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Pentecost 22

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Spurious Alternative!”

Text: Matthew 22:15-21 (Isaiah 45:1-7)

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

Wouldn't it have been great if in the Holy Gospel today Jesus had said, “*Taxes? Nah, you don't have to pay no stinkin' taxes! Especially to that godless Caesar, or that godless government, who aren't doing things according to my will anyway!*” Truthfully, isn't that what you were hoping He would say? But He didn't. Rats! Come April 15th, you'd better have your 1040s in the mail.

Actually the **Herodians** were hoping Jesus was going to say that too. They were the pro-government part of this conspiracy against Jesus, and were all ready to go to the Roman IRS to turn Jesus in for His rebellious words. . . . And the **Pharisees** – well, they didn't much care what Jesus said. They hated the Romans and the Herodians, but they hated Jesus more, for telling all those parables against them! *They* were the wicked tenants, were they? *They* were the underdressed wedding guests, were they? Well now they're bringing the battle to Jesus, *on their terms*. Politics makes strange bedfellows, but if they have to team up with the hated Herodians for the greater good, well, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do! . . . So, if Jesus says to pay taxes, then the people won't like Him anymore and the Pharisees will have their place of favor with the people again; and if He says not to, then, well, they got the goons in the wings to take care of Him then!

It was the perfect storm.

But as we heard, Jesus gets out of the trap. “***Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.***” Jesus will not choose. He gives them both their place. And so the conspiracy fails. Both Herodians and Pharisees will have to wait for another day for their pound of Jesus' flesh. That day would come, but not on their terms, but on Jesus' terms. No one takes His life from Him, He would lay it down of His own accord, for the life of the world (John 10:18).

For the life of the world. You see, that's what Jesus is all about. That's why He gave a different answer than either the Pharisees or the Herodians were expecting; beyond what

they had even considered! Because He is thinking on a different level than they are; a different plane. The Pharisees and Herodians were both about their own kingdoms, their own power, their own prestige, their own positions, their own authority – and how to keep and hold onto what they had. It is a very small picture they had, actually. And looking back in history, we can see that. Empires and governments come and go, people come and go, power and prestige come and go. And those who *live* for these things, who try to hold onto these things as all they have, turn out to be very pitiful and pathetic figures, indeed. But from our very small and limited perspective, it's sometimes hard to see that. Losing sight of the forest for the trees.

But Jesus, the God of history, has no such trouble; no such limited perspective. All authority, all government, all rule – all *things* come from Him. And so what He does He does not for empires or kingdoms, but *for the life of the world*. And not just the world at one moment in time, *but of all time*. And so taxes? Please! If Caesar wants his money, give 'em his money! Caesar and his money haven't been around for so long, and they won't be around forever. But you will be. The things of this world have a limited lifespan, but you were created for eternity. So live like it! Don't get so wrapped up in the things of this world, but see them for what they are – **instruments in the hands of a loving God, working His good in this world, for the life of the world.**

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

You see, small pictures and perspectives make us tend toward what is called “utopianism” – that is, trying to create a perfect society here on earth. Some try to do that through “big government,” thinking that if we just have the right people and the right laws in place, we can solve all the world's problems. Others try to do it through *separatism*, or withdrawing from the things of this world, into their own closed societies. You can see both the Herodians and the Pharisees working for these alternatives, you can see people in our society today working for these alternatives, you can see even see people in our Synod trying to solve our Synod's problems through these alternatives!

But both are wrong. Or, as one of my favorite seminary professors would say, it is a “spurious alternative!” Jesus would not choose. Neither should we. What seems like an “either/or” to us may not be so for God! For Him, things are not so small. God has stamped His image on this world, and so uses the things of this world for the life of the world. Using the things of this world for our good, whether we know it and realize it or not.

