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Pentecost 21

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A Tale of Two Kingdoms”  
Text: Matthew 22:15-22

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

Do not be deceived! What you heard today is not about coins, but about kingdoms. It is not about taxes, but about truth. It is not a real question, it is a trap. They are trying to bait Jesus into saying something they can then use against Him. The Pharisees didn't even go themselves. They cloak their malice by sending their disciples. They're just students, Jesus! They just want to learn, Jesus! Teach them, Jesus! 'Cuz you're a good guy. You always want to help people. You're not swayed by what other people think of you. We admire that. We do. So help these poor, ignorant students out. Just tell them: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*

Do not be deceived. This is not about coins, but about kingdoms. And the Pharisees are thinking about and looking for *the wrong kingdom*.

It's like this: You know how when you're looking for something, you have a picture of what you're looking for in your mind. But if that picture is wrong, if that picture in your mind is incorrect, then you maybe did see what you were looking for - you just didn't know it. Like in a store, when a company changes the packaging of that thing you buy all the time - you're looking for what you remember it looked like, so you can't find it anymore. Or sometimes this happens with people - they change how they look, their hair color, or they shave their beard, or they lose a lot of weight, and . . . is that . . . ?

So the Pharisees, and the other Jewish leaders as well, were looking for *the wrong kingdom*. They pictured and were thinking about the kingdom of Israel in a certain way - like it was in David and Solomon's time: big, wealthy, powerful, secure, at peace, and glorious! And that, they thought, was the kingdom the Messiah would restore, for he would be, after all, like Solomon, **the son of David**. That's was God's promise - that one of David's sons, one of his descendants, would sit on his throne forever. So that meant he would restore his father's kingdom, right? So that's what they were looking for. That's what they expected their Messiah to do.

Well, they got it partially right. Jesus is, in fact, restoring His Father's kingdom. But not the kingdom of His father David, but the kingdom of God the Father! A new Israel. But they weren't looking for that . . .

You see, the Jewish leaders forgot (or didn't want to remember) that the kingdom under David and Solomon was the exception, not the rule. For more often God's people were not like it was in those days. They were small, oppressed, harassed . . . anything but glorious. And while being at peace *sounds* good . . . look at what happened to both David and Solomon with peace - they both fell into grievous sin. So that didn't work out too good . . .

But that's what they had in mind, so when Jesus comes along and He's not doing that . . .

*And worse*, He seems to be working against it. Against *them*. As we've been hearing the past few weeks, He's telling parables against them when they (they thought) should have been the heroes of these parables! The Parables of the Two Sons, the Laborers in the Vineyard, and the Wedding Feast. This isn't right! Jesus is tearing down what they're trying to build up. So instead of repenting, instead of changing their minds, their thinking, and their actions, they need to get rid of Him.

So, Jesus, *what do you think: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*

Now in the Pharisees' world, according to their thinking of the kingdom, there are only two answers to give to that question, and neither of them good! Say NO and upset Caesar, or say YES and upset the people following you. Either way, the Pharisees win.

**Wrong kingdom.** That's why Jesus, instead of giving them one of the only two answers they thought were possible, gives them instead *another*. And very gently, really, **points them to another kingdom**. A far greater kingdom than what they have in mind. Far greater than even the way it was under David and Solomon. ***Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*** And *they marveled*. They marveled, but they wouldn't give up! In fact, right after this the Sadducees take their shot. But looking for the wrong kingdom, they couldn't see the kingdom of God that was coming to them and was, in fact, right in front of them, in Jesus.

