

The Folly of testing God

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost) is Matthew 22:15-22. This text is about paying taxes to Caesar.

There is an old saying that politics makes strange bedfellows. Here the Pharisees and the Herodians display a common hatred for Jesus that overshadows their sharp disagreements with each other.

The Pharisees were ardent nationalists, opposed to Roman rule, while the hated Herodians, as their name indicates, supported the Roman rule of the Herod's. Now, however, the Pharisees enlisted the help of the Herodians to trap Jesus in his words. After trying to put him off guard with flattery, they sprang their question: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (v. 17). If he said "No," the Herodians would report him to the Roman governor and he would be executed for treason. If he said "Yes," the Pharisees would denounce him to the people as disloyal to his nation.

The Pharisees would not come themselves, but would send a group of their keenest students together with the Herodians, who this time might be expected to come before him without arousing in him a suspicion of sinister motives on their part. The impression which they evidentially designed to make was that a dispute had occurred between them and they now desired to settle it by referring the matter to an authority such as Jesus was. We must always remember that the devil is a liar and the father of lies.

This tax was levied directly by Roman authority in Judea and had perhaps been a contributing cause to social unrest and violence a generation before.

Coin minted by Rome for paying this tax bore the image of Tiberius Caesar and identified him as "son of the divine Augustus." Ironically, the question was put to Jesus, the true Son of God. The fact that they possessed this coin tacitly acknowledged Caesar's rule.

Jesus here distinguishes the two realms—the civil and the heavenly—under which all believers live. Though our first allegiance is always to God (Ac 5:29), we are also bound to obey the legitimate civil authorities God has established (Rm 13:1–7). Luther: "It is the duty and obligation of those who participate in this earthly regime to administer law and punishment, to maintain the distinctions that exist among ranks and persons, to manage and distribute property.... But the Gospel does not trouble itself with these matters. It teaches about the right relation of the heart to God" (AE 21:108). (TLSB)

They left him alone and in a sense they had set a trap for Jesus, but had fallen into it themselves.

On Tuesday He tells the Pharisees to pay taxes to Caesar, and on Friday they haul Him before Pilate and say, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king" (Luke 23:2).

Civil authority and good governmental leaders are beneficial means whereby God blesses us.

Prayer: "Thou who art ever nigh, Guarding with watchful eye, To Thee aloud we cry: God save the State!" Amen. (LSB 965:2) (TLSB)