

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 22:15-22

Sometimes questions can be absurd, even stupid. Here are some questions that lawyers have actually asked people under oath in a courtroom.

Lawyer: Did you blow your horn or anything?

Witness: After the accident?

Lawyer: Before the accident.

Witness: Sure, I played for ten years. I even went to school for it.

Lawyer: Do you recall the time that you examined the body?

Witness: The autopsy started around 8:30 AM

Lawyer: And was Mr. Johnson dead at the time?

Witness: No, he was sitting on the table wondering why I was doing an autopsy on him

Lawyer: What happened then?

Witness: He told me, "I have to kill you, because you can identify me".

Lawyer: And did he kill you?

Witness: Yes!

Lawyer: And where was the location of the accident?

Witness: Approximately at mile post marker 499

Lawyer: And where is mile post marker 499?

Witness: Probably between mile post marker 498 and mile post marker 500

Lawyer: Can you describe the individual?

Witness: He was about medium height and had a beard

Lawyer: Was this individual male or female?

Ok, in our gospel narrative for today, the Pharisees and the Herodians were joining forces against Jesus.

These two groups were on the opposite extremes of Jewish culture. The Herodians were a secular group who supported the Romans, and the Pharisees were a spiritual group who hated the Romans. But this time, they had a common enemy, their enemy was Jesus, this radical extremist, this rabbi from Nazareth of Galilea.

But the Pharisees and the Herodians wanted to get rid of Jesus. They demonstrated the old saying, “my enemy’s enemy, is my friend.”

Did you notice the Jewish leaders approached Jesus under the cloak of flattery? They buttered Him up, by saying that He was a man of integrity and a great teacher.

Flattery isn’t the same thing as a true admiration. Flattery is patting someone on the back to find the soft spot to insert the dagger. Flattery is just gossip in reverse.

Gossip is saying something bad behind a person’s back that you would never say to his or her face; flattery is saying something good to a person’s face that you would never say behind his or her back. Flattery is mouth to mouth manipulation.

After softening Jesus up with a few short jabs of flattery, they slipped in their absurd question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” (verse 17)

As soon as this question was asked, I bet the Jewish leaders were giggling with glee, because they were certain, that Jesus was trapped with no where to go.

Don’t you hate the questions, where the questioner restricts you to only a yes or no answer? If Jesus had said: “Yes”, all the people who expected the Messiah to liberate them from the Romans would have deserted Him.

On the other hand, if Jesus had said, “No”, the Romans would have arrested Him on the spot for treason.

Instead, Jesus who didn’t have a coin to His name said to them, “Show me the money!” As He held up the Roman Denarius, He asked this question: “Whose head is this, and whose title?”

The coin was a Roman Denarius which had the image of Tiberius Caesar stamped on it. The inscription on the flip side in Latin would have read: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, high priest.”

By the way, the coin itself was blasphemous to good Jews, because it bore a graven image, which violated the First Commandment.

Then Jesus gave His wise answer to a foolish question. He said: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God, the things that are God’s.” (verse 21)

Jesus’ brilliant reply teaches us three things.

*First of all, as a follower of Jesus, you and I hold dual citizenships.

When I was on active duty with the U.S. Army, whenever I was deployed to another country, I had basically two passports. One was my “official orders” (which functioned as a passport) and one was my passport from the U.S. State Department.

Since I retired from the Army in 2013, I have only one official passport, which comes from the U.S. State Department. And if I were to travel overseas again, really that's all I would need.

Now some people have two or more passports, because they are citizens of two or more countries.

In this scripture passage for today, Jesus reminds us, that we hold dual citizenships. And no, one does not have to have, two passports or more.

Jesus said: "Give therefore to the emperor, the things that are the emperor's and to God, the things that are God's." (verse 21)

By that statement, Jesus indicated, that all of us, live in relationship to an earthly government. He also said give to God, what is God's.

In addition to our relationship to an earthly government, we must also, consider our relationship to God.

As Christians, we live in two kingdoms, the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. It's like holding two passports.

The Apostle Paul pointed out, that he was a Roman citizen, a prized status in those days, but he realized that he was a citizen of heaven as well.

We have a dual citizenship, we are American citizens therefore we have a responsibility to our government as well as to God.

*Secondly, We are to honor and obey the authorities who govern us. Jesus said: "Give therefore to the emperor, the things that are the emperor's" what this means is that since the coin, the Roman Denarius was minted in Rome and then distributed. It's proper to give them back to Rome.

