

## “IT’S A TRAP!”

Matthew 22:15-22

Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity (OT: First Series; NT: Series I)/Reformation Sunday  
October 30, 2016

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 22, verses 15 through 22. It is on page 699 of the pew Bible.

In this gospel lesson, Jesus’ opponents ask him a question about taxes, and Jesus gives them an answer. But the question was not really about taxes. It was a trap.

Please stand for the gospel. From Matthew 22, we begin reading at verse 15.

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, **“Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin for the tax.”** And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> And Jesus said to them, **“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”** <sup>21</sup> 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.”** <sup>22</sup> When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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This trap took place on Tuesday of Holy Week. It was three days before Good Friday, the day on which the Son of God offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

The leaders of the Jews had already determined that Jesus should die. Some were afraid that Jesus would incite a rebellion against Rome. Then the Romans would come in and take away what little power the Jewish leaders had (John 11:47-53). Others were simply jealous of Jesus. They agreed that Jesus must die; they just needed an excuse.

So they made a plan. They wanted to catch Jesus in his words. So they sent their spies, along with some Herodians—that is, servants of King Herod—to try to get Jesus to say something incriminating.

First they flatter him, 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” (22:16). They want Jesus to let his guard down, and then they try to trap him: “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (22:17)

This was a trap. If Jesus says, “Yes,” he would anger the Jewish people. Historians estimate that at this time Jewish families were paying about 50% of their income to taxes. These taxes were not being spent to build up the glory of Israel or help their poor. The taxes were being shipped off to Rome. The taxes paid for building up the glory of Rome and paying their massive armies. The Jewish people were not happy about this. They considered it unfair, even unlawful. So if Jesus says, “Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,” he will anger the people.

## “IT’S A TRAP!” (Matthew 22:15-22)

But if Jesus says, “No,” he will anger the government. That’s why the Pharisees’ spies brought some of King Herod’s people. King Herod was a puppet ruler in northern Israel. He really served Caesar. So if Jesus answers, “No,” the Herodians will arrest Jesus and hopefully execute him.

So the Pharisees try to trap Jesus with this question. But Jesus is wisdom incarnate. He sees right through their plan, and he calls them hypocrites. He asks them for a coin. They bring it to him,

“and Jesus says to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They say, ‘Caesar’s.’ Then he says to them, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.” (22:20-22)

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So Jesus says, “Render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, and to God the things that belong to God.” Or to translate it into Americanese, we could say, “Render to Uncle Sam the things that are Uncle Sam’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Dear Christian saints, you and I are members of two kingdoms. Most, if not all of us, are citizens of the United States of America. And if you’re not a citizen of the United States, you are probably a citizen of some other nation, like Norway or China or Antarctica or whatever. This election season, some of you might wish you were citizens of Antarctica. But you’re not. Most, if not all of us, are citizens of the United States of America.

You and I are citizens of this earthly kingdom. But we are also citizens of another kingdom. This morning’s reading from Philippians taught us that our citizenship is in heaven (3:20). And, while this is certainly true, it does not mean we cease to be citizens of the United States of America. Being citizens of heaven does not remove us from our earthly kingdoms. As baptized believers in Jesus Christ, we have dual citizenship.

This is kind of cool. It means we enjoy all the benefits and blessings of both kingdoms. But it also means we have *obligations* to both kingdoms. So Jesus says, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

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In the context of this passage, Jesus’ instructions have to do with paying taxes. And I realize this might not be your favorite subject, but Jesus’ instructions are quite clear. And the application to our present day is pretty easy. In nine days we are going to elect a new president, a senator, a representative, and various state officers. And whether you like the results of the election or not, you still have to pay your taxes. This is one of the things Uncle Sam requires of you.

When the election results come out, some of us will be satisfied, and some of us will not. But however the election comes out, we are bound by Scripture to consider our elected officials as God’s appointments. Let me say that again, because it’s a bit of a shock, but it’s also true: *We are bound by Scripture to consider our elected officials as God’s appointments.*

Some of us will have a hard time believing that Donald is appointed by God. Some of us will have a hard time believing that Hillary is appointed by God. But it looks like one of them will be president. And we as Christians will be bound by Scripture to consider them, as well as the rest of our governing officials, as God’s appointments.

## “IT’S A TRAP!” (Matthew 22:15-22)

I am sure the Christians in Rome had a hard time believing that Emperor Nero was appointed by God. After all, one of his hobbies was killing Christians. He was a very bad man. And yet, while he was emperor in Rome, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome and said,

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ... He is the servant of God. ... For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God. ... Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” (Rom. 13:1-2, 4, 6-7)

Now, I suspect some of you might have a problem with this idea. It is probably true that at various times, every single one of us has a problem with this. Nobody wants to give respect to people we disagree with, or maybe even consider evil. And yet, that is exactly what God’s Word *requires* us to do. And we don’t like it.

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But we should really think of this as a comforting teaching.

Let me explain. As Christians we live in two kingdoms. The first of these kingdoms we call the Church. And who is the king in the Church? Well, it’s Jesus of course. And how does Jesus reign in the Church? He uses his Word and the Sacraments. He uses these means to serve us his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. And this is very good.

And the second of these kingdoms we call the state. It could be the United States or Canada or Antarctica or whatever. It doesn’t matter. We call it the kingdom of the state. And who is the king of the state? Well, it’s Jesus again, “For God has put all things in subjection under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:27). And “all things” really does mean “all things.” Jesus reigns over all the nations of the world *right now*. And how does he reign in the state? He uses sinful people who may not even believe in him. He uses these means to serve us his gifts of justice, peace, and protection. And this, also, is very good.

