

16 October 2011  
Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Two Kingdoms, One God”

Text: Matthew 22:15-22 (Isaiah 45:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)

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

*Don't mix politics and religion*, we are told. Separate church and state with a great, impenetrable wall. We see this playing out in the presidential debates. Many people, it seems, want our leaders to be religious, but not *too* religious; to be personally religious, but publicly secular; to have their religion inform their personal values, but not their public policies. So we see the spectacle of the candidates trying to traverse a very small tightrope and not fall off one side or the other. And that can be tricky business. *Don't mix politics and religion*.

That's why the religious Pharisees and the political Herodians thought they had cooked up the perfect plot to entangle and catch Jesus in His words. This isn't the first time each had tried, but every time before this had failed. They couldn't get Him as a political subversive because His kingdom was not of this world. He wouldn't get tangled up in that. And they couldn't get Him with religious questions - He was too knowledgeable for that. So they would mix the two; for surely, He would have to choose and disappoint and anger one side or the other. ***So tell us what you think, Jesus: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?***

But whereas we have trouble with the relationship between the church and the state, between religion and politics, and either separate them as far as the East is from the West and try not to let the right hand know what the left hand is doing, or confuse them into a toxic cocktail - God has no such problem. For both church and state are His creation. Both are His kingdoms through which He works and rules for the good of His people and His church. And both receive their authority from Him - though each has a different authority. The state, or what is called the kingdom of the left, rules with the authority of the Law, and the church, which is called the kingdom of the right, rules with the authority of the Gospel. And both are blessings of God, which are not the same but are also not opposed - they are complementary. Each has its place. Each has its rule. Each has its specific vocation.

We see a glimpse of this in the words of the prophet Isaiah which we heard earlier - words where God is addressing Cyrus, the king of Persia. Though Cyrus does not know God, God calls him His ***anointed one*** and is using him ***for the sake of Jacob***

**and Israel.** Just as God had used the kingdoms of Assyria and the Babylon to discipline His people and take them away as prisoners of war, so now He is using Cyrus to release His people and return them to their land. That's the political reality. The kingdom of the left reality.

But there's another reason, too. A kingdom of the right reason. *That through all this, God was revealing Himself to Cyrus.* That he and his people might know that **He is the Lord, and there is no other.** That His Temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt and His Name once again be proclaimed to all nations and peoples. And that ultimately, His Son, the true Anointed One and the true Temple, be born in Bethlehem. That, as the Lord spoke through Isaiah, **all people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.**

So two kingdoms. Distinct, but not separate. For each has its place, but both under God, who uses both for our good.

And so what the Pharisees and the Herodians thought was the perfect question, the perfect trap to entangle Jesus in His words, is really no problem at all for Jesus. They . . . and we - well, we're not as smart as we think.

And so Jesus responds: **Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?** Hypocrites, for they themselves have mixed together what they expect Jesus to keep apart! **Show me the coin for the tax. . . . Whose likeness and inscription is this?** Caesar's, huh? Well then, **render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.** So yeah, you gotta pay your taxes. Even if you don't like Caesar. Even if you don't like the government. God can use whatever Caesar we throw at Him. Jesus isn't gonna help you out here.

But that is, perhaps, the easy part of understanding Jesus' answer here. **Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,** okay, got that. *But what are the things of God? What are we to render to Him? What does He expect from us?*

Perhaps you're thinking obedience. Good works, the Ten Commandments, and all that. Or, since we're on the topic of money here, maybe you're thinking about tithing and giving to God the share of your income that is His. *Those aren't bad answers . . .* but perhaps it would be better to stick with Jesus' words and ask ourselves, **whose likeness and inscription is this?** Or, where is God's likeness and inscription in this world, to give Him what is His?

The **answer** to that lies in the **question.** For the word translated there are *likeness* is the word *icon*, or *image*. So if it is a coin that bears Caesar's image, what is it in this world that is made in God's image and likeness and bears His inscription? Phrased in that way, you know the answer: **it's you.** In the beginning, God made man in His

image and likeness, and in Holy Baptism He has inscribed His name upon you. **You** belong to Him. The things of this world are not what God is interested in. His kingdom is not of this world. He wants you. Always you. All of you. He wants your undivided heart and soul and mind and strength. He wants your uncompromised fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.

Too often we stick to the coins though, don't we? It's easier. Less involvement. Less threatening. Repentance and faith and holy living, investing yourself, giving yourself, that's harder by far.

But that is, in fact, why Jesus was there that day, sparring with the Pharisees and Herodians. He was there *for you*. Giving Himself for you. *All* of Himself for you.

For this episode took place probably just about 72 hours before Jesus would lay down His life on the cross. To redeem you not with gold or silver coins, but *with His holy precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death* (Small Catechism, and 1 Peter 1:18-19). And in laying down His life as the perfect Lamb of God on the altar of the cross, to render unto God the perfect sacrifice due for your sin and mine. That the image lost in us by sin be restored to us in forgiveness, and that our life which will end in death, be raised to life again - first in Holy Baptism, and then in our resurrection from the grave to eternal life. That even now we live a new life. That even now we begin to give ourselves, living a Christ life, an image of God life.

It's never about money with Jesus. That's just the symptom, not the problem. It's about the cross. It's about life in the midst of death. It's about false gods and false life versus the true God and eternal life.

And so you ***render to God the things that are God's*** when you come here in repentance and faith to receive His forgiveness, His life, His Spirit. And you ***render to God the things that are God's*** when you take that forgiveness, life, and Spirit here received in faith and serve your neighbor in love. Being, as St. Paul said, *imitators* of him and the apostles, and of the Lord.

As long as you live in this world, you live in two kingdoms. And you render unto Caesar, but knowing that you don't belong to Him. You belong to God. To the one who created you and re-created you. Who bought you with a price. For not on coins did He put His image, but on you. And not for a worldly kingdom did He die, but for you. *That you may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness* (Small Catechism).

And so now for you He comes once again in the bread and wine of His Supper, that eating His Body and drinking His Blood, His image be renewed in you and His life and love strengthened in you through the forgiveness of your sins. Giving you

all that He is and all that He has, that with He in you and you in Him, you begin to live now that life that has no end. And with His Name on you and His Spirit in you, that is exactly the life you do live!

***When they heard Jesus' answer, they marveled.*** You too. Look at the cross, look at the altar. Hear the wonderful words of your Saviour: *I baptize you; you are mine. I forgive you all your sins. This is My Body, this is My Blood.* Hear and see . . . **and marvel.** It's not about money. This is the Lord's answer to your greatest need. Words that don't entangle, but set you free. Free to live. Free to love. Free to **render to God the things that are God's.**

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.