

## **“Rendering Payment”**

Liturgical Date: Proper 24 A

Primary Text: St. Matthew 22:15-22

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, is the Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 22. The title of the sermon is “Rendering Payment”.

Our text for today is an interesting one, but it is probably not chosen by many people as containing their “favorite” or “life verse” (unlike past week which had Philippians 4:13). That is because it relates to the topic of paying taxes. Maybe if you work for the IRS you like this verse, but most of us don’t like paying taxes (can ask for people to raise their hands if they like paying taxes). Few people do. Did you know that there was a time in American History where paying taxes to the national government was voluntary? As you may remember from your history class, the American Revolution had a lot to do with taxes-Britain was making us pay them and we didn’t like it and eventually revolted. Thus, the first government for the United States called the Articles of Confederation was a very weak central government. It did not have the power to force taxes to be paid to the national government. They could ask, but there was no way to force people and states to pay the taxes. Obviously, that did not go well because very little tax revenue was coming into our national government. The Articles of Confederation only lasted a few years and were replaced by the Constitution, and this government had more power to enforce the law.

The context of our Gospel Lesson this week is again Holy Week. In Chapter 21 Jesus had entered Jerusalem to much fanfare and adoration. Jesus then had cleared the temple of the corrupt money changers. The powers that be wanted to

eliminate Jesus, but they were concerned as He had the support of many of the people. They knew that He had authority. Thus, as we heard a few Sundays ago, they attempted to get an answer from the Lord about where His authority came from. But He turned the tables on them by asking a question of His own about the authority of John the Baptist. Then He told some parables. Then different groups came to try to trap Jesus into answering more questions. We see one of those in our text today, and they will ask Him three more questions later in the chapter.

Jesus' opponents approach Him in verse 15 and attempt to trap Him into an unpopular answer. Our first clue that this is a "trap" question and not a well-intentioned question seeking an honest answer is the false flattery that they heap upon Jesus. *"Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances."* When someone is "buttering you up" like this, you would be wise to be suspicious, right? You are great. You are wise. You are truthful. You always given an honest answer. Get ready because it is coming! We do already see they are attempting back Jesus into a corner to answer the question because they say essentially, "tell us what you think because we know that you don't care about what other people think."

The question then comes, *"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"* And this is indeed a question with seemingly no good answer. Kind of like the old question, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" If you say "yes", then you are saying that you have in the past abused your spouse. If you say "no", then you are still doing it.

Who is asking this question? We all probably know who the Pharisees are, but what about the Herodians? And when we understand who these people were, it helps us understand why they asked the question that they did. Herod the Great was the Jewish leader of Israel at that time and these were people who supported

Herod's rule. Herod was a brutal leader, but he was very crafty. He attempted to appease both the Jewish people that he ruled over and the occupying Romans. Then he could benefit from both sides. Of course, the ruling Romans wanted people to pay taxes. But many of the Jews that they occupied did not want to pay taxes to an occupying pagan power. Thus, if Jesus says to not pay taxes to Caesar, then He is challenging the authority of the ruling secular forces and would be using His influence to encourage disobedience against Rome. And remember, Jesus' enemies want this. They want Rome to see Jesus as a threat and thus eliminate Him. Therefore, if Jesus says it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar, then this is bad for Him.

On the other hand, if Jesus were to answer "yes" then that answer would not be popular with the people who rightly resented being occupied by the Romans. The Pharisees and Herodians believed that this will hurt His popularity among the people, which they also are concerned about as it is harder to convince their fellow countrymen to get rid of a popular Jesus.

But as He always did, Jesus sees through their phony praise and knows that a trap has been laid. *"But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?"* The answer that Jesus gives is brilliant. He gives them a little object lesson with His answer. He asks to be given a Roman coin, a denarius. On this coin would have been an image of Tiberius Caesar and it would bear the inscription, "son of the divine Augustus". A little irony here as Jesus was the true Son of the Divine, holding a coin with a false claim of divinity. In holding up the coin, Jesus asked them a question of His own-which He liked to do. *"Whose likeness and inscription is this?"* They give the obvious answer, *"Caesar's"*.

Then comes the Master's answer which causes them to marvel and scurry away defeated. *"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"*. The trap was a dud. Kind of like the frustration

of a person that puts out a trap for a mouse but returns to find the trap sprung, but both the cheese and the mouse gone. Jesus has foiled them again. He has not given an answer that will turn Rome against Him. He has told people that it is OK for them to pay taxes. But He has not angered his Jewish brethren because He has drawn a distinction between an offering set aside for God and medium of exchange coined and used as currency for the Romans. Essentially, the Romans made the coin, and you are just giving it back to them. You are not sinning by paying taxes.

Actually, the New Testament gives us another text in saying that Christians should pay taxes at the beginning of Romans 13 which lays out some of the responsibilities of the Christian toward government. Romans 13:7, *“Pay to all what is owed 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.”* No doubt, there are things that the government spends our money on that we don’t agree with. But we can’t use that as a justification for not paying taxes. The money that we use is a medium of exchange. In fact, our money today is literally not even worth the paper it is printed on. It essentially only has the value that it does because people believe that it does. Thus, to refuse to pay taxes is an improper mixing of the sacred and secular.

And of course, today is a day when our congregation asks for money. It is interesting how on stewardship/pledge Sunday that the texts often do relate to money. I don’t think we make a practice of asking for money too much in our congregation. But it is something that ours and every congregation needs to have. U.S. currency is the accepted means of exchange in our nation. Rent is not free. Utilities are not free. Communion supplies are not free. And we could go on. To have an efficient and effective ministry to the members of our congregation and to reach out to others, money sure does help a lot. Therefore, we do encourage people to give. And we have a very generous congregation. We are small, but in

our short history we have never run out of money, and we have been able to pay all of our bills and build a reserve. Thanks be to God and His generous people!

Unfortunately, giving and making a pledge in the church are seen by some people as kind of like “Tax Day”. A day to render payment for services. But this is not the correct way to view it. Giving is something that we actually *get* to do. We have the opportunity to support the Lord’s work through our congregation and even beyond with District and Synod. Giving is best practiced with grace. Freely giving from the heart is not a giving that is obligatory. We change no annual membership fee or admission charge in the church. Membership in God’s family is by grace through faith, it cannot be bought. We should give out of a gratitude for the wonderful love and mercy and provision that God has shown us. We should not use excuses. And that includes that the church does not spend money exactly the way that you would do it. If people only gave to the congregation if they agreed with everything money was spent on, churches everywhere would be broke! And that is a similarity to our little lesson on taxes because if we were required to only pay taxes if the government spent money on things we agree with, then our nation would be broke-or well, more broke than we are right now!

There is a time for rendering payment. Jesus said that as did the inspired writing of St. Paul that we are to pay taxes. While as I said we should not view a Pledge Sunday or offering as simply a “payment”, congregations-including ours-do have payments to render to bill collectors. And Jesus would make payment too. Not just of a Roman Denarius at tax time, but for something much greater.

Our Lord and Savior would render payment for our sins. He would render the ultimate payment, that was accepted by His Father. And that, of course, is the payment that required His very blood, body, and life. A few short days after Jesus spoke the words that we heard today, wisely answering the question that was meant to trap Him, He would render that payment on the cross of Calvary. This is

a payment none of us could make. No pledged amount would cover it. Our sin debt was too much for us, but not too much for Jesus. He rendered the payment. Not to Caesar, but to Father God for us all.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.