

“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.”

It’s easy for us to quote these words of Jesus, like the Pharisees, it is easy to marvel at the words and then walk away. But as we walk away, we think to ourselves, “What did Jesus mean by this, exactly?” What things belong to the government, and which things belong to God? This is a question that the Church has wrestled with for centuries.

Many of us are familiar with Luther’s doctrine of two kingdoms. That is, the kingdom of the right has to do with spiritual matters and deals primarily with in terms of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to transform hearts to follow Jesus. Give to God the things that are God’s.

The Kingdom of the Left deals with politics, government, and the civic realm. Rulers use coercion and threats of the law to enforce behavior. The IRS threatens you with fines if you don’t pay your taxes. The police pull you over if you speed or engage in some other kind of unsafe driving behavior. The city council stiffens enforcement of camping bans when homeless people take over public parks and parking structures.

But what we need to understand is that **DESPITE OUTWARD APPEARANCES, ONE KING RULES OVER TWO KINGDOMS TO ADVANCE THE GOSPEL.** It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking we live in two different worlds: right now we’re in the kingdom of the right, but the second we step out of those doors, we’re in Caesar’s world. The one God rules over both the spiritual realm and the secular realm and there is not a Berlin Wall dividing it.

First, I. One king rules over the things of Caesar. As we approach our text, we see Jesus face off once again with some agents of the kingdom of the right, that spiritual realm. Namely, the Pharisees, who this time are in league with the Herodians to try to entrap Jesus. Remember, at this time, Israel was occupied by the Roman government, and the Herodians were all about appeasing their Italian overlords. The Pharisees, not so much, they wanted nothing to do with the Romans, but they hated Jesus so much that they’d team up with anyone willing to help. The Pharisees go along with the Herodians to ask the question, **“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”**

The Pharisees thought they had set a perfect trap. If Jesus tells them, “Yes” then He would be unfaithful to the strict Jews in the crowd who considered their Roman rulers to be evil. If Jesus tells them, “No” then the Herodians are right there to report Jesus to the Romans, and Jesus will be arrested for encouraging others to disobey the law. Can you imagine what it would be like if we put up posters around town advertising a Faith Lutheran Church sponsored class on tax evasion? I’m sure the IRS would not be too happy with us.

Elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, a tax collector comes to Jesus and asks Him to pay the temple tax. He essentially says that sons of royalty do not need to pay taxes to their own fathers. Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, does not need to pay taxes because He knows the God to whom Caesar Himself has to answer to.

And this is the irony, the Pharisees and the Herodians think they are just talking to just another Rabbi, just another Teacher. If only they realized that they were talking to the King to whom all rulers on earth derive their authority, and all people must stand before when He comes again to be our judge.

God calls rulers to work in the realm of the left-hand kingdom, the secular kingdom, to keep the peace and to ensure justice. Your taxes pay for roads for us to get to and from church, for firefighters to put out fires, for police to keep us safe, for judges to punish criminals, for military to defend our country, for teachers to teach our young, for buses to transport people to work, for libraries at which we can check out books, and much, much more. These are examples of render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.

God isn’t locked in heaven, and we can say that it is the hand of God when a firefighter rescues someone from a burning building or a police officer arrests a criminal. It is a God pleasing thing for construction crews to repave roads so they don’t become moon craters year after year. The Lord uses teachers and librarians to help both young and old learn.

As Christians, giving to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s involves not only paying taxes, but also honoring those put in positions of authority over us. A real patriot is the fellow who gets a parking ticket and rejoices that the system works. We see this clearly as Jesus paid the temple tax even when He didn’t need to, when He submitted Himself to the Roman authorities, even to the point of death on a cross. Many of us here have lived through bad presidential administrations, but none of us were alive during the regime that crucified the sinless Son of God, the King Himself.

Secondly, II. One king rules over the things of God. This leads us into the other irony of this text. The Pharisees were the leading churchmen of their day. They of all people should have known to whom they were talking when they accosted Jesus that day. Yet, how does Jesus answer their seemingly innocuous question?

“But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?” In Matthew’s Gospel, there are two groups that test Jesus, one are the enemies of Jesus—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and Lawyers—and the devil. The Pharisees, although supposedly representing the Lord, are actually teaming up with the devil.

