

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity, October 24, 2010

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Hymns: 575, 577, 578, 580, 584.

Lessons: Malachi 3:14-18, Romans 13: 1-7, Luke 20: 19-26.

Sermon Text: Matthew 22: 15-21.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In a week and a half we have the privilege of electing leaders who will guide the course of our nation for the next 2 and more years. Especially this election year there is a great deal of discussion about taxes. Today, let's see what the Word of God has to say about

CHURCH AND STATE AND THE PAYING OF TAXES

- 1. The nation Jesus lived in, where opinions were more important than What God Says.**
- 2. Is it right to pay taxes or not? Jesus' answer amazed those who asked him.**
- 3. *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."***

Let's talk about the political situation when Jesus was asked this question. The Jews were no longer a self-governing nation. Of course, the idea of governing themselves really wasn't totally correct, because God was ruling them – at least he gave them all the laws and opportunities for guiding their nation. But they neglected and ignored what God had given them and made most of their own rules. This is evident from the Jewish tradition that endures to this day of rabbis – teachers – interpreting what the Old Testament says, often giving differing opinions and in effect, giving people a choice of how to live. To this day, according to many, many people, not just Jews, all explanations of God's inspired Holy Word are often "just your own interpretation". The Rabbinical tradition has volumes of opinion after opinion, almost as if it were 'your choice' of the answer. Which of us hasn't heard of or even met people who shop around for a church or a minister or priest who offers opinions they like. One such personal experience was of a Roman Catholic husband and wife in the 1970s who looked for a parish which had a priest who accepted their own views rather than the hard line of the Pope on birth control. How many people don't seek to find another minister who is more friendly to their own opinions!

The Jews were now ruled by the Romans, who had put a figure-head of a king in place from the family of Herod. Herod the Great had been king at the time of Jesus' birth a little more than 30 years previously. Members of his dynasty were still ruling at this time. On this day, two groups of prominent Jews joined together to trap Jesus in his words, seeking to get him to say something that would either cause the common people to hate him or get him in trouble with the government of the Romans. There is an old saying that politics makes strange bedfellows. Here the Pharisees and the Herodians display a common hatred for Jesus that overcomes their disagreements with each other. The Pharisees were considered ardent nationalists who opposed Roman rule and despised the Herodians because of their cooperation with the Roman government. The Herodians, started in the time of Herod the Great, were similar to the Sadducees in that they didn't believe in the resurrection, but were more strongly political in organization and their earthly goals. They wanted a national kingdom under a king from the family of Herod. These two groups were the men of learning, wealth, and influence.

So if Jesus were to tell people not to pay taxes to Rome, the Herodians will report him to Pontius Pilate and have him executed for treason. And if Jesus tells people to pay taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees will spread the word that Jesus is unpatriotic to the Jewish nation.

They tried flattery but Jesus saw through their words to their real intent. *"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. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* Interestingly enough, their flattery was true: Jesus was not swayed by anyone. This question was carefully crafted to trap him in his words. These were people who wanted to get rid of Jesus. He was becoming too much of a thorn in their side. But at God's right time, Jesus would be executed. That was part of God's plan for the redemption of all mankind from sin. It was essential that humans – or at least a human – be punished for the sins of humans. And Jesus was a human –born of the Virgin Mary – who would suffer for all the sins of all humans. That was God's plan. But Jesus wades right into the trap they set. He answers bluntly. *"Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, 'You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.'"*

The question was asked as though it were innocent and harmless. Both yes and no answers had their pitfalls. But Jesus very dramatically gives a correct answer. Jesus distinguishes between what we owe to the government and what we owe to God. Jesus says *"Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'"*

The picture on the coin is that of Caesar, just like the image on most of our coins and paper money is that of presidents. The inscription read "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus". The Roman emperor thought himself to be descended from some god or gods. Jesus correctly points out that we are to give to Caesar – to the government – what rightfully belongs to the government and that we are to give to God what rightfully belongs to God. But when he was brought before Pontius Pilate he was wrongly accused of forbidding to give tribute to Caesar. At that time, the leaders of the Jews *"began to accuse him, saying, 'We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.'"* (Luke 23:2)

