

The Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity

Hymns: 26, 408, 650, 29

The INTROIT

(Jer.29:11,12,14;Ps.85:1)

P: I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord;

C: thoughts of peace and not of evil.

P: Then shall ye call upon Me and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you;

C: and I will turn your captivity and gather you from all nations and from all places.

P: Lord, Thou hast been favorable unto Thy land;

C: Thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob.

The COLLECT

Absolve, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy people from their offenses, that from the bonds of our sins which by reason of our frailty we have brought upon us we may be delivered by Thy bountiful goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The FIRST LESSON

Isaiah 32:1-8 (NKJV)

Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, And princes will rule with justice. A man will be as a hiding place from the wind, And a cover from the tempest, As rivers of water in a dry place, As the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. The eyes of those who see will not be dim, And the ears of those who hear will listen. Also the heart of the rash will understand knowledge, And the tongue of the stammerers will be ready to speak plainly.

The foolish person will no longer be called generous, Nor the miser said to be bountiful; For the foolish person will speak foolishness, And his heart will work iniquity: To practice ungodliness, To utter error against the LORD, To keep the hungry unsatisfied, And he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail. Also the schemes of the schemer are evil; He devises wicked plans To destroy the poor with lying words, Even when the needy speaks justice. But a generous man devises generous things, And by generosity he shall stand.

The GRADUAL

(Ps.44:7,8;115:11)

P: Thou hast saved us from our enemies:

C: and hast put them to shame that hated us.

P: In God we boast all the day long:

C: and praise Thy name forever. Hallelujah!

P: Ye that fear the Lord, trust in the Lord:

C: He is their Help and their Shield. Hallelujah!

The EPISTLE

Philippians 3:17-21 (NKJV)

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they

are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame; who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

The SENTENCE for the Season

(Ps. 119:124)

P: Hallelujah! O Lord, deal with Thy servant according unto Thy mercy and teach me Thy statutes. I am Thy servant, give me understanding:

C: **that I may know Thy testimonies. Hallelujah!**

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. Matthew 22:15-22 (NKJV)

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money."

So they brought Him a denarius.

And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?"

They said to Him, "Caesar's."

And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

Matthew 22:15-22 — "Is It Lawful?"

INTRODUCTION

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II. WHY DO YOU TEST ME?

III. RENDER THEREFORE

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Matthew 22:15-22 — “Is It Lawful?”

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

The sermon text is the Gospel reading appointed for the Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity, Matthew 22:15-22:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

This Gospel reading is in the midst of the events of Holy Week. This is one of the events that occurred during the final week of our Lord’s ministry, the week in which all righteousness would be fulfilled. Jesus was journeying steadfastly to the cross of our salvation. It was the high season of Passover and all the people who had come to Jerusalem for the festival were coming to hear Jesus. On Sunday they acknowledged Him as the one coming in the name of the Lord, the Son of David, the Messiah. Matthew records that Jesus came into the temple and cleansed the temple by driving out those who were misusing the temple and compromising the worship. But the true temple of God, the body of Jesus, would be handed over to be destroyed in order to be raised up again for the benefit of all who would be crucified with Him in Baptism and raised to the new life of His resurrection. In connection with the events of this week and of the things that Jesus said and did, the church leaders kept demanding of Him, **“By what authority are you doing these things?”** In today’s text the question is stated in the form of **“Is it lawful?”**

I. IS IT LAWFUL?

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

This is interesting. Moreover, it is frightful. When we look upon the actions of the church leaders in response to the ministry of Jesus, it truly is frightful to behold. Jesus came preaching repentance unto the faith of the Gospel. He came preaching to change the hearts of the people so that they would be regenerated in their hearts, minds, and souls to live as the children of God. Is this not the very thing that the church leaders always claim to be promoting?

So, then, why were they opposed to the ministry of Jesus? Matthew records it for us in the first sentence. This first sentence is not a quotation from the Pharisees but it is the commentary that the Holy Spirit led Matthew to write. He writes,

Then going, the Pharisees counsel took how him they might ensnare in word.

