

# -Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

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The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

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“And/Or”

(or, “Whose Image Is This?”)

Text: Matthew 22:18-19

“*But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, ‘You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose image is this? . . .’*”

“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:2).

Look where we *are*, . . . and look what we’re *talking* about! We’re talking about *money*!

It was last Tuesday or Wednesday. I was in the hospital - not as a *visitor*, but as a “*paying customer*.” And since I’d been there *before* I knew that “talking about money” was going to be on the horizon *sometime*; I just *assumed* it was going to be *after* my release. But while I can’t remember *everything* from Emergency and ICU, I *do* remember being asked in my weakened condition if I had had my flu shot. And after I replied that it had been on my list for the *previous* Friday - “First Friday” Night at the Movies around here - but I had to skip it because I was running a fever - one of the signs of a pulmonary *embolus*, come to find out - I remember being asked if I wanted to have it - while I was there, and all.

And I remember thinking that that would be “the shot heard ‘round the world.” For if a hospital can get as much for one generic acetaminophen tablet as you’d pay at the store for an entire *bottle of a hundred*, if a patient in Illinois could be charged for a “cough support device” that turned out to be a teddy bear, if charges have been known to show up at discharge for “thermal therapy” that turned out to be only a bag of ice and “disposable mucous recovery systems” which turned out to be only *tissues*, who could guess at how much “*buck*” was going to be in *that* “shot.” (I’ll let you know when the *bill* comes!)

Look where we are, I thought to myself - looking at the wall, where the second of the four words I could see in the facility’s name was “healthcare” - and we’re talking about *money*!

Now let me set the record straight. From the moment I presented in the ER with a heart in v-tac racing along at top speeds of up to 162 beats per minute, I received very good care. *Kevin* can tell you; he was *there* for most of it. Check that, *Kevin can’t* tell you; there are HIPAA laws. So, you’re just gonna’ have take *my* word for it.

And for this, *too*, I suppose: my lovely yellow and gold hospital gown - not my color, as some of you have seen from the pictures - had snaps all across the chest for all the leads for the EKG and the heart monitor, and more snaps along the shoulders to make room for the blood pressure cuff, and a pocket right up front in case we had to take all that circuitry on a field trip to radiology or the bathroom, but it didn’t have a place *for money*. I wasn’t carrying any cash. If the flu shot decision - or any *other* - had come down to a *coin flip*, I would have been forced to do what *Jesus* had to do. I would have had to *borrow* the money.

Let’s turn to *Jesus*. Look where we *are*, . . . and look what we’re *talking* about! We’re in a place that has “*health-care*” right in its name! Well, not in so many words, but

we're here in the great Temple of Jerusalem - and if that doesn't say "*healthcare*," what *does*?

Now when I say "*we*," I mean *Jesus*, of course. *He's* in the Temple. He isn't carrying any cash. He doesn't have any change. But that doesn't mean He's going to come up empty-handed. Far from it! Listen again, . . . and look where we *are*, . . . and look what we're *talking* about! We're talking about *money*!

*15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words.*

*16 They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.*

Their "*disciples*," you don't say. "Young bucks," that is, Jesus hadn't *seen* before. Young "whippersnappers" they hoped could sneak up on Him, *surprise* Him.

Especially in a *crowd*, right? Especially teamed up with others, so that it naturally looked as if the two groups unsuccessfully had been trying to hash this question out among themselves.

"*Teacher*," they said, "*we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.*"

Blah, blah, blah. Gush, gush, gush. Flatter, flatter, flatter. Just "cut to the *chase*," right? Just cut to the *ques-tion*.

*17 "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"*

Ah, the dreaded "*imperial tax*." The one all adults had to pay - everyone between puberty and Social Security (okay, age 65.) The annual "head tax." The "capitation tax." The one that once every year every Jew in Judea had to fork over to the Roman authorities. The once-a-year reminder that the chosen people of God were prisoners in their own land.

And that was just the "rub," wasn't it? That was why it was so irritating. The Jews didn't mind the other taxes nearly so much - the "duties" on all the "goods" that passed through the booths and city gates - but *this* one was irritating. And to add insult to injury, it had to be paid in *Roman* coin.

*"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"*

Now, you say "*right*" and the *Israelites* immediately thought "*before God*," right? You say "*lawful*," and the *Israelites* immediately thought "according to *God's* law."

*"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"*

Does it "square" with our religion, that is . . . *or not*?

Jesus knew what they were doing, of course; but they didn't have a *clue* what He was about to do.

"You hypocrites," He exposed them - "flattery flowing from your lips, but nothing but deadly poison oozing from your evil hearts":

*18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"*

"*Trap*," all right.

For, a "Yes, it's lawful," and the *Herodians* would squeal with delight - "Anything for the monarchy!" - but the *Pharisees* and the people would writhe in pain. And a "No, it's against the law," and the *people* would rise up in righteous indignation while the *Herodians* immediately would report Him to Rome as a revolutionary.

Take your choice. Flip a coin. Oh, but not just any coin; it has to be the dreaded Roman coin, the "*denarius*"!

If the denar dated from the reign of Tiberius, it would have a likeness of the emperor's head on the one side and his full head-to-toe on the other - seated on a throne and dressed like a priest. And leaving nothing of this "*graven image*" (Ex. 20:4-6) heresy to the *imagination*, the "inscription," the very height of blasphemy, would have read: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus Son of the Divine Augustus" on the one side, and "Highest Priest" ("*Pontif Maxim*") on the other.

Like I said, those tag-teams didn't have a *clue* what Jesus was about to do.