He had just claimed to be the Son of God before the leaders of the Jews, and they had solid grounds from their religious point of view to condemn him. But they knew if they accused him of religious wrong-doing in a civil court, they would be thrown out of court. So they falsely accused him of forbidding payment of taxes to Caesar. That was one factor that led to his crucifixion. But we know a greater factor: sin, specifically, our sins. It is our sins that sent Jesus to the Cross, and he went willingly. Because he loved us he paid for our sins, and rose again the third day so that all who believe he is the Savior from sin will receive eternal life. That fact alone is far more valuable than all the wealth and power in the world!

But on this occasion, Jesus' answer amazed them: *"When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away."* They had to find some other way to entangle him in his words, but it wouldn't happen. He willingly gave up his life for us.

In our text for today he correctly gives the answer of this question for all time about whether we should pay taxes: *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

God's people should above all give to God due honor and obedience. In those things which concern the Word of God, worship itself, faith, and conscience, we are obedient only to God and pay no attention to objections made by men. Where God speaks, we follow God and confess our faith. Peter couldn't put it any more clearly than when he and the other apostles were commanded not to teach in the name of Jesus. They replied: *"We must obey God rather than men!"* (Acts 5:29)

But in mere temporal, earthly things, which concern laws of the land, money, possessions, body, life, we obey the government of the country in which we live.

With these words Jesus also confirms what has been called "the temporal sword". The government bears the sword so that they might make human beings out of wild beasts and keep human beings from turning into wild beasts, to paraphrase Luther. They hoped He would condemn government and talk against it; but He does nothing of the kind. He recognizes the sphere and role of worldly government and commands that men should give to it what pertains to it. In this way he confirms God's will that there should be government, and leaders in government, to whom we should be obedient, regardless of whoever they are and whatever they want to do.

We must recognize the proper role of the government, for St. Paul wrote in our epistle lesson: *"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has*

established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." Romans 13:1. Even if we are abused by government leaders, we may speak against them, but must still obey and also remember that all things work for the good of believers.

But, as Luther wrote: what if they should want to take the Gospel from us, or prohibit its preaching? Then we must say: The Gospel and the Word of God I will not give you, nor do you have any power concerning that; for your government is a temporal government over earthly matters, but the Gospel is a spiritual, heavenly possession; therefore your power does not extend over the Gospel and the Word of God. ***"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."*** (1 Corinthians 1:18) We cannot and dare not yield the Gospel or the Word of God. To God pertains His honor, that I believe Him to be the true, almighty, and wise God, and confess that He is the Author of everything good. But to the government is due fear, custom, tribute, tax, and obedience. God wants the heart; the body and goods are under the government, over which it should rule in the stead of God. So Jesus recognizes and praises earthly government.

In our nation we will soon have the opportunity to elect government leaders for our nation, our state, our counties and cities. Many preachers in our nation would gladly tell you whom to vote for. I will not. I will tell you that you that Christians should want to vote for those who will promote God's interests and values. I will tell you that you should want to vote for those who will uphold principles and support policies which are in agreement with God's holy Word. It is God's will that all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. We still have the freedom to proclaim that message. It is not God's will, for one example, that all in our land or in our schools join in prayer. It is God's will that life is sacred, from the very moment in which I was conceived. Because we are God's called children, it is God's will that all believers should ***"let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*** (Matthew 5:16) So your vote is important in wanting to choose God-fearing leaders who will seek to govern in conformity with God's will.

But remember that the church is not to rule the state, nor is the state to rule the church. Instead the church is to pray for the state and all who govern, as we read in 1 Timothy 2:1-6: ***"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men"***

And finally, we must remember Peter's words: ***"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."*** (1 Peter 2:11-17) May God preserve unto us this blessed separation of church and state, where government is given what is due to it, and God is given what is due to Him. Amen.