

11.15.2020 Trinity 23 (Matthew 22:15-22)

When I was a kid, the perfect Saturday morning consisted of two things: cereal and cartoons. I don't know what it was like growing up at your house, but if I had a carton of milk, a box of Captain Crunch, and was watching an episode of Looney Tunes, life was good. As you know, there's a big cast of Looney Tunes characters, but two of my favorites have always been Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner. I'm sure you remember the way Wile E. Coyote would devise a plan, receive his mail-ordered ACME products, and then build these complex traps that would always backfire, leaving him either burnt to a crisp, squashed like a bug, or falling into a canyon so deep that all you see is a rising cloud of dust when he finally hits the ground. Wile E. Coyote was never successful in his repeated attempts to trap, and then eat the Roadrunner, but don't judge him by his many failures, because if you've seen him in action, then you know that this coyote is very intelligent, he's cunning, and he's always coming up with a new plan to trap the Roadrunner.

Some of the qualities that we see in the coyote are also recognized in the first century civil and religious leaders who were constantly trying to trap Jesus. In the Gospel passage we read this morning, St. Matthew tells us that once again these men *"went out and laid plans to trap Him in His words"* (Matthew 22:15 NIV). These highly intelligent and cunning leaders of Israel wouldn't be deterred from their many attempts to lure Jesus into saying something that could discredit Him, or that could lead to His arrest. They came to Him, hoping to trap Him, with impossible questions like, *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?"* (Matthew 19:3). *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"* (Matthew 22:35-36). They brought a woman to Him who was caught in adultery and said, *"Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?"* (John 8:3-6). Then there's the question we heard today, *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"* (Matthew 22:17).

When I was writing this sermon and thought about that question, I couldn't help but picture Wile E. Coyote proudly standing in front of his drawing board after crafting a plan for the perfect trap. I mean this was a question for which there was no escape. If Jesus answered by simply saying, "Yes, humble

yourselves under this burden and pay the exorbitant taxes imposed on you by your Roman oppressors...” then He would certainly multiply His enemies, many would view Him as a traitor, and that answer may even lead the people to completely reject the thought that He could be their promised Messiah, because the common understanding of what their Messiah came to accomplish included driving out any occupying power and establishing an earthly kingdom.

On the other hand, if Jesus said, “No, resist Rome, refuse to pay these taxes...” then He’d be viewed by the Roman authorities as someone who’s leading the people to rebel against them. A crime that would get Him thrown into prison, and the Pharisees would’ve successfully sprung their trap. Whether He answered yes or no, like Wile E. Coyote they were certain that they had Him this time, but unlike the coyote, who actually had a chance at catching another creature, these men were creatures who were trying to trap their Creator!

At this point, St. Matthew tells us that “*Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the tax”* (Matthew 22:18-19). Instead of being caught in their trap, Jesus did what the Pharisees never expected. He didn’t simply answer yes or no, but instead told them to show Him the coin, and then holding it up He asked them the question, “*Whose image and inscription is this?*” (Matthew 22:20). In other words, who issues this currency? When they told Him that the coin was issued by Caesar, He said to them, “*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*” (Matthew 22:21).

The Pharisee’s perfect plan was a miserable failure. Not only were they unable to trap Jesus in His words, He ended up using this moment to teach those who were present that day, and every generation since then, an important lesson about what we owe government, and what we owe God. The first part of His answer, *Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s*, is the source of what St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, in which he said, “*Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes*” (Romans 13:7 NIV). Jesus’ answer is also the basis of what St. Peter

wrote in his first epistle. He said, *“For the Lord’s sake, submit to all human authority - whether the king as the head of state, or the officials he has appointed”* (1 Peter 2:13-14 NLT).

Christians give to everyone what we owe them. We pay our taxes. We pray for our country and its leaders, whether we agree with them or not, because we know that God created government, and that ultimately government exists to serve Him. Christians obey laws and submit to all human authority because, again in the words of St. Paul, *“there is no authority except from God, and those (authorities) that exist have been instituted by God”* (Romans 13:1).

So, the first part of Jesus’ answer, *Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s*, clearly expresses our Lord’s command that Christians are to give to government what belongs to government, and the second part of His reply, *Render to God the things that are God’s*, communicates the truth that there are limits to what we owe government, and the Bible is filled with examples of saints who understood the limits of government, and chose obedience to God, no matter the cost. Daniel was thrown in the lion’s den because he prayed to God instead of King Darius (Daniel 6:10-24), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were thrown in a fiery furnace for refusing to worship a gold image set up by King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3:8-18), and when the Jewish governmental authorities command the Apostles *“not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus”* (Acts 4:18; 5:28), they were beaten and imprisoned because they didn’t stop teaching and proclaiming the Good News that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 5:42).

We give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but if Caesar commands us not to do what God has clearly commanded us to do, or commands us to do what God forbids, then we recognize that government has rebelled against God, attempting to set itself up in His place, and at that point we must follow such biblical examples and *“obey God rather than men...”* (Acts 5:29).

These examples are all directly related to what Jesus said to the people that day, *“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* When Jesus chose to avoid the trap set for Him by

holding up a coin, it was obvious to everyone that the coin belonged to Caesar because it bore his image. What Jesus intends to be just as obvious to us is the fact that we belong to God, because we bear His image. We were made by Him, in His *image* and *likeness* (Genesis 1:26-27), and so it follows that we are meant to be given entirely to Him. In just a few minutes, as we prepare to receive our Lord in Holy Communion, we will pray these familiar words that express that truth perfectly: “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...” We approach the Lord’s Table with hearts ready to receive, and hearts ready to render. Hearts ready to receive the gift of God’s only Son, and hearts ready to render *to God the things that are God’s*: our selves, our souls and bodies.

We give to Caesar what is Caesar’s by paying our taxes, being good citizens, and praying for our nation and its leaders, but we give to God what is God’s by offering all that we are, and all that we have to Him as a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice. In other words, we owe some things to government, but we owe everything to God. *All* of our heart, *all* of our soul, *all* of our mind, and *all* of our strength. Caesar can have our money, but he can’t have us. He can’t have our hearts, our souls, or our minds, because they’re already taken. They belong to God. On the Cross at Calvary, He bought them at a price (1 Corinthians 6:20).