

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“Things For Caesar ~ Things For God”

Matthew 22: 15-22

Trust a Pharisee to get you into trouble, or at least, to try. You see, Pharisees are like that. They were a sect within Judaism that began during the inter-testamental period – that is, between the writing of the Old and New Testaments. They rigidly observed not only the written law but the traditional manmade laws too. Leaders of their time, they were in the worst sense of the word, legalists. Their God was not really the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of justice and mercy, their God was a paper god, a god of laws and rules and regulations. And if you wanted to be a good person and get right with God, they would gladly instruct you in just how to do that and they'd be equally as glad to condemn you when you failed. And as it is with any good legalists, they would willingly connive, trick or try to dispose of anyone or anything that got in their way. The saddest thing was they did all this in the name of God.

Jesus fell into disfavor with these Pharisees early on in his ministry. They not only rejected him as the Messiah, they rejected whatever he said and whatever he did. And at every turn of the road they would gladly argue with him and try to prove him wrong. You see, they saw Jesus as a threat to their status quo. And so they did all they could to discredit him, to make him look foolish before the people, and when that didn't work, they plotted to get rid of him altogether by having him put to death.

It was such a motive that drove them to approach Jesus in our Gospel lesson for today. They thought that if they could put Jesus in the proverbial position of being between a rock and a hard place, they could discredit him and put an end to both him and the trouble he was causing them. And so they devised what they thought was the perfect “trick” question. “Let's ask him about paying taxes to Rome,” they said, “and no matter what answer he gives, we've got him. For if he says the people should pay taxes to Caesar, he'll be in trouble with the people. For after all, most of the people in Israel hate Caesar and Rome with a passion. And if he says the people shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, he'll certainly be in trouble with Rome. After all, Rome doesn't tolerate rebellion.” It was perfect or so they thought. If the people don't get him, the Roman government would. He would be in trouble no matter what he said. Or so it seemed.

But Jesus wasn't about to be “had”. He saw through their scheme and called them hypocrites -- hypocrites because they talked like religious people but they weren't really religious at all. They weren't serving God, they were serving themselves and their own selfish interests. But rather than answer yes or no to their question and rather than just sending them away with no answer at all, Jesus answered them with the now-famous words, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.” And with that, Matthew says that the Pharisees went away, surprised and baffled.

Now you and I know that that answer wasn't just a clever way to avoid trouble. You and I know that it was a profound answer that spoke directly to the human condition and that it still does. You see, that answer still speaks to us today because we too are constantly torn between people and things that seem to demand our time and our energies and our resources and God – we too

are called to decide how we are to live our lives in the midst of that kind of pressure from day to day. Do I do this or do I do that? Do I use my time working on this or do I spend my time working on that? And what about my money, do I spend it in this way or do I spend it in that way? All of these are legitimate questions – questions of life that we need to answer whether we want to or not.

But as we daily decide what to render to Caesar and what to render to God, we must first of all look at our self and our motivation. There isn't a pastor alive who couldn't tell you stories of how people have come to him asking him what they should do or asking him to tell them if what they've done is all right. But what can a pastor say when someone says to him, "I work long hours all week and late on Saturday night. I'm tired on Sunday morning and need my sleep. Surely God doesn't want me to go without sleep, does He?" What can one say except, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's"? And what about the person who says, "With the high cost of living and the way my financial situation is, how can I continue to give to church?" except "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's"? And what about when someone says, "I just can't get involved with church work. I have so many things to do at home and at work already. After all, I only have 24 hours in a day. Certainly God doesn't expect the impossible, does He?" Well, once again what can one say but "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." You see, Jesus wouldn't tell the Pharisees what to do nor would he fall for their question – and neither should we. Each of us must struggle, decide for himself and then stand accountable for that decision.

But how do we decide? It would seem that we have a choice – either we are guided by what we think is right or else by what God thinks is right. In every instance when we are faced with a decision in which we are called to render something to someone, we need to ask ourselves, "What would God have me do in this situation?" And yet how often don't we ask, "What do I want to do?"

To know what God would have us do means having day to day contact with God and His Word. For, God, in His Word, stands ready to guide and direct us as we seek His guidance, counsel and aid. And when we approach Him with open hearts and open minds, He will lead us to make the best decision possible. Now in some matters the Word of God is quite clear and if we choose to ignore it or go against it, we do so at our own risk and we realize it for what it is – sin – missing the mark, not doing what God would have me do or doing something God doesn't want me to do. When God speaks clearly, His children are called to hear and obey. But when God doesn't speak so clearly, what he gives us are guidelines but then says, "I have given you a choice this day, and guided by the Spirit of my Word, the decision is up to you now." Now the older I get the more I realize that life is not all black and white. Some of it is but some of it isn't. Some of life is lived in the "gray area" where things are not so clear. But it's at those times especially that we need to look at ourselves and our motivation in the light of God's Word. And then, and only then, can we make a decision in the Spirit of that Word. It sure would be a lot easier for all of us if Jesus had spelled out what was Caesar's and what was God's. But he didn't and rightly so.

As one Lutheran theologian said, "It was the only possible answer, because it escaped the superficial question and then issued a challenge to ultimate commitment and one's response to

the plurality and priority of claims upon one's life. Not only the church as a whole but every member of the church at all times must determine at every moment what is Caesar's and what is God's."

May grant that at every moment this coming week we, who are His children by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, may determine what is pure and just and honorable and pleasing in God's sight and then may we have the courage of Spirit-filled convictions to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to render to God the things that are God's. And may God grant this to us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.