



Christ Lutheran Church

605 South Fifth Street • Norfolk, NE 68701

Share God's Word, share His love, and do it now!

Pastor Chip Winter, Director of Ministries

“No Easy Answer.” – St. Matthew 22:15-21

20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 22, 2017

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Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the gospel appointed for the day and already read for us from St. Matthew, the twenty-second chapter.

My dear family in Christ, does the plan of the Pharisees, in cahoots with the Herodians in this morning's text, sound like a great bit of chutzpah to you? I mean, they're planning to trip Jesus up by trapping Him in His own words? That's a gutsy move in anybody's estimation, considering how well Jesus speaks and how the crowds have marveled at His teaching. It's not like their own teachers but **“as one having authority”** as the man on the street esteems it.

But then again, if you don't trap Jesus with what He says, what else is there? A man with the power to still the tempest, who walks on the raging waters, is a hard man to best. And a man who feeds the multitudes and heals the masses is an awfully popular figure to take by force. So, maybe this is the way. **“Let's strike at His popularity,”** they reason. **“Let's give Him a riddle with only untenable choices.”**

Truth be told, they come up with a good one. After fawning all over Him, touting His integrity and godliness, they zing Jesus with **“Is it lawful to pay taxes or not?”**

If Jesus answers, “**Sure, give it to Caesar,**” as the cow-towing Herodians would not doubt like, Jesus will be in trouble with His countrymen. The common man among the Israelites will think Jesus a collaborator with the unclean foreigners who rule over the land. The Pharisees will jump on this with both feet, pointing to the Scriptural truth that all things belong to God – what you have, what I have and what the government has, too!

But, if Jesus answers, “**No, everything belongs to God**” as the Pharisees would probably prefer, then He will be in trouble with the government. Charges could be brought against our Lord as a traitor acting against the best interests of the Roman Empire. The Herodians would be able to make hay with this, for another Scriptural understanding is that God has given the government responsibilities and authority to carry out such responsibilities.

We know from Paul’s thirteenth chapter of Romans that the government of this earth is one among the many masks behind which God is at work to serve and bless mankind. The people of Jesus’ day knew this, too, for in the Old Testament lesson we have this morning these words are found: **“This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut...for the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me.”** A foreign king, not a Jew, will bring freedom back to God’s people at God’s bidding.

As we examine Jesus’ answer today we begin with the understanding that **(1)** God owns it all. He is the maker of all things and whatever is in our possession is simply on loan to us. From there we recognize that **(2)** God deems the government is owed our loyalty, our honor, our service and our taxes. **(3)** God deems that our family needs – and indeed can rightly expect from us – providing. And **(4)** He deems that His work of Gospel proclamation is paramount – **for God would**

have all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:4). This “saving” God made possible through the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary’s cross. And to top it all off, we conclude with the understanding that **(5)** God gives in abundance for our benefit and joy, and to provide for the previous threesome of ministry, family and civic duty.

But that still leaves us in a bit of tension. We are amazed with the crowd at this answer of Jesus. For all we could tell there was not a good way out of the question. But, it still doesn’t answer us very specifically. It leaves us struggling. We have our civic duties to government and work. We have family responsibilities. And we have discipleship which encompasses everything. How do we deal with it all? What is specifically God’s and what is specifically Caesar’s?

Some would suggest that over here you could have the realm of Jesus. Here is where you would find that which is personal, private, “spiritual” and “religious”. Over there you would have what belongs to the empire or to society. There is where you could figure on money, power, work, security and protection. In short, everything materially important and substantial, that’s what you would find in the realm of Caesar.

You might think that an awful overstatement. And you’d be right! But a sampling of the common culture’s values would suggest that previous paragraph was pretty spot on. One of the comic strips that I truly miss is Calvin and Hobbes: the little boy and the stuffed tiger that is real in his imagination and world. Their social commentary was often so incisive.

In one trip the two of them are examining their recent creation of a snowman. Hobbes, the tiger, comments **“This snowman doesn’t look very happy.”** Calvin responds, **“He’s not.”** He continues in the next frame, **“He knows it’s just a matter of time before he melts. The sun ignores his existence. He feels his existence in meaningless.”** In the final frame Hobbes asks, **“Is**

it?” And as often is the case, Calvin has the last word: **“Nope. He’s about to buy a big-screen TV.”** The world says that the really important stuff belongs in the realm of Caesar.

Much as the world would like to convince us that life can be thus compartmentalized, it cannot be. You are God’s child, body and soul, one united entity, called in grace to know His forgiveness and live the eternal life you now possess in both this world and the next. Jesus doesn’t answer “either/or” because there is no “either/or”. We are God’s children by the blood Jesus shed on the cross, the blood of the Lamb which has washed us clean and won our forgiveness. We live that reality in all we do, civic duties and family responsibilities included.

Certainly, resources are always a consideration. As Bill Bryson wrote in his book, “Made in America: An Informal History of the English Language in the United States,” **“Benjamin Franklin, not a particularly religious man himself, proposed to the Constitutional Convention that it open all of its sessions with prayer. Like most of Franklin’s motions, this was soundly defeated, but not because the delegates necessarily had anything against God, but as they patiently explained to him they had no funds to pay a chaplain!”**

Where does the money go? To worship God and share His Word, to pay our taxes and to provide for our family, among other things. Where does the time go? It goes to worship and ministry, to vote and serve, to volunteer at school or attend a ballgame or concert, among other things.

In the midst of incessant demands on our time and resources we are reminded again on this Lord’s Day that everything is the LORD’S. Whatever we do and whatever we have must reflect that. St. Paul’s encouragements are as specific as they are challenging: **“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”** (1 Corinthians 10:31. **“And whatever**

you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the LORD Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:17)

Those are tall orders. But with God all things are possible. It is possible to live as His disciples, serving His Gospel purposes through family, through work, through voting and government service. It’s a challenge, but it’s possible.

Instead of trapping the Lord with words, the Pharisees and Herodians found themselves trapped. We find ourselves trapped, as well, in our sin and selfishness. But by Christ Jesus’ passion death and resurrection we are forgiven. By His words – His promise in Baptism, His grace assured in Holy Communion, His guidance in the scriptures – we are strengthened and enlightened for the days and the activities to come. Amen.