

The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity – Pr. Faugstad sermon
St. Matthew 22:15-22: “We Give to Caesar out of Love for Christ.”
November 11/12, 2023 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Everlasting and merciful God, let Your protecting hand be over our country and over all who travel. Prosper what is good among us and bring to naught every evil counsel and purpose. Protect and bless Your servants, the President of the United States, the Governor of this state, our judges and magistrates and all in authority. Fit them for their high calling by the gift of Your Spirit of wisdom and fear, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, p. 48)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the twenty-second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus’ name:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle [Jesus] in His words. 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. Tell us, then, what You think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” / But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put Me to the test, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin for the tax.” And they brought Him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” / 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.” / When they heard it, they marveled. And they left Him and went away. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who reigns in power over all things in heaven and on earth, and who shares His righteousness and glory with us sinners, dear fellow redeemed:

Jesus called the people who tried to trick Him “*hypocrites*.” Our English word comes right from the Greek word: *hypocritai*. The word literally means “play-actors,” people who play the part of someone else, who pretend to be something they are not. These people pretended to be friendly toward Jesus, admirers of His. They pretended to be on His side, but they were actually opposed to Him. They didn’t really care about truth. They cared about maintaining the influence they had in society.

That sounds like the way some government officials operate today. They pretend to care about their community. They claim to stand for higher principles. They use flattery to win people over to their side. It doesn’t matter where you stand politically. Each of us can think of politicians who fit this description. They are *hypocritai* – play-actors, pretenders – people who pursue their own interests above all else.

We certainly wouldn't expect God to tell us to respect people like these. By their selfish actions, they should be disqualified. We shouldn't have to give them any obedience or honor. But that is not what Jesus teaches in today's reading. Without saying anything about Caesar's worthiness to demand or receive tax money, Jesus said, *"render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."* In other words, "Honor the ruler. Follow the law. Pay your taxes."

Jesus is teaching us about authority. We need this lesson, because all of us are inclined to want things our own way. That is the old Adam in us: "I don't care if God told me to stay away from this fruit. I'm going to eat it!" Each of us can think of examples from our childhood when we disobeyed our parents, because we didn't want to do what they said. Or maybe when we were older we talked back to a teacher, a boss, or a police officer. We might have felt strong in our defiance, but we learned that the consequences for actions like these are often unpleasant.

The apostles sent out by Jesus taught this same respect for authority. The apostle Paul wrote: *"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.... Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor"* (Rom. 13:1,7, NKJV). The apostle Peter said much the same thing: *"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors"* (1Pe. 2:13-14a, NKJV).

What is remarkable about these statements is that they were made at a time when the Roman officials were not friendly toward Christianity. Christians were persecuted, not because they refused to pay their taxes or obey civil laws, but because they would not regard the emperor as divine, as a god. Even at this time of unjust persecution, the apostles said, "Respect the authorities." But why? Why is it so important to respect those who are not respectable, to honor those who are not honorable?

If you only respected the people you thought deserved it, what would your relationship with your parents have been like when you were younger? Did you always feel like your parents deserved your respect? Of course not! A lot of the time, you probably thought their perspective on things was unreasonable, mean, or just plain dumb. Why couldn't they just trust you to make your own choices? It's not like you were going to go commit crimes or anything!

But as you got older, you realized that your parents maybe weren't so crazy after all. It's like the son who as a teenager thought his dad was not too bright, but then couldn't believe how much smarter his dad had gotten just a decade later! As we get older and wiser, we can see why our parents didn't let us do everything we wanted. They were trying to protect us from bad choices, from situations that we weren't mature enough to handle. Far from being unable to understand, they understood well the challenges we were up against.

This is why God gives us governing authorities in the home, the church, and society. It is to maintain order, so that everyone does not do whatever he feels like doing. And it is to protect us from harm, so that we are free to pursue what is good. Paul writes that this is why we pray for the authorities, *"that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence"* (1Ti. 2:2, NKJV).

But what if the authorities want to take away our peace? What if they frown on our godliness and reverence toward God and act like our enemies? This happens when government officials forget who gave them their authority, when they act like there is no authority higher than their own. Jesus reminded Pilate about this when Pilate wasn't getting the answers he wanted. Pilate said to Jesus, *"Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?"* And Jesus replied, *"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above"* (Joh. 19:10,11).

All authority comes from God who is the ultimate authority. That is why we honor our earthly authorities. We honor them because *"there is no authority except from God."* We honor them *"for the Lord's sake."* We honor them because God put them in their position for His purposes—purposes that may or may not ever become clear to us.

Now that does not mean we have no recourse if the authorities act wickedly or unjustly. In our country, we have the freedom to vote against any current office holders and to vote for other candidates. We can also challenge the decisions of the officials through our freedom of speech or through the court system. These are rights we are granted by the constitution as citizens of this nation.

At the same time, the Word of God cautions us against putting too much hope in government officials. Psalm 146 says, *"Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish"* (vv. 3-4). The elected officials we have are all the same in this respect: they are all sinners. None of them will rule perfectly. None of them can save us from the problems we face. They can help point us in a better direction by their adherence to the moral law of God. But we will not have and we cannot make a perfect society on earth.

That is clear enough by the reception Jesus received—the only perfect person to walk this earth. His disciple Peter wrote: *"He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly"* (1Pe. 2:22-23). This is how Jesus was treated by the civil and religious authorities. He was reviled. He was abused. He was nailed to a cross to die. And through all of this, He continuously entrusted Himself to His Father in heaven, *"to him who judges justly."*

And how does God judge us? Have we like Jesus honored the authorities even while they mistreated us? Have we been willing to suffer for doing what is right and good? Have we continued to put our trust in our Lord, even while everything in society seems to be going wrong? We know the answers to these questions. We may have done well sometimes, but God knows the times we felt anger and hatred in our hearts toward the governing authorities. He knows when we willingly broke just laws. He knows when we failed to trust in His help and His strength.

But God does not judge us by our many violations of His holy law. He judges us by His Son. When Jesus was sinned against, He did not retaliate, He did not threaten, He did not punish. He took the suffering that we and every other sinner deserved. He made our sin His own. He appealed to His Father, the just Judge, to judge Him in our place, to judge Him instead. And

God the Father did. He let the earthly authorities do their worst, so that they, and you, and I would have a Savior.

Because Jesus suffered and died in your place, your failure to respect the authorities by not following the laws of the land, not paying your share of taxes, not speaking well of them, and not praying for them—these sins are all forgiven. God does not hold them against you, not your sins of today or your sins from years ago against your parents and any others whom God placed over you. Jesus shed His holy blood to wash these sins away.

Through Baptism He has applied His forgiveness and holiness to us. He has made us His people, and He calls us to *“follow in his steps”* (1Pe. 2:22). No earthly authority can take away the victory we have in Him. No matter how bad it gets in this world, Jesus has triumphed over death itself and now reigns at the right hand of His Father. Nothing happens that He does not see. No injustice is done that will not be set right on the last day. Earthly authority is temporary. Earthly kingdoms and rulers come and go. The authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and His kingdom are eternal.

After describing how we should respect the authorities in the home and the workplace, Paul writes this, *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ”* (Col. 3:23-24). This is our motivation. This is our confidence. No matter who is ruling over us here on earth, we see the opportunity through our respect and obedience for the governing authorities to give honor to our almighty Lord and Savior.

It is because of Him that our debt with God is paid. It is because of Him that we stand righteous before the throne of heaven. It is because of Him that we are free to help and serve our neighbors, including the authorities, just as He helped and served us. **We Give to Caesar out of Love for Christ.**

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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