Jesus tells the Pharisees, give to God what is God’s, and they never actually do. They never give God the glory, the worship, and the trust that’s due Him. How

do I know this? They fight tooth and nail to destroy Jesus. They would have honored Jesus if they had wanted to honor God.

The right hand kingdom is the spiritual kingdom which works to provide life in Christ through the Gospel. This is the kingdom of church and worship, devotions and prayer, and deep and eternal things. This is the kingdom where we hear the Gospel which is the best news of Jesus Christ who died for sinners like you and me and saves us apart from anything we've done. We simply trust His promises. It is the realm of forgiveness, grace, and Good News.

Our citizenship in the kingdom of the right, the spiritual kingdom, is bigger than what country you're from. It's bigger than what state you live in. It's bigger than who you voted for in the last presidential or mayoral election. It is about receiving life from the very King who stood before Pharisees and Herodians who were so busy getting rid of him, they didn't realize who they were trying to get rid of in the first place.

To give to God what is Gods starts with meeting God in the places He promises to be. The Psalmist asks, **“What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD, I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.”** This happens through joining a Church that teaches the Bible faithfully, through hearing His Word preached there, receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion often, and taking this Word home that it becomes part of our daily lives through prayer and devotion.

Finally, III. Despite outward appearances, the King works through both kingdoms to advance the Gospel. Some may take this teaching of two kingdoms and use it as the license of freedom from religion. One nonprofit of that same name is based out of Madison, Wisconsin and advocates that our constitution tells us religion should have nothing to do with our government. We often talk about the freedom of religion which is more neutral, it's as though the secular world and the spiritual world are Mars and Venus, never the two shall meet.

I would argue the Bible teaches of a freedom *to* religion. God established kings and presidents, Caesars and Prime Ministers to clear the runway that we might take off into the heavenly realms.

That doesn't mean that we need to pass a law making the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod the official state religion of the United States, but it does mean that the kingdom of the secular things are ultimately in service to the kingdom of the spiritual things. For example, God enabled the civil engineer to design the roads well so that you could get to church today. Police officers were up late last night enforcing the law so we didn't have to worry about our safety on the way to church. Even if you never read a Bible in public school, teachers taught you to read so that you can read a Bible.

In a perfect world, the doctrine of the two kingdoms wouldn't be so controversial, but we don't live in a perfect world. All of us are sinners in need of a Savior, and even the best of us will make mistakes and fail perfectly to enact God's plan for us here on earth. But what do we do when the government is corrupt and the church is corrupt?

As we mentioned earlier in this sermon, this summarizes the situation Jesus found Himself in this text from Matthew 22. The Romans were godless pagans and the Jewish leaders failed to recognize the true king. Corrupt rulers sentences an innocent man to death, and they were egged on by the very religious authorities to whom God gave the task to welcome the Messiah.

Luther said the Devil is still God's Devil. That is to say, everything is under the Lord's control and sovereignty, even the Devil himself. When the devil works to subvert God's will, he is nevertheless playing into God's hand as God is able to work good out of his evil. We need look no further than Jesus' death and resurrection. At the end of the day, God is in charge, no matter how bad things may get.

Pray for your rulers: both worldly and churchly. They have tough jobs, and yes, some of them may be wicked, but pray nonetheless that they repent. I wrote an email to the mayor saying among other things, that we pray for him monthly by name at church, and he actually responded with thanks.

There are many avenues to address grievances. Even if your complaints get ignored or tossed out, public schools answer to the public and so do libraries. If there's something being taught at the local school or a display at a local library that does injury to the Gospel, we as private citizens have the right to protest.

We have the power of the ballot to vote out bad rulers. If you question the integrity of our elections, don't just complain about it, volunteer or work as a poll worker to see how the sausage is made.

These are just a few suggestions, take them with a grain of salt, and don't hope to unravel centuries of political and theological debate in a twenty minute sermon.

Regardless, faith sees the Lord working through means of sinners as His servants to promote peace and order as well as to spread the Gospel. Tyrants and false teachers will have to answer to the Lord on judgment day. Until then, we imperfectly render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the thing that are God's knowing that our perfect Lord stands in our midst as King, working all things for His purposes. Amen!