

On the Proper Service of Caesar to God
Matthew 22:15-22
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus response to the Jews who sought to entrap him, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

How easily people *can* be (and, historically, *have* been) and even now *are being* deceived by misunderstandings about the relationship between Caesar and God... or, as many people like to say it, "Church and State"... which is actually the very first deception on this matter: when people claim "Separation of Church and State," they really *imply* "separation of God and State," and they claim that your views of God should be kept to yourself, while the State is intended to be governed independent of any mention of God, but in almost an atheistic secular fashion. But, governing by atheism is just as much a religious stance as is governing by any other religion!

In truth, it's not "separation of *God* and State," but "separation of *Church* and State"... a phrase Christians may employ *as long as* they understand that both Church and State are under the authority of the one true God. Once it's understood there is little distinction between Church and State when it comes to God's authority (both are ruled by Him, even if by different means and to

different goals) – once *that's* understood, the question of paying taxes to Caesar becomes very simple, doesn't it? If Caesar has created coin and currency to help rule the State, then ought taxes not be paid with that coin and currency Caesar has dreamed up to help him govern? Why would we Christians idolize such currency and coin – as if they purchased salvation, belonged to the Church, or as if they were gods in the place of God – when they only have value in matters pertaining to Caesar's rule? Even offerings given in currency to God for benefit of neighbor imply our love of neighbor is lived out (at least in part) under the watchful eye of the government. So, as coin and currency are defined by Caesar, they can be paid in tax to Caesar... but such does not leave the faithful poor. For, not only has God granted the faithful participation in Caesar's currency, but we have the currency of Christ, the riches for the spiritual life of repentance and forgiveness in Word and Sacrament. Thus, Church and Caesar together, Church and State together, belong to God and are accountable to Him for the benefit of the Third Estate, the Family – which benefits from both Church and State. The Church is accountable to God for filling the Family with salvation, and the State is accountable to God for Filling the family with neighborly conduct. The family benefits from the Church for its spiritual, eternal safety, and it benefits from the State for its bodily, temporal safety... and, as body and spirit together make up one man, then both Church (in

servicing spiritual need) and State (in servicing bodily need) carry out God's purposes for man and his family.

But, this relationship of Church and State also illustrates just how sad and guilty we sinners are, just how broken is every family that descends from Adam and Eve... that we need not only the Church to protect *the sinner* from his sin, but the State to protect *others* from the sinner's sin! Or, another way to say it, where we need the Church to call to repentance and forgive sin, we sometimes also need the State to curb and limit the damage of sin.

Indeed, if we want to see how sinful we are, how dangerous we sinners daily are to one another, intentionally and unintentionally, just consider that this entire third estate, the Government, was given by God for the single purpose of defending our neighbors from us and our sin. It might even be argued that – in the perfection of Eden - government was not needed! But once the Fall comes and Sin enters the world, the godly use of *Government* is quick on the scene. In fact, isn't the first sword-bearing against evil confessed by Cain?, who – when he killed his brother, Abel – and was sent out by God – Cain was afraid of the civil retribution against his sin (namely, that others would rise up and strike him down).

Indeed, from Cain on throughout all generations, how sinful we are... it's quite embarrassing to consider, isn't it?... that our sin so publicly acts out against others that God had to put in place an entire third estate of divine order to defend our neighbors from our sin.

Law after law after law is enacted to try and curb our sin, as the authorities are given by God Himself to do: Paul writes,

“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.... [The ruler] is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. He is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

And then, Paul concludes with a word that reminds us of the relationship between Caesar and the Church, when Paul says, “Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath *but also for the sake of conscience.*”

Notice that: when the hangman (as Luther dubbed the government) punishes us, when he curbs our sin, does he not also *burden our conscience*? Indeed, Caesar threatens to penalize you for speeding, stealing from a store or bodily harming your neighbor; and in so doing, Caesar’s enforced penalties also inform our conscience... and our conscience is our greatest preacher of the Law. Whose conscience wants to justify being a criminal? ... spending time in jail? ... having a ‘mugshot’? Can the *conscience* remain clear?

So then, Caesar does not bear the sword in vain. He curbs our sin and thereby begins to *show* us our sin; and burdened consciences flee to God’s Holy Word for further teaching from the Holy Law therein, which drives us to the Gospel.

There, what the government is not able, not *meant*, to provide, the Church’s Gospel does: it proclaims to the conscience the

pledge that the holy God who reigns over the government to threaten your *outward* evil is the same merciful God who reigns over the Church and who gave unto that Church her dear groom and Savior, Jesus Christ, whose blood and death cleanses you from *all* evil and from your sinful heart... and thereby grants you a *clear* conscience before the Almighty. Indeed, there's Christ hanging upon the tree – in fact, hanging upon *government's* tree! (Take the body down, and its a symbol of *civil* punishment!) There is Christ, in your place, that you might know that not only your sinful *thoughts* and *words* are forgiven before Heaven's Judge, but so also are your sinful *deeds*. To be sure, Caesar will carry out *societal* punishment upon your sin – that is his God-given domain. But not even Caesar can put conditions upon your forgiveness in the court room of God – as you hide behind Jesus, the Advocate you have with the Father.

How **holy** is the Father and His court room! How **holy** are the Two Tables of God's Holy Law! How **holy** is the government's work in enforcing the Second Table of that Holy Law upon the godless, curbing sins against neighbor! And yet, **equally holy** is Christ our Advocate, our Substitute... a substitute who satisfied the debt owed to God for the sins of the First Table *and* the debt owed to God for the sins of the Second Table. And because of that holy, righteous, perfect substitute and Advocate Christ Jesus, you may live with a clear conscience before God ... faith in Him, love toward neighbor...

and you may honor each of the three estates and their role in God's created order.

