

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Twenty Third Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.⁴

“Hear therefore, O ye kings, and understand; learn, ye that be judges of the ends of the earth. Give ear, ye that rule the people, and glory in the multitude of nations. For power is given you of the Lord, and sovereignty from the Highest, who shall try your works, and search out your counsels. Because, being ministers of his kingdom, ye have not judged aright, nor kept the law, nor walked after the counsel of God; Horribly and speedily shall he come upon you: for a sharp judgment shall be to them that be in high places. For mercy will soon pardon the meanest: but mighty men shall be mightily tormented. For he which is Lord over all shall fear no man's person, neither shall he stand in awe of any man's greatness: for he hath made the small and great, and careth for all alike. But a sore trial shall come upon the mighty. Unto you therefore, O kings, do I speak, that ye may learn wisdom, and not fall away. For they that keep holiness holily shall be judged holy: and they that have learned such things shall find what to answer. Wherefore set your affection upon my words; desire them, and ye shall be instructed.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth Verse of the twenty-second Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Shew [SHOW] me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. And he saith

[SETH] unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith [SETH] he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: "*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.*"⁶
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Homily:

What do we legitimately owe to our government? Jesus plainly set down the standard while rendering foolish the arguments of those who were attempting to lay traps for Him in their questions.

In today's Second Lesson, He told of an incident, also recorded by St. Luke, in which a group of Herodians, who supported the rule of the Romans, came to Jesus with a question. As was the case in so many of these encounters, the question was an attempt to lay a trap for our Lord.

If Jesus supported the Herodian argument that faithful Jews could, and therefore should, pay taxes to support the Roman occupation of Palestine, on the ground that Rome was the *de facto* government that provided civic peace and security, then many of the Jewish faithful would be outraged, because they opposed the Roman occupation and considered only a Davidic kingdom to be a legitimate government for their country. These affronted patriots would then turn on Jesus and reject Him.

If, on the other hand, Jesus rejected the legitimacy of the taxes imposed by Rome, then He would be viewed by the Roman authorities as

an enemy of the state, which would subject Him to punitive government action. The very real nature of this risk is shown by the fact that when Jesus' enemies were finally able to compass His death, they accomplished this only by convincing the Romans that He threatened to develop a power base separate from theirs. Jesus, however, saw through the His questioners' attempt to entrap Him and left them speechless with His answer.

The Jews themselves had long held that where the money of the king in power is current, is valued, and can be used in trade, then the king has a legitimate rule and may demand some of that money in tax. Certainly the existence of the Romans' rule was beyond rational argument. While many of the people opposed that rule, they did so only privately and even then at great peril.

St. Paul would later expound on this very idea: *“For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.”*⁷

The Herodians initiated their question by trying flattery: *“Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men.”*⁸ While they would have been loath to admit it, they spoke the truth of Jesus in laying the groundwork for their questioning.

Jesus was, and is, unrestrainedly true and taught the ways of God without concern for the personal agendas of men. He never hesitated to tell the truth in any situation. The Herodians, on the other hand, did not believe these complimentary things they said of Jesus. They merely said them to entice Him to enter into the discussion with them. From there, they offer their question, which was designed to force Jesus into an untenable corner.

*“What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?”*⁹ But our Lord cut to the essence of the question, and by doing so

made evident the evil intent of those who questioned Him. First, he forced s the Herodians to admit what was already known—that they themselves accepted that the coin on the realm was issued by and given value by the king. He then countered their question by asking them whose image and name appeared on the coin.

The coin, as was usual at the time, bore the image of Caesar. In that case, Jesus advised, give that which belongs to Caesar to Caesar and that which belongs to God to God. This answer clarifies and illuminates the different spheres of authority. If the coin of the realm is made valuable by the government, then give the coin to the government when it is demanded.

Give to Caesar, Jesus says, that which belongs to Caesar anyway. As head of the government, he is due honor. As lawmaker, he is due obedience. If he should demand tribute, then he is due tribute. Remember our prayers which we offer each Sunday “for the whole state of Christ’s Church”? *“We beseech thee also so to direct and dispose the hearts of all Christian Rulers, that they may truly and impartially administer justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion, and virtue.”*¹⁰

Civil government demands our obedience and honor, at least to the point at which it contravenes the laws of God. Laws made by that government, which are designed to benefit the whole populace by maintaining law and order, should be obeyed. The operations of government involve certain expenses, and it is appropriate that the taxes necessary to meet those expenses be paid by all those who live under the rule of the government.

The line is drawn at that point when obeying and honoring the government runs afoul of the laws of God. We are instructed to give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s, but we are also commanded to give to God that which is God’s—and the clear implication there is that we are to give *only to God* those things which are God’s.

We must always take care that we do not give to Caesar that which is God's. The worship and obedience due only to God are His and His alone. If Caesar, or whatever government stands today, should try to change our faith, to limit or damage the Gospel, or demand the worship of God be limited or stopped, then that government has lost all legitimacy and must be opposed, whatever the cost.

Our money may bear the stamp of the government, and so be given back to the government when demanded. Our souls bear only the stamp of God, and must only be given to God. To God alone we owe obedience in moral and spiritual issues. To God alone we owe faith and worship. While we are bound to “*give therefore unto Caesar that which is Caesar's,*” we are even more bound to “*give unto God that which is God's.*”

So what do we owe to our government? The answer that Jesus gave is just as applicable today as it was when He walked the earth. We must pay dues when due, taxes when applicable, revenue when needed. We must hold public officials in respect and grant to them what honor they are due and, when called to do so and when our consciences permit, we must participate in the operations of government, such as by serving on juries and voluntary boards and commissions. But when our government trespasses into the realms of faith and our relationship with God, we must resist it. This is our appropriate, legitimate and honorable relationship with our government.

Let us pray.

Lord, so guide our elected rulers we beseech thee, that they incline always to Your will and ways. Give to each of us the wisdom, the grace and the fortitude to follow always Your commands, and to give to our earthly governors their due respect, honor and support. This we ask in Jesus' name. *Amen.*

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November 11, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity, 2012.*

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ *Wisdom 6:1-11 (KJV).*

⁵ *St. Matthew 22:15-22 (KJV).*

⁶ *St. Matthew 22:21 (KJV).*

⁷ *Romans 13: 6-7 (KJV).*

⁸ *St. Matthew (KJV).*

⁹ *St. Matthew 22:17 (KJV).*

¹⁰ *Prayers for the Church, The Book of Common Prayer* 74 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

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