

"Your Two Kingdom Life"

Matthew 22:15-21

October 22, 2023

"Jesus said to them, 'Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.'"

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

- * Did you put on shoes this morning, or did you come to church in a car?
- * Do you eat cereal for breakfast, or don't you like football?
- * Are you Lutheran, or do you live in Canada?
- * Will you obey God, or will you pay taxes to Caesar?

Welcome to the world of false dichotomies—things that are wrongly set against each other, "either/or's" that really aren't.

Can you wear shoes and come to church in a car? Can you eat cereal and enjoy football? Can you be Lutheran and live in Canada? Of course; in fact, you can be a Canadian Lutheran who wears shoes and eats cereal while enjoying football after you've traveled to and from church in a car. None of these things are mutually exclusive. Beware of the one who asks such questions, because there may very well be a hidden agenda behind them. At the same time, rejoice! Such scheming is no match for the crucified and risen Lord.

I. A False Dichotomy and the Word of Truth

In our Gospel lesson, the Pharisees are seeking to trap Jesus in some way -- it doesn't matter what.

They want to entangle Him in His words—a favorite strategy of political debaters in every age. After some serious plotting, they send their disciples—along with some Herodians, of all people—to ask Jesus a question.

The question is preceded by step one, the big buttering-up of the victim: "Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men." Personally, they don't believe any of this, but it's part of the strategy: Put someone up on a pedestal so that they can fall farther and harder when you knock them off.

Then comes the question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

It's really a clever question. They really don't care about the answer: In fact, the Pharisees and the Herodians would probably disagree; but what they do agree on is that they want Jesus out of the way. In their view, the Savior of the world is a political problem that requires a political solution; and their solution is to destroy his public support. Few in Judea are really pleased about being in the Roman Empire, and nobody likes to pay taxes. Many regard it as sinful. If Jesus says that they are to pay taxes, He'll turn the nation against Him. On the other hand, if Jesus says that it's wrong to pay

taxes, He'll be arrested for treason when word gets out. So, tell us Jesus: Will You obey God, or will You obey Caesar?

Ah, they must be gleeful, watching from afar: They've got Jesus in a political bind. However, they've made a terrible mistake: Jesus isn't a political figure. He is, in fact, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. He is no respecter of persons, but a preacher of the truth. Let the chips fall, because He isn't looking for votes.

And so the Savior answers: But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius.

And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

"Will You obey God or will You obey Caesar?" The answer is yes, because the question is a false dichotomy. In other words, it's wrong to say that this is an "either/or" because it's a "both/and." One can follow God and pay taxes to Caesar because it is God who puts rulers on their thrones and commands that they be obeyed. In God's plan, He and Caesar aren't competing for the same spot: Caesar is there as God's instrument to keep order in the world. Of course, if Caesar commands you to do something sinful, then you must obey God and disobey Caesar; but if that's not the case, serve both.

Those who pose the question were right about one thing: Jesus speaks the truth, and He is no respecter of persons. To their amazement, their clever question falls flat, so they beat a hasty retreat.

They have completely failed to entrap the Son of God; oh, such sinful questions might look good to some people for a little while, but they are no match for the truth. They leave, and Jesus continues on His way to the cross that is only three days away. Foolish questions and false dichotomies will not prevail against Him. Neither will sin, death or the gates of hell.

II. The Things of Caesar and the Things of God

Like it or not, the Savior speaks the truth of God and Caesar: You live in two different kingdoms under two different rulers. As a Christian, you are a citizen of heaven and Jesus is your King. But until you are delivered, you also live in this world, and you are part of humanity and live under a government. You interact both in church and in society. You are a citizen of two very separate, distinct kingdoms. This is most certainly true, and this is most certainly okay: This is how God has set things to be until Christ returns in glory. Today's Gospel lesson gives us opportunity to see how people will try to twist these two kingdoms -- and what a danger it is to your faith.

Again, Scripture makes the distinction clear: God has placed you to live in two very distinct kingdoms. However, some will approach it this way: "You live in two kingdoms right now, it is true: The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. It can't be helped. Therefore, Christian, it is up to you to avoid the kingdom of the world as much as possible in favor of the kingdom of God. Your faith will be measured by how much you stay out of the one and in the other."

Sometimes this is obvious: It is taught among some that one who follows God should not vote, pay taxes, serve in the armed forces or even drive cars or use electricity. Such teachings are easy to spot, but they are not found in the Scriptures. Neither are the more subtle forms that can put your faith in danger. Consider the following questions, and look for the false dichotomies-the false "either/or's":

- * "Are you a born-again Christian, or do you dance?"
- * "Do you dress differently than the world, or don't you believe in Jesus?"
- * "Are you committed to the Lord, or do you listen to secular music?"

We might dismiss these questions as merely being "strict" or "conservative," but there is more to it than that. There is a doctrinal problem here -- and woe to those who mistake a doctrinal problem for a political disagreement. Such statements imply that, to be a Christian, you must not dance, you must wear certain clothes, and you must avoid all secular music. In other words, you are in the Kingdom of God because of how much you stay out of the kingdom of man. Therefore, you are a Christian because of your clothes, your music and your not-dancing. And if you are a Christian because of these things, then your salvation is dependent upon your clothes, your music and your not-dancing.

