darius. He simply continued to pray to the true God as he always had, until it led to his arrest and his sentence to the lion's den.

Daniel's resistance to the command to commit idolatry came from the knowledge that he was the citizen of another kingdom, God's kingdom. We are, too. As believers in Jesus Christ, we chime right in when the apostle Paul says, "**But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring all things under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.**" (Php. 3:20-21) Our first loyalty is reserved for God, for our Lord Jesus Christ. And this doesn't have to be a conflict. Ideally, our Christianity will make us better citizens.

What does "Give to God what is God's" really mean? It means to recognize his authority as the Ruler of the Universe. It means to do him the high honor of believing what he says, that is, that we are sinners in need of a Savior, and that Jesus, his Son, is that Savior. It means professing our allegiance to Jesus verbally, but more than that, demonstrating our allegiance as we order our priorities and use the resources he has entrusted to us. It means that with our lips and with our lives we say as St. Paul once did, "**Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.**" (1 Tim. 1:17)

I want to be sure to say that the church has limits on its sphere of authority, too. The kingdom of God is established by the gospel, not by laws or force. When the Popes organized the Crusades, when the Spanish conquistadors attempted to convert Indians at the tip of a sword, or when we today try to force the use of prayers in public schools, we have lost sight of the fact that God has established two kingdoms, each with its proper sphere of authority and its appropriate tools.

This Gospel reading fits our situation beautifully. In the final countdown to Election Day, Jesus wants us to remember that we Christians live in two kingdoms. As believers in Jesus, we live in a kingdom of grace established by the gospel. The full blessedness of this kingdom will become apparent on the day Jesus returns and remembers us as his own. But here on earth we live in another kingdom, under governing authorities who rule

by law. When Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” he wanted us to be clear about the existence of these two kingdoms and live as his faithful followers in both. Amen.