

Matthew 22.15-22  
23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
19 November 2017  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The words to which we turn our attention today are these, from the Gospel lesson, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

*Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.*

Today we're going to back in time for a moment. The year's AD 55. The Roman Republic had been overthrown just a century before. And from Republic came Empire. As in emperor. As in more or less autonomous head of state. Taxes were oppressive. Rome held her territories as tax farms. Taxation so harsh you often had to take a loan to make your tax payment. And the legal rate of interest was 4%. Per month. Freedom was highly restricted. Outside of Italy fewer than 2% held citizenship and upwards of 30% were enslaved. Slave revolts were put down mercilessly. A trip to Rome often brought into view the crucified bodies of rebel slaves. "Just a warning." And freedom of religion? What's that? Unknown, really. A freedom entirely at the whim of the emperor, especially when it came to threatening monotheism. Indeed, only 16 years earlier in AD 39, the Emperor Claudius had trampled holy place and conscience and set up his own image in the Temple in Jerusalem. That's AD 55. Got it?

And in the year AD 55 the apostle Paul stopped in at the local scriptorium in Corinth to dictate a letter. Bound for the Christians in Rome.

Imagine, then, the surprise on the face of Tertius, the scribe, when Paul, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, asked him to write down these words: "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.... 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." Fellow-redeemed: that's straight from the mouth of one who in a few short years would be taken to Rome in chains; imprisoned in Rome; and die in prison in Rome. For being a Christian.

But what was Paul doing but faithfully teaching? No new revelation, but the very words of Jesus: Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.

What was he doing but faithfully teaching what God had revealed on Mt. Sinai: "Honor your father and your mother."

What was Paul doing but faithfully teaching what had been written into the very creation by God Himself, that "we should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents *and other authorities*, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them"?

And why? Because they have been instituted by God Himself. From the foundation of the world.

Now, the history that I mentioned at the start of this sermon is important. Paul doesn't put an asterisk by what he writes. There's no exception clause. There's no condition placed on what he says. He doesn't

say, “Honor them, unless their first name happens to be Bill or George or Barak or Hillary or Donald.” He doesn’t say, “Obey them, unless they happen to issue executive orders your party disagrees with.” He doesn’t say, “Pay taxes, unless you think they’re too high.” Instead, God calls you to live faithfully in your vocation, according to His 10 Commandments, at all times. To love your neighbor as yourself. And that includes the governing authorities.

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Let me pause here and just say something. Love is never formless. When we’re to love our neighbor, it’s not an emotion. It’s an action. If I want to love my neighbor according to the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, my emotions do him no good. Instead, I help and support him in every physical need.

And that’s exactly how it goes with the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, as well. You can’t rightly love the governing authorities by disparaging them. By disobeying them. By trivializing them. By speaking of them in a derogatory manner. It doesn’t matter who’s in office. It’s not love for neighbor.

No. Love for neighbor, when my neighbor’s the governing authorities, is my honor, service, and obedience. And holding them dear.

But why? Why hold them dear? Because God wears them like a mask.

If someone spoiling for a fight were to ask me what God has done for her today, I’d say that He’s given you your clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife, children, land, animals and everything you have. And that He’s defended you against all danger and guarded and protected you from all evil.

And she might say, “God didn’t do these things. He wasn’t the one who kept the opposing traffic to my left on my way to church. And collected the taxes to make the roads smooth. And established the laws that make buying and selling and merchandise and stores and consumers possible. It was the government.”

But that’s just the point. If it was the government, it was God. Wearing the government like a mask.

You see, God always works through means. That’s such an important teaching. God always works through means. He saves you through water with His Word. He forgives your sins through the mouth of a pastor. He gives you the medicine of the resurrection through bread and wine taken as His Word and command.

And that doesn’t stop in the kingdom of the left. No! In the left-hand kingdom He defends your life and protects you from the evils of theft and robbery and rape and murder and embezzlement and quacks and rickety bridges and crashing mid-air with another plane and the list goes on—He protects you from all of that through the governing authorities. That’s His mask.

