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Pentecost 20

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Teflon Jesus?”

Text: Matthew 22:15-22 (Isaiah 45:1-7)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

You gotta give credit where credit is due. It was a good question. It wasn't a strictly religious or a strictly governmental question - it was both. It had to be both. Jesus was too good.

The religious - the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Scribes, the Elders - none had been able to trip Him up on the basis of God's Word. He simply knew it too well. And the rulers hadn't been able to convict Him either - there was simply no sedition, treason, or rebellion to pin on Him. Today, our media sometimes refers to people like that, presidents or other officials, as “teflon” - nothing seems to stick to them. That was Jesus. Nothing would stick to Him. And with each passing day, each passed test, His opponents were getting more hostile, desperate, and determined.

So finally, they teamed up. The Pharisees and the Herodians, the religious and the government. One question that *couldn't* have a right answer. Give a religious answer, one that would please the Pharisees, and get in trouble with the government, the Herodians. Give an answer that would please the Herodians, and get in trouble with the religious, the Pharisees. Surely, they had Him this time.

And a little flattery up front wouldn't hurt either, to disguise their real purpose . . .

“Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Or in other words, you're a good guy. We know we can trust you. We are your humble inquirers, with a question we haven't been able to figure out. Tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

I wonder how long it took them to come up with this question, this scheme? How many late nights and brainstorming sessions? How many ideas and questions shot down, not good enough? How much thought and energy and effort went into it? Because evil takes effort. To plot wickedly but look righteous. To want evil but look good. To cover up but look innocent. To search for excuses, reasons, loopholes. It's hard work. You know it. You've done it, too. We all have. One lie leads to another and another and you've got to

remember them all. Finding more and better ways to hide what you've done and what's in your heart and look good on the outside. Smiles covering hate, humility a disguise for pride. It's hard work, evil. But somehow, we think, worth the effort. But is it?

Tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

It's really a good question, even apart from the scheming and plotting. A question many wonder about even today. Because what is Caesar doing with that money, with our tax denarii? How is he ruling? What if Caesar is evil? And using our money against us, against the church, against God, and against His Word? Do you pay Caesar when Caesar is using your denarii to fund things that are horrifying and abominations in God's sight? Maybe that's been on your mind, too.

So it could have been an honest question, a good question. That's what made it so perfect! Plausible deniability.

But Jesus knows what's going on. Flattery doesn't work with Him. He knew they were being hypocritical and just trying to trap Him. He knew this wasn't really an honest Fourth Commandment question - a question of the authorities God has placed over us. And He knew it really wasn't an honest Seventh Commandment question - a question about money and possessions.

It was, in truth, a First Commandment issue - a "who is your God?" issue. Who or what do you fear, love, and trust most? Is it money? Is it power? Is it your position in the community or in the church? Is it yourself? Is it praise? Is it pleasure? What do you have that if God took away, would cause you to turn against God? Would cause you to seriously doubt His love for you? Would make you think or say: Fine! If that's the kind of God you are, forget you!

Well, the Pharisees and Herodians were losing all those things I mentioned - money, power, position, praise, pleasure - those things they feared losing and loved having and trusted for their life. But they weren't going down without a fight. And Jesus' answer - so simple - helps us see that the real issue here was, in fact, idolatry. False gods. False loves. False trust. ***"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."***

Now, the Caesar part we get. Mostly. Taxes and such. *But what belongs to God?* The answer is simple. Don't try to mess it up! Don't try to categorize and separate and think what belongs to me and what belongs to God, what is sacred and what is secular, what is this or that - stop. Do you see what you're doing? You're making it hard. Because evil is hard. The answer is simple. What belongs to God? *Everything*.

So whatever it is you're trying to hold on to, whatever it is that if God took away you

would get mad at Him, whatever it is that makes you plot and scheme, whatever it is that makes you try to choose between it and God, is a false god.

Render to God the things that are God's. And that means everything.

