

## Pentecost 20 “Give unto God What is God’s” Matt 22 21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

A pastor was returning from an event on the south side of Salt Lake. It was winter. He glanced in his rear-view mirror to see all the cars which had been following careening sideways across the interstate. Apparently, he had just traversed an icy patch of highway and sailed right over it. Someone behind him had touched their brakes and started a multi-car accident.

He gingerly took his foot off the accelerator and slowly came to a stop. By this point he was far beyond the accident. He said a prayer of thanksgiving to God. He had certainly felt the protection of God that day. But what about all those folks whose lives were upended by that accident. Were they not trusting in God too? I don't know for sure, but surely one or two of them were believers in Jesus Christ.

Our Collect today offers a very sharp contrast to the sort of thinking we just engaged in. God's providential rule and protection of you and me has a goal which we may find difficult to discern. We ask to pass through temporal things in a way that we do not lose the things eternal. Temporary things seem relatively easy to discern, but what are the eternal things? It is not just the hereafter. Paul says that love abides, it is something we take to heaven with us: it's eternal. Forgiveness seems to me to be an eternal thing as well. When we forgive, it is forever. What other things do we have that are eternal?

Our Isaiah passage speaks to us also about God giving us eternal treasures that you may know that I am Lord. In our epistle reading, Paul speaks to the Thessalonians and us about the Resurrection to eternal life.

Paul's very brief visit to Thessalonica is described in Acts 17. After just three weeks, he was run out of town. The people who were opposed to him even chased him to the next town and ran him out of that town. His followers had reason to be afraid. But read the chapter carefully and that is not what Paul is really talking about. They had affliction but also joy. They turned from idols to serve the living and true God. Now their lives are marked by waiting.

They await the Jesus who has conquered death itself and who rescues them and us from the wrath to come. Christ has called them and us out of lives of fear and into lives of trust, joy, and confident expectation. Jesus has defeated death. What can climate change, political loss, pandemic, or anything else do us? Jesus rescues us from whatever wrath and destruction comes our way. No wonder people were watching and marveling at these people.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus prepares to give us the eternal treasures spoken about in Isaiah in the form of the Resurrection and eternal life spoken of by Paul to the Thessalonians.

It is the first in a series of skillful answers to his enemies' questions, all of which Jesus designed to deny the authorities any solid grounds for prosecuting Him. Like Thomas More, who was the key counselor of King Henry VIII in the early 1500s, who after he refused to accept the king as head of the Church of England, was tried for treason and beheaded, Jesus was also walking a legal tightrope. He did so in order to ensure that the case that they will ultimately bring against Him will have to be based upon trumped up charges, so that His passion and death will be for the sins of the world and not for anything He has done.

The Pharisees brought the Herodians along so they could ask a question about paying Roman taxes. If Jesus said it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees would condemn Him for breaking the first commandment. If Jesus said that it was wrong to pay taxes to Caesar, then the Herodians would condemn Jesus as traitor to Caesar. They would be ready to condemn Jesus no matter which way he answered.

It was clear to Jesus what the object of His enemies was. It was to set Him up so that if He answered one way, the Roman authorities will see Him as seditious and if He answered another way, the Jewish authorities will see Him as a blasphemer. And so they do.

“Tell us,” they say, “is it lawful for Jews to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

Jesus not only knows their end game, but He sees through the flattery right to the heart of their malice. In a bit of pure genius, He uses the rabbinical practice of answering a question with a question. “Why are you trying to trap me?” He asks them. “Show me the coin you pay the tax with.”

When they do, Jesus uses an object lesson, the Roman coin, to give them an answer which is equally crafty and elusive. He simply points out that the coin already belongs to Caesar since it has his face and name stamped on it. And He gives them one of history’s greatest non-answers, He said, “Well then, pay Caesar what belongs to him and pay God what belongs to God.”

Of course, the coin is Caesar’s. But is not **everything** God’s?

Like the Pharisees, we cannot trick Jesus either. He sees into the hearts and minds of all men. And Jesus is aware of our hidden ego, greed, malice and hypocrisy!

Are Jesus’ words nonsense? Hardly. But neither are they to be taken as a model for the two kingdoms or for church and state relations. Instead, keep in mind that Jesus was walking a tightrope, responding to a trap, and keeping to His task of coming in the fullness of time to be the innocent Lamb of God, who takes the sins of all humanity and carries them on His back to the cross.

It does impress me, though, that Jesus is able to take such a situation, an evil trap, and turns it into a moment to speak truth into our situation 20 centuries later. We are blessed.

Give unto God what is God’s? Well everything is God’s! Can I, should I give everything to God?

An example in today’s 21<sup>st</sup> century can be given from your pastor’s own situation: The treasurer of this church regularly deposits money into my bank account. Of course, immediately the bank claims some of that – the mortgage must be paid. The grocer has his hand out too when I walk out the door with my groceries. The internet company, the cell phone company, and many more stake their claim over those dollars. We also cannot forget the IRS and the local authorities who extract their percentage, sometimes before it even gets to my account. Jesus asks me to think as if all of it is God’s money.

I serve God by paying my taxes, feeding my family, paying my bills, and saving a little for retirement. He died for every moment of my life and every dollar that has ever passed through my bank account.

That makes all my expenditures potentially holy and directed back to God. Yes, there are some things I should not buy, harmful, sinful, and idolatrous things. That would be self-serving and the opposite of worship. When I pay my taxes, however, or buy groceries for my family, make the car payment and house payment, those are God's funds too – he gave me the job, the house, the family, the life to live and every breath I take. Paying my bills and my worship become parts of the same thing. I can give Caesar his due and at the same time be giving God his money. They both can be God's will.

So, In the end, Jesus has reminded us that everything in the universe was made through Him and it is all His, He wants us to use the gifts He gives us for ourselves, our families, and our neighbors, all to the glory of God. He wants us to realize that these things, although many of them are necessary, are temporal things that will all pass away and cannot be taken with us after death.

He wants us to concentrate on the eternal things: the love of neighbor and of God, the forgiveness we extend to one another because God first forgave us, the treasure of Jesus stored up in heaven. The treasure of souls saved to be there with us in heaven.

Ultimately, what does God want? He wants us to believe in Jesus Christ. He wants us to fear, love, and trust in Him. And He gives us that which He requires of us, everything. Before we did anything and while we were still sinners, God loved us and sent His son Jesus Christ to die for us, forgiving our sins, covering us in the cloak of His own righteousness, so that we have the gift of eternal life.

That's the wonderful thing: whatever God requires **of** us, He also freely supplies **to** us. Come, receive forgiveness, life, and salvation freely given to us in Jesus' Word, body, and blood.

And may the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, abide with you to life everlasting. Amen!