

22nd Sunday after Pentecost – Year A
Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Matthew 22:15-22
Pastor Paul Horn

October 12, 2008

Faith

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and Give to God what is God's

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." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Only two things in life are certain: death and taxes. In last week's sermon we talked about how Jesus swallowed up death for us. Sometimes we wish he would swallow up our taxes. Since Jesus brings up the topic in the Gospel for this morning, let's talk about taxes today.

We know from history and from the Scriptures that the people of Palestine were farmers and ranchers. But today in the gospel from Matthew we observe a pack of Israelites as avid hunters. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the people of Israel, have determined that Jesus of Nazareth must be killed. They will set a trap. They will bait their prey with what they think will result in certain capture. This is actually a genius plan. They first enlist the help of the Herodians. This is an odd alliance. The Herodians and Pharisees hated each other. As a political party the Pharisees were ardent nationalists and opposed Roman rule. The Herodians supported the rule of the family of the Herods, which were established by the Romans. But both political parties had a common enemy; Jesus of Nazareth. The Pharisees were scared that their influence over the people would end if the Messianic Kingdom of Christ became a reality. The Herodians were apprehensive of the fall of their dynasty if the Messianic Kingdom of Christ became a reality. For these reasons they were willing to negotiate. But note that the Pharisees themselves do not go with the Herodians, for fear that they would be antagonized by the crowds. They send their disciples. Perhaps Jesus is more likely to be ensnared by one of their own who was not so well known to him.

This is where their scheme is so brilliant, "**Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?**" If Jesus answered yes, that the people of God owed tribute to a pagan ruler, Jesus' influence among the people would be a thing of the past. If Jesus were to answer no, the Herodians would immediately scuttle off to the governor. The governor would dispatch Roman soldiers who would arrest him, sentence him as a traitor of the state and have him promptly executed. Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians would look like the bad guys. This was a plot most cunningly concocted. They couldn't lose.

But with all their scheming they forgot one important factor. Jesus is the God-Man. Even while they were walking down the street toward him, he knew why they were coming, **“You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?”** And then he turns the question back on them, **“Show me the coin used for paying the tax. Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”** You can see the Herodians and the disciples of the Pharisees saying, “He wasn’t supposed to say that. What’s he doing? We didn’t plan for this?!” There is only one answer, **“Caesar’s.”** Jesus replies, **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”** Well played. The answer to their question was not an *either-or*, but a *both-and*. Jesus reminds the people that they are citizens of both the Church and the State. They ought to be willing to give both to Caesar what was due him as the lawful ruler and give to God what was due him; true hearts, true love, and all their fruits of faith which includes obedience to government.

Remember what Paul said in Romans 13? The Almighty God has established every government and has given the state its authority and power to carry out its various offices, which include the right to collect taxes. Paul shared these words with us this morning, **“It is necessary to submit to the authorities because of conscience.”** (Rom 13:5) Your conscience is not formed by your feelings towards government officials and their policies. Your conscience is held captive to the Word of God and is formed by the Word of God. We, therefore, will gladly pay our taxes because our King has told us to do so. And when we pay taxes we are ultimately giving to God what is God’s. Everything is his. Our money is not ours, it is God’s. One of ways he wants us to manage that money is to faithfully carry out our duty and pay our taxes with a cheerful heart.

But Pastor Horn! Politicians have demonstrated time and time again that they do not always have our best interests in mind. They think first of their pocket books and their political careers when they vote, not what we have asked them to do for us. Why should we be honest in paying our taxes when our city, our state and our federal government do not always use our money honestly? You said that we should joyfully pay our taxes?

This is not what I’ve asked you to do. This is what your King and Savior has commanded you to do. When we belittle God’s representatives, when we complain about our taxes, when we cheat on our taxes, we are cheating and dishonoring our King. You think it is difficult to pay the taxes you owe your government? What you and I owe our King in heaven is far greater. He commands us to be perfect as he is perfect (Matt 5:48). We cannot keep this simple command, **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”** That’s just one command... how many others have we failed to keep perfectly? Our debt to our King is great indeed.