Your salvation is dependent upon your work, and not solely dependent upon the forgiveness of sins. As soon as you buy into this, the doubts creep in. Take, for instance, the question, "Are you committed to the Lord, or do you listen to secular music?" This question signals a false teaching about the two kingdoms -- it says that as a citizen of God's kingdom, you cannot make use of things in the kingdom of this world. It implies that you may listen to music in only one kingdom, but the doubts arise and questions must be asked: Is a "Christian" song that denies Baptism better than a secular song that speaks truth about the human condition? What if a singer in the Christian music industry records a secular song -- is it okay to listen? What if a singer in the secular music industry is a Christian -- is that okay to listen to? The questions grow, and along with them grows uncertainty.

The reason for this is simple: The Scriptures do not forbid music-or dancing, for that matter; nor do they command you to dress a certain way.

On the other hand-and this is a BIG "on the other hand," this doesn't mean you have the license to do whatever you want. A secular song may indeed teach a profound truth and be worth listening to; but if your favorite music extols the virtues of drug use or physical or sexual violence, then you've got a problem.

Dance is not forbidden in Scripture; but if your dance includes getting blasted at a rave or simulating immoral acts on the dance floor, then you're guilty of sin. The Bible does not command a certain form of dress; but if your T-shirt advertises the latest satanic rock band or your outfit is immodest and suggestive, then repentance is in order.

In such matters, there is a key question: "Where do you draw the line?" How much of a secular activity should a Christian participate in? The answer is not always easy, and the answer may well be different among Christians when the Scriptures provide some leeway. (This, by the way, is what makes parenting so difficult.) There is right and there is wrong; but with each specific practice, where

will you draw the line? These discussions become murky and troublesome fast, because the solution isn't always clear.

And that is my point: Let the murkiness be a warning when you are told that you must act in certain ways in this world to be a Christian. Do you really want to base your faith on something so confusing and unclear? Do you really want to base your salvation on how you handle the things of man? Do you really want your salvation to depend on you and your daily decisions? Absolutely not!

Do not base your salvation on what is unclear and uncertain, but on what is clear and sure: The things of God -- the death of His Son on the cross for your sins. You can be certain that He has redeemed you there. You can be certain that you are forgiven for all of your sins -- even the ones you're not sure are sin as you struggle with life in the kingdom of this world.

You are not in the kingdom of God because of how well you stay out of the kingdom of man. You are in the kingdom of God because God has brought you in. You are in the kingdom of man because God has put you there, as a Christian, to do His will. Take heart: As you grow in faith and the things of God by the forgiveness of sins, your dealings with the kingdom of the world will grow much, much clearer.

There is another dangerous error that seeks to destroy the faith: In this case, the teaching is that we must blend the kingdom of God with the kingdom of the world in order to make disciples. That we must make the kingdom of God more worldly, less holy. Once again, be on the lookout for false dichotomies, the false "either/or's"; consider the following statements:

- * "Are you concerned with the purity of doctrine, or are you concerned with evangelism?"
- * "Do you support interfaith services, or don't you believe it's okay to pray?"
- * "Do you value people, or do you value doctrine?"

All of these questions have been voiced recently. We examine each one briefly in turn.

It is asked: "Are you concerned with the purity of doctrine, or are you concerned with evangelism?" It is a bad question from the start: pure doctrine and evangelism aren't enemies -- they are bound together. One can only evangelize with the pure Gospel, for nothing else forgives sins. To the question, "Are you concerned with the purity of doctrine, or are you concerned with evangelism?", the answer is "Yes." To be careless about either is sinful.

It is asked: "Do you support interfaith services, or don't you believe it's okay to pray?" The question may strike you as ludicrous, yet it is put forth today. Of course we pray: But according to Scripture, prayer is to be directed to the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He does not share His glory with another, and prayers are not to be directed to others. Is it okay to pray and to oppose interfaith worship services? Absolutely. It's not just okay; it's commanded.

One more: "Do you value people, or do you value doctrine?" Once again, this is absurd-how could the two be opposed to one another? If we value people highly, shall we feed them with false, damning doctrine? Of course not. The Lord values people so highly that He has given His Son to die for them;

and He has given His Word-His doctrine-so that they might hear and believe. Do we value people or doctrine? Both. A Christian can do no other.

The kingdom of God is holy; woe to the one who seeks to make it worldly instead. Such teachings will attract the admiration of the world, but they fall to pieces before the Lord of heaven and earth.

Hopefully, you see a difference between these answers and those above about dancing, clothes and music. Our exploration of the former only led to more questions and murkiness-uncertainty.

But our examination here does not lead to uncertainty, but provides a clear answer in each case. Why? Because the matters of discussion are the things of God, and such things are clear and sure and unchanging. Dancing, clothes and music are things of this world -- they change and vary, and some is good while some is bad. The cross, forgiveness, life and salvation do not change -- they are always pure, holy and righteous, because they are the things of God.

So we render the things of God to God -- obedience, holiness, repentance, faith; and we do so because He gives us all of these things first. He gives them to us in His Word and Sacraments. About this, there is no doubt; therefore, there is great joy.

This is your two-kingdom life for now, dear Christians, because God has placed you into two kingdoms. In the kingdom of this world, we live and work because God has put us here to live and work. We do so according to the Lord's Word, following His commands. Where we sin, we confess the sin. Where things are muddy, we muddle along, confess our sins and trust in the Lord's salvation.

His salvation for you is certain, because He has brought you into another kingdom -- His kingdom. He has done so by the death of His only-begotten Son on the cross; and with such a price paid, He will not forsake you. Therefore, in His kingdom, there is no doubt: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.