Now this is revealing. From the point of the Pharisees this would surely be viewed as ensnaring Jesus in a word or in talk, but Matthew leaves it open to be understood in the fuller sense of who Jesus is, the Logos, the Word of God.

After taking counsel together, the best plan that they developed was to present to Jesus the question of who truly has authority in the lives of God's people. They asked the question, **“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”**

This clearly is a wicked plot which leads to asking a wicked question. If we want to understand the question and why it is wicked, we first must understand the plot. The plot is to ensnare someone using the Word of God. But the plot is far more wicked, for the plot is to use the Word of God against itself. The plot is to use the Word of God to undermine the truth.

“Is it lawful . . .?” Who asks such a question? The Greek word is *exestin*. It is the exact same word as the Pharisees used in chapter 19 when they asked the Lord Jesus, **“Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?”** In both instances the Pharisees are seeking to ensnare Jesus by asking him a question in which the authority of the Word of God is challenged.

This is what happens when people treat the Scriptures as the Word of God. The Scriptures are not the Word of God, but the record of the words of God by which the Word is revealed. But people prefer to speak of the Scriptures as the Word of God. Do you know why? Because the Scriptures are not living. The Scriptures, of themselves are merely words on a page. They have no power of themselves. The words of the Scriptures can be lifted from the page and manipulated. The Scriptures can be used to make any point that a person should choose to make. This is a misuse of the Scriptures, but history shows countless ways in which this has been done. Therefore, by mislabeling the Scriptures as the Word of God, people prepare for themselves a template by which they can speak authoritatively. In this way they can set themselves above others and even above the Lord God Himself.

But the Word of God cannot be manipulated in the way that people manipulate the Scriptures. The Word of God is God. The Word of God is omnipotent and omniscient. The Word of God does not need to be proven. The Word of God IS.

This, in fact, is the literal meaning of *exestin*. *Exestin* means *from being*. So, when people ask, **“Is it lawful?”** they are really asking, **“Is it really so?”** Another way of saying this is, **“Did God really say?”**

Sound familiar? It should, for this is what the tempter asked the woman in the garden.

This is the very question that the father of lies used to overturn the good and gracious authority of God in the lives of God's children. It is the question that we have inherited from Adam. It is the same manipulation of the truth that we attempt to utilize when we do not want to submit to what our consciences tell us by the direction of the Holy Spirit. **"Is it lawful?"** is always an attempt to find a way to redefine the truth. It is always a way to manipulate the authority of God to fit what we imagine to be our advantage.

This is done in two primary ways. First we ask, **"Is it lawful?"** in an attempt to justify what we want to do or to avoid doing. Secondly we ask this as a means of judging others. In both ways we turn away from what we know God has declared His will to be, attempting to find some way to get out from under the authority of the LORD our God so that we can go our own way while pretending to be faithful to God and His Word.

II. WHY DO YOU TEST ME?

But we cannot succeed in our wickedness anymore than the Pharisees could when they tried it. Oh, they kept trying, over and over again to ensnare the Word of God in Word. In the end, all that they could do was to lie. They took the Word and twisted it, and then condemned the Word with their lies. But they never succeeded, not even when they took the Word and crucified Him, dead and buried. The Word IS God. He cannot be ensnared or mocked or denied.

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money."

So they brought Him a denarius.

And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?"

They said to Him, "Caesar's."

For what possible reason should anyone ever put Jesus to the test? In what way has He ever been untrue? In what way has He ever done wrong? In what way has He ever done anything contrary to what He has promised?

Yet in our daily lives we challenge Him. In our thoughts we imagine ways that He has failed us or disappointed us or in some way has not been true to what He has promised. But in reality, it is we who have failed. We are the ones who have been unfaithful and then when our lack of faith fails us and when our own choices prove to be bad choices with bad consequences, we turn and accuse God of failing us. We ask, **"Why God? Where are You, God? Why have You let this happen to me, God?"** When sickness comes over us and weakness of our bodies causes us to be limited and to be in pain, we begin to accuse God of abandoning us. Yet it is really we who have turned from God so that we can no longer see His blessings and steadfastness in our times of trouble, trouble that has actually come upon us by God's promise to curse the ground for our sake so that we would not forget that sin has separated us from God and that we desperately need for Him to come to us and rescue us. Oh yes, we Pharisees live in every age and we try to twist the Word against God.