And so when Jesus says ***“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”*** that's Fourth Commandment stuff there. Honor those in authority over us, at home, in school, at work,

in government. Whether we like them or not; whether we always agree with them or not. They are God's instruments to do us good. They may not always, as we see it, but that's not a reason to rebel. . . . Isaiah today spoke of a ruler named Cyrus – a ruler, Isaiah tells us, who did not know or believe in the true God! And yet God will use him. God is going to use him, in fact, to conquer His people of Israel and haul them off into exile! And the people of Israel, thinking small and in the moment, thought, "*Oh, how awful! God has left us!*" While God knew what He was doing all along. He didn't choose one or the other. He uses the things of this world for the life of the world. For His people's good. So that they would return to Him in repentance and faith. That they would "***Render to God the things that are God's!***"

And how often this happens! Joseph is sold into slavery to Egypt and serves the Pharaoh *for the life of the world*. Moses narrowly escapes death and is raised as the Pharaoh's son *for the life of the world*. Mary and Joseph have to travel to Bethlehem for a government census *for the life of the world*. Jesus is tried, convicted, and crucified by a Roman court *for the life of the world*. The Apostles are persecuted and forced to scatter with their message from Jerusalem *for the life of the world*. Luther is put under the ban and kicked out of the church *for the life of the world*. And there are so many more examples. And how many, at the time, seemed like a good idea? Seemed like, yeah, things are really going according to plan! Look how God is working! . . . **Zero**.

Herodians, Pharisees . . . perhaps we fall into both traps from time to time. Thankfully God does not! But this is all more than just God's providence; the fact that He is almighty and can do what He wants. Because that's not necessarily good news! Most all religions believe in an almighty God who can do what He wants, and because of that they are afraid of Him and try to do all they can to please (or appease) Him so that He will use His power to do good things for them! And so they live in uncertainty and fear, for who really knows what God will choose to do today? If He will like and favor me today? Or someone else? It is a horrible way to live.

But that's not who God is. He does not choose: me, or someone else. *Spurious alternative!* He is for me, He is for you, all the time. All the time, in all He does, *for the life of the world*. Through the governments and laws, through families, through vocations, through the Church and forgiveness. All have their place. All are His.

And so we do not pit the physical (the things of this world) against the spiritual, as if one is good and one is bad. *Spurious alternative!* For all that God created He created very good. Our sin has ruined it, yes. But God became man to redeem it. To reverse the curse of sin on all of creation, and set us free from all that holds us captive. From sin, death, and devil. That would require "a pound of Jesus' flesh," but it is that flesh that He gladly

gives. Upon the altar of the cross, and upon our altar here. His body and blood for the life of the world. For restoration and forgiveness. That His image that we lost in sin, might be restored in us. That we would ***“Render to God the things that are God’s.”*** That we render unto Him repentance and faith – confessing our sin and death, and receiving His resurrection and life.

And then, from that place, under the cross, under His body and blood, under His forgiveness, under His life and resurrection – we can see things as they are, and live in freedom, peace, and joy. **Freedom**, for we have been set free from our sins and no longer have to make wrong choices between *spurious alternatives!* **Peace**, for at peace with God and no longer separated from Him by sin, we can live at peace with others, no matter who they may be. And **joy**, the joy of Christ’s salvation. The joy of knowing that we have been given life – life here, with purpose and meaning; and life eternal, to live with our God and Saviour forever.

So we pay our taxes. You’re going to run across some Herodians and Pharisees. And if they demand from us a pound of flesh, that’s okay. We’re in good company. And whatever flesh we may have to give is given back to us even more. For the flesh and blood we here give is sinful and rotten – not a very great prize! But the flesh and blood of Christ that we here receive is perfect and holy, full of forgiveness and life, and is conforming us to His image.

So, life *here* or life *there*? Herodian or Pharisee? Me or you? *Spurious alternatives.* Jesus came, Jesus is coming now, and Jesus is coming again, *for the life of the world.* For me. For you. Come, Lord Jesus!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.