For instance, when I pull out a quarter out of my pocket, I could ask the same question, whose image is on the coin? Washington's. Although George Washington is dead, it would be proper for me to say, 'Give back to Washington, that which is Washington's'.

Because our government minted and distributed this coin, it's appropriate to give it back to them.

As Americans, we should submit to the authority of our government. The Apostle Paul tells us in the Book of Romans, chapter 13 starting at verse 1. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God."

You and I may not like the way, our government works, and the way some of our elected officials behave, but the Bible says that God establishes governments. Remember, when the Apostle Paul wrote this, Nero was emperor of Rome, and he was no saint. In fact, he was systematically rounding up Christians and killing them.

All power of every government, comes from God. Do you remember when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate on the day He was crucified?

The gospel writers tell us that Pontus Pilate asked Jesus all kinds of questions and Jesus stood there quietly without giving any answers.

As Governor Pilate questioned Jesus, Jesus finally said to Pilate, "Look you have no power, except that which is given to you from above".

First we are commended in scripture to pray for those in positions of authority.

That's why we are to pray regularly for our President, members of Congress, the Governor of this State, and for our local leaders.

Second, we submit to the government. That means we are to obey the laws and recognize the authority of those who maintain the law.

By the way, when I talk about the government, I am not talking about politics here, I am making no reference to whether one is a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or whatever your liking. I am talking about the government.

Let me remind you, we should not only pray for our government and submit to them, we should support our government, i.e with our tax money.

Someone once said: our responsibility to our government can be summed up in these words: Pray, obey and pay.

The problem most folks have with this passage from Matthew, is that, often the focus is on what Jesus said about giving to the emperor, the things that are emperor's, therefore we miss the main point.

Jesus also said: Give to God, the things that are God's. So this brings us to our next point.

*Thirdly, Jesus wasn't talking mainly about our relationship with our government, He was talking about our responsibility toward our Creator.

We give back to God that which is His. So what is God's? When the people of Jesus' day looked at that Roman Denarius, they saw the image of Caesar, because his image was stamped on that coin.

So where do we find God's image? Well, to answer that question go the Book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 27, the scripture tells us: "So God created humankind, in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female, he created them."

What do we owe God? We owe Him, whatever He has His image stamped upon. That's us. We are to give Him our very lives.

When God created us in His image, it doesn't mean that we look like God, it means that as God is triune, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we are created as triune: Body, soul, and Spirit.

Now none of us may look very "godly", but we are made in His image. Because His image is stamped upon us, we are to give Him something greater than our money, we give Him ourselves, our obedience, our time, our resources, our allegiance and our worship.

We don't give the government (Federal or State), all of our money, though it times it may feel like that's all they want. When it comes to giving ourselves to God, there is only one amount that is accepted, ALL!

No part of our life is excluded from our fundamental covenant with the one who is our Creator, and who has redeemed us from sin and death, to make us citizens of His Kingdom.

Everyday, whether you think about it or not, we live as citizens of two kingdoms, an earthly kingdom, to which we owe certain allegiances, and a heavenly kingdom to which we owe everything.

Remember, what we owe to this earthly kingdom is limited, and one day it will end, it will turn to dust. But God's Kingdom will never end, it will endure forever, it will never turn to dust.

What we owe to God is not limited to taxes and will never end. Having and living by faith in Jesus Christ means we are not just members of a religious club, or a social club, but that we are citizens of two kingdoms, which are sometimes in conflict.

Jesus gave the emperor what belong to him, and never challenged the right of Rome to charge taxes so as to maintain law and order in that society, but Jesus always gave God what belongs to Him.

Jesus acknowledged the right of Pilate to take His life, even though He could have avoided death, but Jesus gave His life on that cross, Jesus gave it all to God, all that He had, so that through His death and resurrection, we would be redeemed, forgiven, loved and be free to be the people God has called us to be.

Through God's baptismal grace, may we live as people of God, in hope and in faith as we live in this earthly kingdom, looking forward to the day, when we will be living in completeness, wholeness, and joy, in God's heavenly kingdom, which has no end. Amen.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, through your grace, and Christ's death and resurrection, You have claimed us as your own, You have made us children of your heavenly kingdom. You have placed us, as citizens of this sinful and fallen world, with obligations to the Kingdom of this world. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, help us to see your kingdom, so that we may live lives of peace and of service to You and to one another. All these things we humbly pray in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.