Now, I know what you're thinking . . . Wait just a second! Jesus said: ***Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's***, so not everything belongs to God. Or does that mean I can't help the poor, and I can't serve my neighbor, and I can't do this and I can't do that because I have to give all my money to God! . . . Stop.

Do you see? *You're doing it again.* Making it complicated and hard. Thinking up excuses and loopholes and circumstances. It's simple. All government and authority is from God (Romans 13). We corrupt it. We don't do it right. But it's still His. Even Cryus, in the Old Testament, didn't know God, but God still used him. His power and authority were still from God. And so by paying taxes, by honoring and obeying the authorities God has placed over us, and also by helping the poor, by serving others, by doing what has been giving us to do in all our callings, you are giving to God what belongs to Him. For as we'll hear Jesus say in a few weeks: *Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40).

You see, God doesn't want your money. What God's wants . . . is you. To be your God and for you to be His child. He is God, of course. The only one. But He wants to be your God. Your good. So if money gets in the way, if family gets in the way, if position, pride, or power get in the way, if boyfriend or girlfriend get in the way, if activities get in the way, if grudges or anger get in the way, if pain or hurt get in the way, if sadness or loss gets in the way - whatever it is: ***Render to God the things that are God's***. If He wants you to have them, He'll give them back. If they're good for you, if it's the right time. Or if you still need to learn, or grow, or let go, maybe not right now. Or if not good for you to have them, He'll take them away.

But really, when you boil it all down, when you get to the heart of it, it's a fear, love, and trust thing. What do you fear the most, trust the most, love the most? Want the most, keep the most, hide the most?

The answer is simple, but not easy. And so we prayed today that God would *have mercy on us* . . . so that we *may so pass through things temporal* - the things of this world - *that we lose not the things eternal*.

Think about what that said for a moment. Because *that we lose not the things eternal* means that we already have the things eternal right now, otherwise we couldn't lose them. But they have been given to us now, while we're still in this world and living this life. Jesus has given them to us. The things eternal. Eternal life. A life beyond this one. An eternal kingdom. And (to tie in with the Gospel today) His ***likeness and inscription*** -

His image - on you. Put on you in Holy Baptism, when He inscribed His cross on you and His name on you and gave you back that image lost in sin. It's already yours. A gift. Grace. From God to you. You belong to Him.

Because while the Pharisees and Herodians and all of Jesus' opponents couldn't get anything to stick to Him, any of their charges or traps, there was one thing that did stick to Jesus: *your sin*. Because He wanted it to. He came for it. He took it and clung to it and wouldn't let it go, so that your death, too, cling to Him, and then put Him in the grave. So that none of that stick to you. Because in the end, it still wasn't the Pharisees or Sadducees or any of the Jewish leaders, it wasn't the Herodians or the Romans either, that took Jesus' life. Yes, they put Him on the cross, but Jesus laid down His life for you (John 10:17-18). He did it. He did what we could not: **Rendered to His Father *everything***. The pool of blood that puddled beneath that lifeless corpse the evidence.

But then God gave His life back. For God is not a taker. If He takes, it is so He can give. If He humbles, it is so He can exalt. If He kills, it is so He can make alive. And so to ***render to God the things that are God's*** is not only right and good, **it is then to wait for and rely on what He will give**. Which will always be more than we give. Always.

And here: it is forgiveness for our sin and life for our death. It is hope for the hopeless and comfort for the mourning. It is love for the loveless and honor for our shame. It is the Body and Blood of Jesus to eat and to drink, that the Word of God enter not just our eyes and our ears but also our mouths. That we touch and *taste and see that the Lord is good*. And that *blessed are all who take refuge in Him* (Psalm 34:8).

So how does this story end? They marveled, yes. But how did it end? Here's how I picture it: they gave Jesus that coin, a denarius, a day's wage, to look at. But He didn't even look at it - He knew what was on it. So He asks them, teaches them, and then when He turns to leave, He tosses it on the ground in front of them. So how does the story end? What do you think? Did they pick it up? *Will you?*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.