

GOD AND COUNTRY

a sermon by

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Text: "Jesus 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

It's almost over.

Within the next 48 hours our nation's polls will open and Americans will cast our collective vote. Even though it is only hours away, the outcome of this election is simply too close to call. This is among the most closely watched and hotly contested mid-term elections in more than 50 years.

So, who are you going to vote for? How do you possibly decide?

Now, I must admit to being a bit of a politics junkie. I followed the posturing, the primaries, the debates, and now, the race to the finish line. If you are among the undecided voters, perhaps this little summary will help place each candidate in a proper context.

The Democrats want to save you from the Republicans.

The Republicans want to save you from the Democrats.

A handful of independent candidates want to save us from every body else.

Now, which savior will you vote for? How will you decide how to vote?

Wouldn't it be easier if you already knew who would win? You could then decide whether or not you even needed to stand in line at the polls. Then, once there, you would need only to decide whether to back the winner or to cast your vote in protest.

Easier still would be to know which candidate had the endorsement of the Lord our God. Which person would, as the Psalmist counseled, "Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling."

In whom, I wonder, would God find pleasure?

The problem here is this: you can't tell. You simply can not discern from the media reports which candidates would have the greatest amount of divine favoritism.

Many candidates certainly claim to be that particular person. Many candidates for office are decent, church-going citizens. Some remain married to their first spouse. Many of these marriages, by all accounts, have raised pretty good kids. Many families are said to be committed to Jesus Christ and their households appear committed to the work of the church. Some prominent candidates are even Presbyterians.

Now, with these descriptions, it may be impossible for you to discern the candidates upon whom God's favor would rest.

If you can't tell which candidate is the anointed one, the one set apart by the Lord our God, you are in good company. You see, in Jesus' day, not even the religious and political leaders could readily discern the identity or mission of Jesus Christ.

I.

Notice what happened in the segment which we read from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. As he traveled, Jesus carried on conversations with many people. Among them were leaders within the religious community; including Pharisees (a certain group, something like a political party, within the church), and Herodians (civic-minded and politically influential members of the church). Matthew is sure to mention that "the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians."

This was *not* a casual conversation. They were asking questions intended to entrap Jesus. Surely he could not continue his ministry of teaching.

Or, could he?

Notice now how the conversation begins. The Pharisees and Herodians address him politely. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." Well, at least this sounds polite. But, this is not an unbiased statement made in the presence of Jesus. It is, in reality, a series of accusations leveled against him.

"Teacher," they called him. Instead of the title specific to religious teachers, a more common, less respectful term is spoken. Is this the correct title to be used? Is Jesus a teacher? Well, yes, Jesus is teaching. But, more than this, Jesus is Lord.

"We know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth." Translated more precisely, their statement would sound like this, "We know that you are truthful, and teach the way of God in truth."

This reference to the truth is interesting. Throughout the Gospel of John we are bombarded with the powerful image of Jesus himself being the truth. This is not so in Matthew's Gospel. Here, and only here, does Matthew use these words for "truth."

Matthew, however, does promote powerful images of Jesus as the way of God. For example:

John the Baptist is heard quoting the prophet Isaiah, saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Jesus himself teaches, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the [way] that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the [way] that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Does Jesus teach the way of God in truth?

Again, the answer is yes. But, Jesus does more than teach the way of God by speaking truthfully. Speaking truthfully, Jesus is the way of God.

Jesus *is* the way of God.

Oddly enough, the Pharisees and the Herodians had found the way of God, the way that leads to life. But, now, in this conversation, they set out to entrap him that he might be put to death. So, they continue saying to Jesus, you “show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.” Listen, again, to this much more precise translation of what is being said to Jesus. “You do not see the rank of people.”

II.

The Pharisees and the Herodians are not the last group to consider themselves of such great importance. Throughout history, many elected leaders have seen themselves as great moral and religious leaders. In this country, it is not uncommon for elected leaders to use the language of scripture to advance that claim. In his first inaugural address, Franklin Roosevelt invoked the Biblical image of himself as a savior, using these words.

“The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.”

Not every one agreed with the policies of President Roosevelt. There was an occasion when Chester Nimitz attended a parade with his family. As President Franklin Roosevelt approached, the crowd came to its feet. In a moment of adolescent protest, the Admiral’s teenage daughter remained in her seat. Nimitz was heard by some as he said to his daughter, “You may, if you wish, dislike and even protest the policies of Franklin Roosevelt. But, you will stand and honor the President.”

The Pharisees and Herodians continued saying to Jesus, you “show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.” Their complaint is hidden in the precise words that they spoke, “You do not see the rank of people.”

Isn’t this interesting? These people who were speaking to Jesus held themselves in very high esteem. These were the great religious leaders, the politically powerful, and the social elite. They ask in effect, ‘Do you not see our importance?’ No, “You do not see the rank of people.”

This is not a statement made with polite deference. It cries out with self-inflated importance. In this they are saying, “*We* are the religious authorities, the civic authorities, the social authorities. *We* are people to be treated with greater respect than what is to be shown to any others.” They imply to Jesus, “get behind us. *We* – not you – are the leaders of this world.”

Now, with all of this said and implied, here comes the final question, the trap that surely will ensnare Jesus. “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

There it is! The ultimate trick question!

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Yes or no; is it lawful?

If Jesus says “Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes;” then the Pharisees may seize him as one who is unfaithful to the church. But, if Jesus says “No, it is not lawful to pay taxes;” then the Herodians may seize him as one who is unfaithful to the government.

There it is, not even Jesus himself could escape. Finally, Jesus has been trapped.

Or, has he?

“But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the money for the tax.’ And they brought him a coin. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ ²¹ They said, ‘Caesar's.’ Then he said to them, ‘Render therefore 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.”

III.

This Tuesday we will cast our collective ballot. On Wednesday morning, the polls will be closed and most of the votes will have been counted. It is likely that we will know the outcome of the national, state and local races. Then the whole world will learn who we have elected, anointed, to be our next leaders. This is what we will do as Americans.

But, apart from this, should not we, the Body of Christ, ask these very important questions: What are we asking of our President? Of our legislature? Of our courts?

Are we asking our elected officials to be our moral and spiritual leaders?

Is not this role reserved for Jesus Christ, who alone is Lord and Head of the Church?

Are we asking our Legislature to levy taxes sufficient to provide for those in need?

Is this not the purpose of paying a tithe to the church; that we, as the body of Christ, may care for the least of those among us? Are not we the ones who have been instructed by God to clothe the naked, to house the homeless, to feed the hungry?

Are we demanding that our courts lead in the work of repentance and redemption?

Is this not the proper jurisdiction of the Body of Christ? Is it not among the great ends of the church that we would promote social righteousness and exhibit the kingdom of heaven here in this world?

It appears that we, as the Church, have lost our way. We, the Church, have accepted the notion that our government should do what rightfully remains our work, as the Church.

In doing this, are we not acting like the Pharisees and the Herodians before us? Do we not imply our belief that *we* are the religious, the civic and the social leaders? In this, our actions speak for us, saying, ‘Jesus, do you not see our importance? Or, do you not see the rank of people?’

Fortunately for us, we know exactly what Jesus has to say about this. Here we are, filled with the self-inflated importance of ourselves, and focused on the rank of people. Now, more than ever, we need to hear the answer given by Jesus.

Jesus said, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

The party that wins these national elections will celebrate their victory and will claim to control the agenda for the next election of the President of these United States. Regardless of who wins this election, or any other election, Jesus Christ will continue to be Lord and head of the Church.

END NOTES