

October 12, 2008
Pentecost 23

"Giving to Your Government and To God"

MATTHEW 22:15-21

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."

Have you ever had to trap a mouse that took up residence in your garage or maybe even your house? A mouse trap such as this works quite well indeed. Put a little cheese or peanut butter on the trigger, set the trap and wait for the mouse to get caught.

In the words just read to you, we see religious leaders gathered in Jerusalem and setting a trap for Jesus, a trap based on the baited or loaded political question, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If Jesus said "Yes, we should pay taxes," then they could accuse him of favoring the Roman government over the nation of Israel. If he said, "No we should not pay taxes," they could tell the Roman government he was creating an uprising against Rome by telling people not to pay their taxes. What did Jesus do with this trap? He disarmed it, just as I can take a stick and disarm this mousetrap. Jesus snapped the trap with these well known words, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what is God's."

Have you ever heard someone sanctimoniously say "There are two things I never talk about and that is religion and politics?" Is talking about religion something bad, especially about Jesus as the only way that people can be saved? And is it really so bad to talk about government and about elections and who we think is best for leading our country. Let's listen to Jesus speak to us about "Giving to Caesar and Giving to God."

Giving to Caesar

How could anyone suggest that people living at the time of Jesus should give taxes and respect to the Roman government? Didn't the Romans enslave people and hang them on crosses if they tried to escape? The Pharisees used this deep seated hatred against the Romans to set a trap for Jesus. They even joined forces with the Herodians who were their political enemies to help them set this trap. It was Shakespeare who said, "Politics makes strange bedfellows." Their common bond of hatred led them to work together to set this trap for Jesus.

They come to Jesus and butter him up with flattering words. "Teacher we know that 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." What they said about Jesus was really true. He did not change his message to appeal to the crowds and win their favor as we see politicians and even pastors do today. Now they set the trap for Jesus. They must have had a hard time speaking these words without showing a smirk on their faces. "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" People in those days did not like paying taxes because they were often overcharged by the Roman government. Then there was the nasty surcharge the tax collectors added for collecting taxes. It made them sick to their stomachs to think their hard-earned money was being used to support a heathen empire like Rome and an emperor who had the audacity to say that he was a god.

Jesus did not walk into the trap. Instead he snaps the trap and makes it harmless by first calling these people hypocrites. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be your friend and shakes your hand with his right hand, but then uses his left hand to stab you. Jesus had the ability to look behind the friendly faces and see the evil that was lurking in their sinister hearts.

Then Jesus asked for a coin. "Show me the coin used for paying the tax." Someone reached into their pocket and pulled out a denarius, the coin that was used to pay the taxes to the Romans, worth about a day's wage in those days. "Whose image is on the coin?" Jesus asked. Without missing a beat they replied, "Caesar's." There it was, the image of Tiberius Caesar stamped on the coin. Some of the coins even had the words in Latin, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." They were carrying coins in their pockets with the image of the emperor and with the words that proclaimed him as a god.

Are you carrying some money in your pocket today? The very fact we carry money in our pockets that is printed by the United States of America shows that we depend on our government to run the affairs of our country and keep peace and order in the land. We depend on our armed forces to protect our country in time of war. We depend on the government to provide us with an infrastructure that provides us with water, roads, sewers, libraries, parks.... Even if the government is totally pagan and corrupted, it is still a blessing for us when it seeks to rule the country instead of allowing anarchy to prevail. Remember the sad scene after the devastating flooding in New Orleans after Katrina. People went crazy as they stole whatever they could from flooded stores. Jesus said we should give the government what it deserves and needs because it watches over us.

Let's look more closely at what Paul tells us in Romans 13 about our duty to pay taxes and support our government. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." The system of government has been established by God as an order in society just as the system of marriage and family has been established by God. If you read more from Romans 13 you hear God's Word tell you that it is your responsibility to pay taxes. "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing." If the State of California raises the sales tax to 20% to cover its deficits, and if the federal government doubles the amount of money you need to pay in income tax to cover all the bailouts, the war, and the massive spending programs, we will have to follow God's Word and pay the taxes that are required. It is only when the government asks us to disobey God that we are required to obey the Lord first.

In the United States of America we have a unique opportunity to show our respect for our government by voting for our leaders, even the top leaders in our land, including the president of the United States. If we are tired of paying higher taxes, we can vote for a leader who will lower taxes, or if we want to pay more taxes to help our ailing economy we can vote for a candidate who will raise our taxes. We can vote for candidates who will govern wisely, who will protect our people in time of war, who will govern in righteousness by following the natural law the Lord puts in every conscience.

Respecting the Lord

Dear Christians, as you vote this fall, remember that you also citizens of the kingdom of God. As citizens of his kingdom, Jesus urges us to, "Give to God what is God's." Jesus tried to explain to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate that his kingdom was not part of this world in John 19, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." Then he explained to Pilate, "You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me." We listen first to the voice of Jesus. In John 10 King Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep to rescue them and make them part of his kingdom. He also said, "My sheep listen to my voice: I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." The words Jesus speaks to you change your life, draw you close to him, and even help you to make the right decisions when you cast your ballot in November.

I became a citizen of the United States when I was born at St Mary's Hospital in Watertown, Wisconsin on August 29, 1947. I was born into this world as a child of darkness, someone dead in trespasses and sin, without hope and without God, a stranger and foreigner to God as Ephesians 2 tells us. But then a miracle happened in my life when Pastor Otto Pagels placed water on my head in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through the blessing of Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit had me born again into a new kingdom with Jesus as my Savior. Listen to how your citizenship and my citizenship is described in Ephesians 2, "Consequently you are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." In Philippians 3 we are told, "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 they will be like his glorious body."

If the earthy kingdom in which I am living, the United States of America, has a leader or governor who tells me to go contrary to God's Word, then I must say to the government: "My first allegiance and loyalty is to King Jesus. The Lord is my Shepherd and I listen to his voice first." If some day because of advanced research in genetics, the government tells you that you must destroy a baby in the womb, because it has genetic disposition to heart problems or other diseases, you will have to stand up to the government and risk a fine or imprisonment because you listen to King Jesus first. The midwives in Egypt protected babies from being killed by the king of Egypt. If the government says that we must destroy all the people in Mexico to keep them from coming across our border, we will have to stand up to the evil government just as Lutheran ministers did in Germany during WW2 and found themselves in prisons such as Dachau. We give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and we give to God what belongs to God.

Martin Luther confessed in his *Small Catechism*, "Christ has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from sin, death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death. That I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." We live under Jesus in his kingdom. This is another week to serve Jesus in his kingdom by honoring our government with our respect, our prayers and our best efforts to vote for people and propositions that best serve our country. "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what is God's. Amen.