But in His mercy God does not allow this. Even these wicked Pharisees were answered so that they would be shown their need for the repentance that the Holy Spirit works through the pure and unadulterated Word. When challenged by these wicked men, Jesus demonstrated to them that the answer was already given to them, if only they would stop arguing against the truth. With what at first sounds only like anger, Jesus showed that the Law is given to direct us to God's mercy. He showed them by their own words that the truth was known to them and that the

LORD has not failed to reveal the truth openly, especially to those who have His Scriptures.

**“Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.”
So they brought Him a denarius.
And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”
They said to Him, “Caesar’s.”**

The Scriptures, of which the Pharisees were students and teachers, plainly declare the answer to their question. Thus the hypocrisy is a spiritual hypocrisy. But even from what can be known by natural law they were hypocrites. They had Caesar’s coinage in their pockets. They accepted this coinage and used it in their daily lives. How then could they deny the rules attached to that coinage? How could they possibly expect anyone to honor this coinage if it was not honored fully? This coinage was trusted for use in trading based upon the authority of the one who minted it. That authority is represented by all who use the coinage. Yet these Pharisees denied this authority and then tried to use their hypocrisy to ensnare Jesus. So Jesus allowed them to answer their own question.

It is the same for us when we challenge God. He turns us right back again to our own questions. This is where we go astray. We do not believe that God has given us the answers. Actually, more often, we do not like the answers that we know that God has given and then we try to find a way to get God to change His answers.

However, when we use the Scriptures as God gave them to be used, we do not seek answers in the Scriptures. Rather, we turn to the Scriptures and ask God what He has revealed in them. When we have trouble understanding, we turn to God and wrestle with Him until He directs us to more and more related Scriptures that open our hearts and minds to understand what He has said and continues to say to us today. When we use the Scriptures as the foundation upon which we wrestle with God, we ask Him very different questions than we ask Him when we are seeking our answers in the Scriptures alone. When we seek the answers in the Scriptures we are relying not upon God to reveal Himself and His holy will to us, but upon our own reason and strength. What happens then is that we answer our own questions. But what we need is to hear God. We need to keep wrestling with Him until He directs us to the knowledge of the Truth. When we ask God a question, we should expect that He is faithful to His promise to answer us and we should do like Jacob and not let go until He dislocates our hip and gives us the name of Israel, that is, Prevails with God. Ultimately, this is always His answer. We do not prevail by finding answers in the Scriptures. We prevail in the name by which we are declared to prevail with God. We prevail in the name of Jesus. We prevail when the answer that we hear is our unity with Christ in His body through the pure doctrine of the apostles and the administration of the pure traditions handed down, that is the pure worship that is entirely dependent upon the Sacraments. Then we prevail not in our own strength and not by our own reason, but with God. When we wrestle with God until He leads us back to the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit as our life and our hope and to the Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood for our unity and renewal in His life, then we truly have heard God and have received His Word.

III. RENDER THEREFORE

This is why Jesus answered the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians in this way:

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

What does God care about money? Money is purely an invention of mankind. It is the result of sin. If sin had not entered the world, if mankind had not departed from the life that God had created us to enjoy, money would never have become necessary. Money is a means by which we attempt to guarantee that others will not cheat us. Money is a means by which we try to protect ourselves against dishonesty. If not for the sinful nature that we all have inherited from Adam, we could trust everyone, and we would simply share with one another as anyone had need. We would be able to trust our brothers and sisters and would not even need the word *neighbor*. Neighbor is a word for someone who is in close proximity to us but is not of our family. This word was not needed before the holy image of God was exchanged for brokenness.