Imagine that this past Friday your bank called you up and told you that because you have defaulted on all of your loans, they are coming to repossess everything next week. You spend the weekend ill, neither sleeping nor eating, wondering, “How am I going to get out of this one?” Imagine that tomorrow morning your phone rings. You look at the caller ID. It’s your bank. You gingerly pick up the phone, “Yes?” Your bank calls to

inform you that everything you currently owe on the appliances you had to finance, your vehicles and your home mortgage was paid for in full by an anonymous donor, and the benefactor is asking for nothing in return. The phone would probably fall from your hands. When you recovered from your shock and awe you would start jumping up and down for joy! My debt has been canceled! I am free!

How much greater is the debt we owe our Father for our poor attitudes toward the government which he established, for our disobedience to his command to render unto to Caesar what is Caesar's? Instead of forcing us to pay the debt, a benefactor paid that outstanding debt. Only he is not anonymous. He made himself known through his Son Jesus. He made his Son Jesus pay our debt. In Romans 8:32 the apostle Paul says, "**He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?**" In Matthew 17:24-27 we read an example of Jesus paying taxes. He did that perfectly, without complaining. He obeyed his Father's law perfectly for us. Instead of making us suffer an eternity in hell for our sins, he punished his Son with that debt. So great were the hell fires that Jesus suffered on our behalf that he cried out from the cross, "**My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?**" Christ Jesus' sufferings and death paid the debt you owed his Father. Through faith in his Son Jesus, the Father accepts the payment his Son has given to him on your behalf. Your debt has been canceled! There are no hidden charges or fees. There is no interest to pay. You are free!

Since you have been set free from the debt of sin and death, this is how your King wants you, his children, to live – to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Pay your taxes joyfully and without complaining.

If anyone had an excuse to dodge taxes and complain about taxes, it was the apostle Paul. In 52 A.D. taxes were collected by "tax farmers." They bought the right to collect taxes for the government. They had a set amount that was to be sent to the government, but they could collect as much as they could get away with. The tax you paid was only a percentage of what ended up in the government's hands. And, just like those Hagar the Horrible comic strip, the army literally stood behind them. Still more, the tax collected was used to pay the very officials and soldiers who arrested and executed Christians. However, God used the Roman government for his purposes. At that time in history the Roman government used taxes to pave roads all through the empire which made travel easy. Rome established the *Pax Romana*, the Peace of Rome. Travel was safe. Rome made Greek the universal language of her state. All of these contributed to a prime time in history for spreading the gospel.

We may see government use taxes in ways that offend and outrage us, used in ways that go contrary to God's Word. Some taxes pay for godless teaching as well as good teaching in public schools. Some taxes fund abortions, which is murder in God's eyes. Depending on how the November election goes, the way your tax money is used for abortions could be reduced or eliminated. If the other candidate gets elected, more money will be used for abortions. Some taxes support a justice system that is often

unjust. Paul gave no advice in his day about avoiding taxes, how could we possibly find an excuse? Taxes are used by the government for our benefit.

As Paul said in Romans 13, the state uses the sword to punish evildoers and to protect the state. Taxes pay for fire and police departments, military and homeland security. Taxes pay for laws that protect us; seat belt laws, speed limits, safety standards for buildings and food. Imagine if your taxes did not pay for those programs? Taxes pay for parks and recreation, sewer and water lines, pothole patching. When a Christian pays taxes he or she is supporting what God has given the government to do. And through the State, the Church benefits. Currently we as Christians in this country have freedom and safety to spread God's Word to the millions of unchurched people in our nation. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Because then you are giving to God what is God's.

Maybe you've heard about the new Field of Dreams under construction in Elizabethtown. This field will be a vast sports complex complete with football and soccer fields, softball and baseball diamonds. The city council in E-town passed a 2% restaurant tax to fund the construction. So if your bill at O-Charlie's is \$50, the tax will add an additional \$1. Not too bad. Maybe you've seen the opponents' yard signs, "Ax the Food Tax!" They argue that during these tough economic times this 2% tax is a burden to families. Those for the tax respond, "Then don't go out to eat so much!" Opponents argue that this Field of Dreams will not generate the revenue the county needs. To which the supporters say, "It's not built yet. Just wait." We know that no matter what our government decides to spend our money on, taxes are as certain as death. We as citizens of the State and the Church will pay our taxes cheerfully, faithfully and honestly. We will do this because Jesus paid the enormous debt we owed our Father. Out of thanksgiving we will joyfully follow his command and render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Amen.