So this ought to be a very comforting teaching, because, as we look around our society, our nation, and our world, we can become very discouraged. But we take comfort knowing that all of these rulers are appointed by God. And if he has appointed them, he can get rid of them, and he can set limits to the evil they can do. And he does. We have no idea what evils would fill this world if not for the limits God has set.

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As citizens of the state, we enjoy the gifts God gives to us through the state. But it also means we have obligations to the state.

So, “**Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.**” For us, this might mean 10, 20, or even 30% of our paychecks. But it also means obedience, loyalty, honor, and respect, even to men and women we may disagree with.

And one of the things our nation asks us to render is our votes. I hope that sometime in the next nine days, as many of you as are able to do so will exercise your right to vote. Now, I’m not going to tell you what bubbles to fill in on your ballot, because that’s not my job, and I don’t have the qualifications to evaluate political candidates. But I am going to tell you who to vote

*for*, because the Scriptures do give us direction in this respect, and teaching the Scriptures is my job.

So here is the best biblical advice I can give you when you vote: And I’m borrowing this from another pastor by the name of Ken Schurb. Here’s his biblical advice: Don’t vote for ... yourself; vote for ... your neighbor. Here’s what I mean: when you go to the polls, don’t just think about the candidates, think about who you are going to vote *for*. Think about who your vote is going to *benefit*. When you cast your vote, do it *for* your neighbor. If you are a parent, how can you vote *for* your children? Look around our society—our city, our state, our nation, even the world. Who do you see in need? Who can you help with your vote? When you vote, do not serve yourself. Instead, use your vote to serve your country and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

Suppose a candidate ran for office on the platform of free tacos for white males between the ages of 32 and 34 who work in the field of religious services. Would it be right for me to vote for such a candidate? No, of course not. I might want to, but it would be unfair to ... pretty much everybody else.

But suppose a candidate runs on the platform of protecting unborn children. That is a candidate I should vote for.

As Christians, we should see our votes, not as an opportunity to serve ourselves, but to love our neighbor. So, think about your children, your parents, the low-income widow next door, the refugee, the unborn child, and many others. How can you cast a ballot *for* them?

At first this sounds simple, but if you think about it very long, you will discover it can be quite complicated. Your vote may help one person, but it may be unfair to another. There is no perfect sequence of bubbles to fill in that will fix the world, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to do something. So when you vote, think about who has the greatest need, and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is how you can fulfill your obligation to the state, while also being obedient to God.

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So Jesus says, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” But that’s only half of it. And it’s not even the most important half. He adds, “And [render] to God, the things that are God’s.”

Taxes might belong to Caesar or Uncle Sam or whoever, but what belongs to God? Everything, right? All of creation belongs to God. So when Jesus says, “[Render] to God the things that are God’s,” what is he talking about? He’s talking about everything—not just money, but our entire being! Our eyes, ears, hands, heart, soul, and mind—all of it should be used to love God and serve our neighbors.

But I am selfish. What can I actually render back to God? This wicked heart? This corrupted soul? This sinful mind? Some half-hearted, self-serving obedience?

How about you? What can you render back to God? Everything? Perhaps you can do better than me, but you can’t give perfect obedience. You can’t give everything. God demands righteousness, and we don’t have enough to give.

To put it in financial and political terms, we are spiritually bankrupt, and we can’t pay our divine taxes.

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And that’s why the context of this gospel lesson is so important. Remember, it’s Tuesday of Holy Week, just three days before Jesus will render the ultimate payment, both to Caesar and to God. The Jewish leaders are trying to trap Jesus and have him executed. But Jesus does not fall for the trap, simply because no one will take his life from him. He will lay it down of his own accord. It will be a willing payment.

Jesus submitted himself to be arrested, put on trial, and even executed. And who executed him? The Jewish leaders wanted him dead, but they did not have the authority to do it. They were not the government. It was Rome. Pontius Pilate—the representative for Tiberius Caesar—is the one who sentenced Jesus to die. But it was not because of Jesus’ views on taxes. Jesus taught submission to the government. And he practiced what he preached.

While Caesar merely required *taxes* from his other subjects, he required *blood* from Jesus. And that is what Jesus gave him. Jesus submitted to his government’s right to kill him.

When you think about it, this was greatest example of government overreach you could ever imagine. Governments have the right to do a lot of things. But none of them have the right to kill God. But that is what Rome did. That is what Jesus let them do.

They had no incriminating charges—only that Jesus claimed to be God, which isn’t a crime, especially if it’s true. But that’s what they hung him for. They knew he was an innocent man, and they killed him anyway.

This is the most evil thing a government can do, and governments do a lot of evil things. The most evil thing a government can do is kill an innocent person, especially when that innocent person is God himself. And Jesus submitted to it. He rendered to Caesar his very life.

But who was really in control? Who was behind it all? Was it Pontius Pilate? Was it Tiberius Caesar? No. It was God. God was reigning through this evil act by the Roman government to bring salvation to the world.

Jesus submitted to death, because he was not merely rendering to Caesar what he required, he was rendering to God what he required—a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. He rendered to God the righteousness that we are unable to. He rendered to God the innocent blood that we do not have. He rendered his life back to the Father, entrusting the Father to raise him from the dead. And so our debts—our divine taxes—are paid by God himself.

Jesus rendered to Caesar what Caesar required, and to God what God required. And so we are saved. Amen

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The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14). Amen.