

“Caesar’s God—and Yours” Matthew 22:15–22 Pentecost20A 10-22-17

A familiar distinction is often cited by Lutherans, that we serve two kingdoms, civil authority and divine authority. It is also called the Kingdom of the Left hand and the Kingdom of the Right hand. The Bible does not contradict that distinction, but it does teach that in reality, there is only one authority. God rules the church by grace and the world by laws.

As Isaiah cited, he acts through secular powers like Cyrus, as He did later through Caesar, to do His will for His people. Though Caesar considered himself to be a god, he was unwittingly subject to our God. Our God is also Caesar’s God.

Therefore there is no contradiction between serving the state and God. With rare exceptions, when we obey the lesser civil authority, we also obey the greater authority of God.

The distinction lies in the kind of obligation we have to both. Such is the concern of today’s familiar Gospel lesson in which Jesus answers the question: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?

The question was asked for no other reason than to trap Jesus in a no win situation. The Pharisees and the Herodians wanted him either discredited by the people or killed by the Romans. If he said “no” to the paying the tax he would earn the verdict of treason. If he favored paying it, he would lose his adoring crowd. Jesus not only avoids the trap, he also teaches a timeless truth for us today.

The tax was paid with a denar, which bore the image of Caesar. The government made the money and can demand it back through taxes. It would contradict God’s will for Jesus to say the tax should not be paid. Taxes finance what God has ordained the government to do. Establish law and order, build infrastructure, keep foreign invaders out.

Rome did all that. In fact, by doing those things, Caesar, as did Cyrus before him, made it easier for the Gospel to spread throughout the empire. Good roads, a time of peace, and a common language helped the church to grow. Rome’s persecution brought new believers inspired by those who refused to deny Christ even in death.

Because humans govern, we can often find something to complain about. But it’s better for us and the Church than anarchy. Governments provide many services today that make it possible for the Gospel to go forward. Caesar is still serving his and our God today. For that reason we pay the taxes we owe. The only thing we don’t owe Caesar is obedience to laws that violate God’s higher authority.

Jesus said to give to God what is God’s. But what is that? In stewardship talks we say rightly that all the earth is the Lord’s. As government money passes through our hands, so do all other earthly blessings. We manage everything and own nothing. Nothing follows us in death. God’s people manage all resources to serve those with both physical and spiritual needs.

But God owns more than our material blessings. Paul wrote that we are not our own, but were bought with a price. God has redeemed our bodies, including our thoughts and desires. Peter names the purchase price: Not gold or silver, but the precious blood of Christ. Then he called the Church, *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood children, a holy nation, a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

As individual believers in God’s Church we share the conviction of St. Paul, who wrote, *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

We give to God our very selves in service. We do it for our neighbor who benefits when God works in our charity and love. We do it for us, for the blessings that result from our good works confirm and strengthen our faith. Giving ourselves to God in this life gives us a foretaste of the blessed perfection to come in the next life.

Yes, we pay our taxes. We give government its due. For God uses our rulers as one way to do his will in our lives. Our God reigns over all kingdoms for the good His Church.

We also give to God what is His, not just our money, but our whole being. Yes, there are two kingdoms, but there is only one King. Him we serve, for He has first served us by his grace through Christ. Amen.