Now we do not see each other as family. Now we see differences rather than unity. Now we see cause for distrust and fear. Now we see others as those who would treat us unfairly and try to rape us of our goods and of our efforts and of our very selves. So we develop money as a means of trading on a more even basis.

But this does not work either. Nothing that we devise for ourselves can restore what has been lost to us on account of sin. Therefore, we have governments, by which the harm that we would do to one another is limited through punishment and through threat of physical force. God has authorized this, for without such governing authority chaos would destroy all hope of opportunity for the Gospel to be preached. Mankind would war without end and the peace of God in Christ would not be proclaimed.

Thus Jesus answers, **“Give up therefore the of Caesar to Caesar, and the of God to God.”**

Did you notice the difference between what Jesus says and what our translations usually say? Our translations usually say **“things that are Caesar’s . . . things that are God’s.”** But Jesus spoke in the singular. In fact, “thing” is not even in the text. Jesus simply says **“the of Caesar . . . the of God.”**

God does not care about our money. He cares about us. He does not give us money. Money is not from God. Money is from whatever form of government that we must endure. Government arises by God’s decree. Governments establish money as a means by which to rule over people. But God does not give us money. He gives us food and clothing and shelter. He gives us our lives and our families. He gives us the strength to work and to play and to think.

Money is a manmade invention by which we trade for the things that God has given to us. Ultimately, money is an invention by which we trade ourselves, for we sell ourselves in little pieces to others in exchange for money by which we trade for the things that God provides.

But God does not need our money. He never even asks for it. In the days of the tithe, for the tithe is strictly an Old Testament provision, the tithe was never of money. The tithe was always of the produce of the land, which is entirely dependent upon the grace of God. This was the point of the seventh year being a year of fallow, or rest, in connection with farming. God promised that even without their work, the ground would produce sufficiently for them purely by God’s grace, producing enough in the sixth year to carry them through to the harvest of the eighth year, with the produce of the seventh year supplying the needs of the poor and of the beasts of the field. The tithe was nothing more than God’s provision for the servants of the Word through the blessings given to the people. Each gave freely from what God had provided. From the Word the Levites served the brethren and from the fruits of the land the brethren served the Levites.

This system worked perfectly as long as everyone remembered that all things were from God, so that they rendered to God the of God, namely, their own life. Moreover, as long as they all understood that the life of the Church is of God and not of themselves, the united focus never was compromised and they lived together in the true unity of God's grace in His Holy Communion.

CONCLUSION

This is the conclusion that Jesus teaches us, even as He taught the Pharisees and Herodians. There is no way for God to deal with us without the condemnation of the Law. Jesus turned the Law upon the Pharisees to show them their need for the Holy Spirit's repentance. If they had been of God, they would have heard the Word and they would have rendered to God the of God. But since they were not of God, they turned away from Jesus and plotted further against the Word of God.

This is why God insists on the purity of His Holy Communion. The reason is that where such purity is not observed, it is not of God. God's communion is one of pure grace, administered through the pure means of grace. Where these are practiced, the unity of the faith is nurtured. It is not a question of our faithfulness but of God's faithfulness. The purity of the doctrine and practice is God's purity, not ours. He is the one who gives it and promises to maintain it in His Church. He is the one who has ordained the means by which this purity is and shall be preserved. Adherence to pure doctrine produces dependence upon the pure practice of the pure administration of the means of grace. Pure practice in the pure administration of the means of grace nurtures pure doctrine. This is what God has promised. Wherever the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies through this pure Gospel, true concord continues. But as with the Pharisees of old, such unity based purely on God's grace cannot be embraced and they fight to turn the hearts of the saints to rely upon their own attempts at purity. Then, they encounter the futility of such attempts and begin to put God to the test in various ways. But the Holy Spirit calls the Church to flee such and to gather again in the name of Jesus according to all that He has ordained. When we gather in His body in the way that He has ordained, we do observe the unity of the brethren of Christ and we rejoice together in whom God has made us to be in Christ Jesus our Lord. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.