"Show me the money," the man in the gown, the man who had no money, responded. And those who had been so busy digging a trap for Him never saw the one He in that instantly dug for them:

19 They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

21 "Caesar's," they replied.

And why wouldn't they? What could be the harm in that?

They couldn't just say *nothing*. The "*chief priests and the elders*" (21:23) had just *tried that*, and Jesus had left them speechless, and then started in on this whole string of parables that were casting them in a terrible light. So, without hesitation, yes, "*Caesar's*," they replied. "This coinage bears *Caesar's* image."

"Well, then," Jesus answers them, "since this is among the many things that belong to Caesar, '*give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.*'"

"*So give back [emphasis added] to Caesar what is Caesar's.*"

The Greek verb highlights the whole "give back" - "give *in return*" - thing. Caesar is owed what Caesar is owed. Caesar is *due* what Caesar is *due*. You know, "*for services rendered.*"

For services rendered *to God*, don't you know - or didn't you hear that *Old Testament* lesson? The one about the Lord's "*anointed*," Cyrus, the unbelieving king of Persia - well, not *completely* unbelieving, since Cyrus would later ascribe his military success, the way he was able to overrun the invincible juggernaut that was King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, to the chief god of the *Babylonian* pantheon, Marduk. Cyrus was working for the LORD - Cyrus was *servicing* the LORD - even when he didn't *know* it.

And for *that*, he deserved what was his. For "services rendered," as I said. As do *all* rulers. *Tribute*, to be sure - *taxes*, "*revenue.*" But beyond that, "*honor*," and "*respect*" (Rom. 13:7). And that goes regardless of whether in *your* judgment your particular government makes that hard or easy. For, short of an Acts 5:29 conflict between the two - government and God - where God automatically gets the nod, the command of Romans 13 prevails: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*" (v. 1).

Oh, and don't even *question* - like those disciples of the Pharisees and those Herodians did - whether being loyal to God inherently means having to be disloyal to government. Just the opposite, in fact, as one Bible commentator has said: "Honoring God doesn't mean having to dishonor the emperor by refusing to pay for the privileges - a relatively orderly society, police protection, good roads, courts, etc., etc. - one enjoys . . . . Pay the tax" (Hendriksen, *Matthew, New Testament Commentary*, Baker Book House, 2002, p. 803)

"*So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's*," Jesus answered, "and [emphasis added] *to God what is God's.*"

Yes, Jesus' answer isn't over - not by *half*! But not "by half" as we often think of it. Not "half by half," side-by-side, with one, the one, and the other, the other, and "never the twain shall meet." It's not "church *and* state," as we often hear in our world today. It's not even "church *or* state" - with "church" on the one side and "state" on the other. It's "state," if you will, *because of* Church:

Or, in the theme of our meditation this morning, it's not "and/or," but rather just "and."

"We misunderstand Jesus," one of my favorite old Lutheran Bible commentators explains, "when we think that he says that the obligation to God has nothing to do with the obligation to our government. The "and" of Jesus intends to cancel the "or" of his questioners [*"Is it right . . . or not?"*].

These are no alternatives, they harmonize, yes, more; by giving to God what is God's we for his sake give to the ruler what is his. For our obligation to God includes everything in our life, its citizenship as well as our religion. This "and" connects a small field with the whole field. And only by seeing both in their true relation do we see either aright. From Caesar Jesus rises to God; he does not make them parallel."

Dr. Lenski has more to explain about Jesus answer here: "His word about Caesar regards the state and our relation to it as a separate domain, and the doctrine of the separation of church and state is thus the only legitimate conclusion to be drawn from what he says. Yet church and state are not mere parallels and equals. Our obligations to God are the whole of life, those to the state one part of this whole. While church and state are separate in the way indicated, there is no gulf between them. They are not like two watertight compartments. . . . Each aids the other [the church contributing "conscience" to the state while the state, among other things, "carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" in society according to Rom. 13], but the second aids in the higher way. When either seeks to control the other, usurps the function of the other, havoc results for both as history bears witness."

Look where we *are*, . . . and look what we're *talking* about! Look back to that *Gospel* lesson. We're in the *Temple*. And we're talking about *money*!

As history bears witness, those Jewish leaders could not have been any more confused about *things* - the things of Caesar, and the things of God. For they took "what is God's" - that Temple, that place of sacrifice - and tried to sacrifice there the very blood of the Righteous One. They took "what is God's" - His Law - and, pretending to care about it, broke it, trying to trap that Jesus in his words. They took "what is God's" - they took His promised Messiah - and gave Him back to Caesar, insisting, "Crucify Him, crucify him!"

And look where we *are* as a result. We're *outside* the temple. We're outside *Jerusalem*. We're at Golgotha, where Israel's *true* King reigns *from a Roman cross*. Where that old *temple* is now spiritually bankrupt but the *world* is suddenly rich in mercy and grace. Where the priceless blood of the true Passover Lamb has now been shed. Where the treasury of God's mercy has been thrown open to all people - to all who repent of their sin and receive Him as their matchless King. And where - following the example of that One who "*came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mt. 20:28) - we, as Christ's disciples, are called to continue His mission to extend His mercy to all the world.

For, after all, "*show me the coin,*" if you will. (With the back of Pastor's hand encircling his face), "*Whose image is this?*" "God's," they were forced to reply.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, *and to God what is God's*"

"*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*" (Gen. 1:27).

*28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.* (Rom. 8:28-30).

*18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.* (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

May God grant it for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of a world still waiting to receive His mercy. Amen.