

The 20th Sunday After Pentecost

October 18, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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SERMON by Pastor Zachary Johnson

The Pharisees and the chief priests wanted to arrest Jesus, for they feared his teachings and his followers would lead them to losing the power and wealth they had come to enjoy from Rome. So, being sly and crafty, the Pharisees and the chief priests sent some of their disciples to entrap Jesus by asking him a question.

They were going to ask Jesus whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. They knew that, if Jesus said “no” to their question, it would be treason and they could report him to the Roman authorities to be arrested. They also knew that, if Jesus said “yes” to their question, he would instantly lose favor with his followers, which would make it easier to arrest Jesus, for the Pharisees and the chief priests feared the crowds.

However, Jesus, being the Son of God, saw right through the deception of the Pharisees and the chief priests, and Jesus turns the question back on them in his own crafty way. Jesus asks



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them to show him the coin used to pay the taxes. Now, what is clever about this is the fact that, by showing Jesus the denarius used to pay taxes to the Roman emperor, the Pharisees and the chief priests are admitting to their hypocrisy. They are already paying taxes to the emperor, so they already know the answer to their own question!

But what is really interesting here is the fact that on one side of the coin is the face of the emperor; on the other side of the coin is a picture of the imperial mother Livia as the goddess of peace. By using this coin to pay taxes to the emperor, the Pharisees and the chief priests are acknowledging the Roman emperor's claim to both political and religious power.

But the point that Jesus is trying to make has nothing to do with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the chief priests; nor, as western theology has mistaken this passage many times, is Jesus trying to tell us whether or not it is a Christian principle to pay taxes. Rather, what Jesus is pointing out to the disciples of the Pharisees and the chief priests, as well as us, is the understanding of who is the true ruler of the world. In other words, Jesus is subtly taking a political stance in claiming that the person who has the true power in this world is God. This is what Jesus means when he says: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

This is a good message for us to hear, for I feel that sometimes we as a society, and as individuals, like the Pharisees and the chief priests, place our loyalty with things that are not God. That is to say, we are more loyal to false, earthly powers than we are to God.

It is not hard to look around our society today and see that this is indeed true. When I see people in the stands at college and NFL football games not practicing social distance and not wearing masks, I wonder whether or not these people care more about their team winning than the wellbeing of others. The same rings true when I see news stories about people protesting having to wear masks in public.

Then there is the way that Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives have treated each other over the past several years. It has gotten to the point where if someone doesn't agree with our political views, we immediately see them as the enemy, someone we can no longer affiliate with, and in extreme cases, someone whom we need to hate. Because of this behavior, people begin to internalize the criticism of the candidate they voted for, or party they support, as a personal attack on themselves. It is amazing to me how quickly people will react with anger and hostility towards others who say anything critical about the candidate or party they support.



I will also admit that, as a pastor, I'm rather tired of being accused of siding with any specific party because of how I teach and preach the gospel. We can see through this text that Jesus was indeed political, but he wasn't partisan. The whole Bible is political, but it is not partisan. I have seen it many times in this country where both Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, have tried to claim that if Jesus were alive today, he would be a member of their party. Yet, if Jesus were alive today, I'm sure he would say: "Vote Republican if you want to, or vote Democrat if you want to, but give to God the things that are God's." In other words, Jesus would say, "My loyalty is to God and God alone." As Christians, our loyalty should be to God first and foremost.

What Jesus cares about is what he proclaims to the Pharisee who is a lawyer later on in chapter 22, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' And a second like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" That is Jesus' political alignment. Any action that leads to loving God and loving neighbor - which includes the stranger, the foreigner, the poor, the needy, the weak, and the oppressed - is what Jesus cares about and stands for. Jesus' loyalty is to God, which is carried out through these two commandments. And Jesus proves this to us through the cross.

Jesus' willingness to die on the cross shows us that he loves God by being obedient to the act of dying on the cross. It also shows us his love for neighbor, for dying on the cross is what has assured us that nothing will separate us from God's love. Jesus died on the cross to show us how far his love will go for all of humanity.

Of course, what is even more good news is the fact that this ultimate act of love and loyalty has now freed us to be loyal to God above all else. It has freed us to be loyal to God through actions that love God and love neighbor. As we can understand when we read through the Bible, God cares much for the poor, the weak, the outcast, the oppressed, anyone who is suffering because they are being rejected by human neglect. We can also understand that God chooses to include us, the Church, all members of the body of Christ, to be God's hands and to help God do the work of healing, forgiving, redeeming, and advocating for all people so that all human beings can live and thrive and so that all human beings can come to see that their life is a gift and blessing from God.

Unfortunately, our loyalty to things other than God is the way evil and sin try and prevent us from loving God and loving our neighbor. It happens when we allow political parties, governing bodies, laws and policies, sport's teams, cults, organizations, commercialism and



consumerism, profit margins, and even religion to become our idols, switching our loyalty away from God.

Thankfully, Jesus grants us many means of grace through worship, Bible study, Christian education, prayer, and other rituals that remind us that we belong to God, that we are God's beloved and that we have been freed to turn our loyalty back to God, where we will prove it through actions that love God and love neighbor.

We, as Christians, need to remember that Jesus' message to us today is to remind us that God is the true ruler of this world. This means that our Christian mission is free to be focused on loving God and loving neighbor. Jesus' message to us today is confirmation that loving neighbor, which includes advocating for change that allows all groups of people to live and thrive, is showing that we confess that God is the true ruling power in this world. So, where do your loyalties lie?

Amen.



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