But there are others who did see it. Those who weren't looking for the wrong kingdom, the wrong packaging, a kingdom that used to be much larger. The **blind** who regained their sight, they saw it. The **deaf** who regained their hearing, they heard it. Those who were set free from **demons**, they lived in it. Those who were **forgiven** their sins were welcomed into it. The prostitutes and sinners, the diseased and outcast and less-than-perfect - *they* all saw it. The God who had come to them in human flesh. The God who was setting things right again. The God who wasn't rebuilding an earthly kingdom, but growing a heavenly one. So they cried out: Jesus, **Son of David!** Jesus, promised Messiah! have mercy on us. And this King, who charges no taxes but freely gives, *had* mercy on them. And in so doing, ***rendered to God the things that are God's.*** For these people, made in the image and likeness of God, belonged to Him. Satan tried to claim

them, sin tried to ruin them, but Jesus saw through that and reclaimed them and set them free. Free in the kingdom of His Father.

**And Jesus has done the same for you.** He set you free and made you His own in the waters of Baptism. He has taken you from the kingdom of satan, of sin and death, and put you in the kingdom of His Father, the *new* Israel. With His cleansing forgiveness He is restoring you to the image and likeness in which you were created and how you were always meant to be. Do you see it? Do you realize it? Or are you looking for the wrong kingdom?

That happens, doesn't it? Maybe you remember life in the good ol' days, and want them back. Maybe you look around at things in the world and think: I want that, or, I want to be like that. Or maybe you have a picture in your mind of how life should be as a Christian - and, well, your life isn't living up to that. I want fewer problems. I want to be more successful. I want less stress, fewer worries, an easier go of it. Why isn't God answering my prayers? Why isn't God taking care of me? Why aren't churches more full? Why is the world so immoral? Where is the kingdom of God?

**But maybe that's the wrong packaging.** Maybe that's not what the kingdom of God looks like at all, and so we miss it. Or we go where we think it is, or where we want it to be, and how we want it to be, to those things we want, and . . . like David and Solomon, fall into sin. . . . Think we ever do that? Think you ever do that?

So we prayed in the Collect of the Day earlier that *we may so pass through things temporal* (that is, earthly) *that we lose not the things eternal*. And so we come here every week, through the earthly, through one kingdom, to another. To once again hear and see the eternal. The eternal Son of God, the Son of David, come here for us. To mercy us. To see and hear the kingdom of God, and be reminded that it doesn't look how the world - and sometimes our own hearts - wants it to look or thinks that it looks, but that it looks like **THIS**: a crucified man. Pontius Pilate didn't know how right he was when he brought Jesus out and said: *Behold, your king!* (John 19:14) Or when he wrote the charge against Jesus that was put over Him on the cross: *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews* (John 19:19).

That's why we put this crucifix here, right next to the pulpit, to see every week. Here is your King, on His throne, for you. Here is a King that doesn't demand from you, but gives to you. Who gave His life for you. Who took all your filth and sin and uncleanness, all the thoughts, words, deeds, and desires that you are ashamed of, and told His Father, *make them mine*. And all His righteousness, perfection, and forgiveness - *give it to them*. That they may be yours, and live under you in your kingdom (Small Catechism, Second Article). A kingdom not like anything in this world, but far greater, far better. And one that is not passing away, but is eternal. **For you**, Jesus says. **For you**, your King says. And AMEN! *So be it*, we say. We say when we hear those baptismal words in the

invocation. AMEN! We say when we heard the words of absolution. AMEN! We say when the Body and Blood of Jesus are placed into our mouths. AMEN! We say when Jesus sends us back out into the world and into our vocations to live in the image and likeness in which we were made and now restored. AMEN! So be it. **May I render to God the things that are God's.** My heart, my mind, my life, and not give them to another.

And seeing and hearing *that* kingdom, *that* life, having a King such a *that* . . . that changes everything. What you hear in the world doesn't sound so good anymore. What you see in the world doesn't look so desirable anymore. And your crucified King *looks more glorious than ever.*

Do not be deceived. Your kingdom is not of this world. So if you're struggling, if you're dissatisfied, if you think things aren't working out as you want - *good!* Fix your eyes instead on Jesus and His kingdom, and marvel. Marvel at your King and His words. Marvel at His cross and His love. Marvel at His promises and the cross He hung on to fulfill them. Marvel, at your King, who would do this **for 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.