That's an important point: we so readily honor family and the Church, but do we honor government as we ought?

God Himself honored government's role in His divine order by including it in the plans of salvation. He could have sacrificed his Christ *apart from* worldly government, as he did with the Passover Lamb in Egypt, but He chose to use the "troops of the king" – just as He did in our Old Testament reading when He cares for Israel by the hand of godless Cyrus, even saying to that faithless king, "For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me... I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know... that there is none beside me" – just as He equipped faithless Cyrus to serve His chosen Israel, so also God used Pontius Pilate to punish "Israel reduced to One" and carry out the sacrifice of God's own Christ.

Though the cross was historically an instrument of Caesar's punishment, it was once rendered by God an instrument of His divine wrath upon Christ, which is to say, it has forever now been rendered by God an instrument of His everlasting Gospel and our eternal salvation.

Therefore, as Jesus has saved us from the worst enemy of them all – ourselves and our own sin! – then we can live our daily lives honoring His Three Estates for our good... and also trusting him

to protect us when those estates' officeholders go astray... protect us from them and vindicate us at the last. This is an important hope, and we perhaps sense its urgency in our time as we have witnessed our government become untethered from its divine duty and, in its functional atheism, crown itself god in place of the one true God who "daily defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil."

Indeed, because each governmental office in every land is filled by one of these same sinners who can so easily harm their neighbor, and because these same sinners become prideful and faithless and covet power more than a clear conscience before God, we see often in government how such sinners seek only to retain and strengthen their grip on power: skirting laws to improve their campaigns, ignoring widespread voting irregularity, politicizing the court system, making secret deals with foreign nations, or – worst of them all – using governmental power unhinged from God's Holy Law to replace the Second Table with Man's own definitions:

Very *unauthorized* definitions of:

- **honoring father and mother**, definitions that do not protect the vocations of parent but replace it with dependence on the State;
- or, ungodly definitions of **murder**, definitions that do not protect the unborn or the aged,
- ungodly definitions of **adultery** and **sexuality** that do not protect the marriage estate,

- unseemly definitions of **stealing** that do not protect business owners from rioters and looters
- ungodly definitions of **bearing false testimony**, definitions that charge Christians with 'hate speech' for testifying to the truth in love;
- unauthorized definitions of **coveting** that do not protect one man's wealth but forcibly remove it from him and redistribute it to others...

And, using such unauthorized power, an ungodly government lurches the households of the culture away from the one true God and toward civil idols... to the temporal, and even eternal, detriment of the people they serve.

Yes, because those entrusted with the Estate are just as much sinners as are we, we see quite publicly sin of all sort from those in positions of governmental authority: those in power are often so tempted to use their power not for the people's advantage, but for their own. They are tempted to not curb and punish sin, but to turn a blind eye to sin and endorse falsehood, to extend godless influence over both Family and Church, telling Family how to indoctrinate and raise their children, telling Church how and when to call upon the LORD...

And so, we sympathize with the pharisees' distrust toward Caesar and might be equally dumbfounded that Jesus would say that Caesar is to be honored with the tax he demands... especially dumbfounded because we all *know* the Caesar of Rome was no less sinful than those filling God's government estate in *our* land. Indeed,

Caesar even believed himself to be – and demanded the people think of him as – God! If some of *our* leaders are only now learning the craft of self-idolization, the caesars of *Rome* had perfected it!

So, how could Jesus still say, “Give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and to God that which is God’s”? He does it specifically by articulating the divine truth that what belongs to God cannot be forcibly taken and claimed by Caesar ... such a self-serving government will soon be toppled by “the troops of the king” and be replaced by another, for everything claimed by Caesar still ultimately falls under the rule of God. Caesar can rightly claim taxes, civil authority to punish, government’s full God-given use of temporal power... but he cannot claim *divinity* or equality *with* divinity or *separation from* divinity: recall what God said to Cyrus: “I call you... I equip you... that all may know there is none beside Me.” Cyrus had no power to claim that which God had not given into his hand, a truth Jesus himself confesses to Pilate: “You would have no authority over Me if not given to you from above.” And where Caesar claims *any* other authority – over family or Church – then, in accord with Acts 5, “We must obey God rather than men.”

And yet, the authority that *rightly* belongs to Caesar *is* given him from above. Authority to be carried out. And, even when the temporal authority is carried out most unjustly in the death of Christ, God still honors the estate of government by *submitting His Christ to it*. By including Pontius Pilate in His divine plans, God not only

ensures Christ's invasion into human history will be cemented and confessed in the Apostles' Creed forever, but also ensures the estate of the government – though handled by sinful men – that estate will forever be confessed as subservient to the will of God.

Thus, we ought not allow either Caesar's sins nor our sins to prevent us from rejoicing in the good order of rendering unto Caesar what actually and truly belongs to Caesar. By remembering the much larger picture of the Three Estates – Government, Family, and Church – and in all those ways - rendering to God what is God's, we always keep Caesar on his subservient throne, and we thus also keep the glory and honor at the feet of God Most High. Where Caesar does what is good in God's sight, render to Caesar what is his, for he is but a reflection of the holy will of God Most High. But, where Caesar does what is *not* right in God's sight, seek counsel from your pastor when/how to obey God's reign and distance yourself from Man's reign, for Man is about to be toppled and replaced, the ruler's unsuitable reflection not long being allowed to distract from the true *radiance* of God's glory... that glory the radiance of which is embodied in the flesh and blood of the God-Man himself, as He who hung on the cross in our place now pours out the divine judgment of mercy upon us sinners.

In Nomine Iesu

+ AMEN +

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