So that to oppose Caesar is to oppose God Himself.

Except for what St. Peter rightly says. That “we should obey God rather than men” (Acts 5.29). That is, except that when the law of the land or the rules of the authorities are diametrically opposed to God’s Law, then we must follow God’s Law. And take our lumps for it.

So this is your calling as a Christian. Obey the authorities. Serve them. Obey them. That’s the love you owe them.

Even more importantly, and more difficult, because it's a matter of the heart. Honor them. Respect them.

Paul gives the reason why. It's because they're God's mask.

But Jesus doesn't even let you ask why. He just says do it. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

And that's the same for the other part of what Jesus says. Render unto God what is God's.

So what is God's? It's your fear, your love, and your trust. It's calling upon Him in every trouble, praying, praising, and giving thanks. To Him as your highest good. It's taking His Word for what it is. Holy. Sacred. And because it's holy and sacred, gladly hearing and learning it. Not snoozing away during church. That's what God wants from you.

And that's all Law. Not a shred of Gospel. It's entirely Jesus' directive. For you. For your life. Obey the authorities. Honor them. Respect them. And give to God what's owed to Him. Your fear, love, trust, and obedience.

And by doing this, God says, you have every grace and blessing *in this life*. But note, it doesn't make any promises about the next. In fact, when it comes to the next. When it comes to using this Law to figure out how you stand with God, the Law becomes your enemy.

You didn't speed on your way to church this morning—it's Sunday, for crying out loud. But the Law doesn't ask only about this morning.

You like Trump. A lot. But this law asks what you what you did to honor Obama, too.

You had the utmost respect for Sebelius. But this law asks why you have none for Brownback.

You're in church right now, listening to God's Word. But this law asks why your Portals of Prayer is all dusty.

You always pray to God when your back's against a wall. But this law asks why you feel compelled to utter His name when you're angry.

You love the Lord. But this law asks you why you love mammon, too.

All Law. Not a shred of Gospel. And while you must see in it how blessed your life can be, you must also see in it as in a mirror, and know that before God you've deserved nothing but punishment.

But now we conclude where we started. I want to take you back in time again. To the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium. For looking in that mirror you must also see the One who speaks these words: the Lord Christ Himself. And He speaks them as your substitute before God.

You haven't the patience for home devotions. But the Lord Jesus gladly stayed in His Father's house as a 12-year-old boy to hear and learn God's Word. That's the whole reason God the Holy Spirit included that episode from Jesus' life in the Gospels. Because Jesus did that for you. And then lived according to that Word of God to perfection. That's why the Scriptures have so much detail about the life of Jesus. Because Jesus lived His life on this earth for you. In your place. As your substitute.

And at the end of it, where you can't curb your flesh to follow God's will, He brought His into submission so that it sweated blood and made Himself obedient unto death. Bound over entirely to God's will, and not His own.

In short, what you can't do well enough, He's already done perfectly well enough. For His obedience to His Father wasn't the craven obedience wrung out of fallen creatures. It was the loving, self-denying obedience decreed by God in His Law.

And finally, when Jesus was called to render unto Caesar, He rendered not with a coin, but with His holy, innocent death. And shed His blood not only *under* Caesar, but *for* him. And for *you*.

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You see, all that Jesus' words in the Gospel today tell you is how to live in the here and now. In the kingdom of this world. Behaving properly like the creature that you are.

But the One saying those words has and is an entirely different kingdom. A kingdom He has made yours through your Baptism. A kingdom not where you serve your neighbor, but are served by God Himself. A kingdom not where you are a slave to everyone, as you are here, but entirely free, even before God Himself. Because the Lord of the kingdom Himself took on the form of a slave *in your place*. A kingdom not of the Law, but of grace. A kingdom where the cursing Law can no longer curse and the blessing Law can no longer bless, because all blessings in this kingdom flow to you from the cross of Jesus. The happy exchange. His perfect life for your imperfect. God rendering unto His creation. Not what is owed it. But what He freely gives: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Jesus' name.

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

*sdg*  
*jsb*