

## **Between Caesar and God** Matthew 22:15-22

### **Intro**

I don't know if you would agree with me or not, but preaching is difficult. It's difficult because of the nature of God's Word. I cannot control God's words; rather, I have to wait until God speaks to me... listen carefully as much as I can... discern whether it comes from my own thoughts or from God's ... and deeply meditate on this living voice of God for our church today. But preaching is also difficult because of the subject matter in the Scripture itself. Do you know what topics are difficult to preach on? Politics and money. They're difficult due to its divisive and controversial nature. And today's text touches upon these two subjects at the same time.

While my preaching professors encourage me to preach on socio-political issues, some seasoned pastors advised me not to do so because it will do more harm than good for the church. I think I have been pretty good in following these pastors' advice thus far. But today, I will take a risky path, following my preaching teachers' advice. I may touch a sacred cow in the church so please be ready.

### **The Pharisees and the supporters of Herod**

As we all know, Jesus was a very popular figure in his time. He was a well known teacher. He was an extraordinary healer, exorcist and miracle worker. But what made him so popular among people was his non-discriminatory [년-디스'크리미네토리] attitude toward people. Jesus loved to meet people regardless of who they were and what they did for living. He liked to be with people and loved to share the good news of God's coming kingdom. People knew that they would not be judged or discriminated at Jesus' table so they loved spending time with Jesus.

Of course, not all people loved Jesus. There were two particular groups of people who did not like Jesus. One were the Pharisees and the other were Herodians, who were loyalists to Roman empire. On the one hand, the Pharisees did not like Jesus because Jesus spent time with social outcasts. Simply sitting at the same table with these unclean people was considered as a violation of purity law but Jesus often had parties with them. So the Pharisees didn't like Jesus. Herodians, on the other hand, did not like Jesus because Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, which sounded very much like a political instigation against the Roman empire. So the Herodians didn't like Jesus. While these two parties customarily fought against one another, they had one thing in common. Both parties did not like Jesus. As an old proverb says, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," they cooperated in an attempt to trap Jesus by asking him regarding one of the most controversial topics... Roman taxation. They asked, "Teacher! Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (v. 17)

### **Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"**

Like today, taxation was a hot topic, particularly Roman taxation. Most people suffered from the huge burden of taxation during the time of Jesus. Many of Jesus's

followers were also victims of heavy Roman taxation. But the deeper problem of paying taxes to the emperor was theological. Israelites believed, the land of Israel belonged only to God, who is the true ruler of Israel. However, the pagan emperor came, took their land, and claimed ownership of their land. For Jews, the emperor was an illegitimate ruler of their land. So many Jews wondered whether paying taxes to the emperor was an act of disobedience to God. For them, it was a matter of loyalty and faith.

So their question of taxation was a perfect trap. If Jesus said “pay up,” he would offend many pious Jews and alienate many of his poor peasant followers. But if Jesus urged people to refuse paying their taxes to the Roman emperor, it wouldn’t take long for the Herodians to arrange for Jesus to be arrested. Their “either-or” question was a well-laid trap.

### **Either... Or...**

In the divisive political climate in our country today, we often encounter and fall into these kind of traps. There are many controversial socio-political issues such as immigration issues, boarder wall construction, gun control, and climate change. But there are other controversial issues that caught my attention. Kneeling down during the national anthem as a way to protest a rampant racism in our society and police brutality against African Americans. What do you think about this issue?

I can already sense the tension emerging in you. Right? If I say that one must stand up during the national anthem, I would lose my support from liberals. If I say that kneeling during the national anthem is a perfectly appropriate way to protest against racism, then, I would lose my support from conservatives. Like the Pharisees’ question to Jesus, our binary political situation often forces us to choose to be either conservatives or liberals; either Republicans or Democrats.

Now politics literally divides Christians in terms of their political allegiance. [얼리-전스] While white evangelical Christians are predominantly Republicans, African Episcopal Methodist are mostly Democrats. About 54 percent of the United Methodists identify themselves as Republicans and about 46 percent of the United Methodists see themselves more Democrat-leaning.

You can see...the church is divided. We are divided. The holy body of Christ is torn apart by politics. We are supposed to heal division in the world, but we today are divided by the politics of the world. Because the church is so divided in terms of politics, preachers including myself tend to stay away from sensitive political issues and keep silent on social justice issues, which are often entangled with political issues.

People in the pew also do not want to hear preachers’ opinions opposite to their own positions. Right? What is at stake here is that we forget how to deal with many important issues of life based on our Christian faith. How does your faith influence your political stance on gun control or immigration issues? When you enter the voting booth, are you a Christian, Republican or Democrat? Think of how your Christian faith informs and influences your business practices. How does your faith change and shape your way of doing business or relating with other people? Some say, “I practice my Christian faith when I involve myself and my family in the programs of the church. But my business is

my business – that’s something else. The two don’t have much to do with each other.” This comment expresses a pretty common view of the relationship between Christian faith and business. What I would like to say is that somehow we compartmentalize our faith. Faith becomes a private matter of devotion and has nothing to do with other parts of our lives.

When our Christian faith is unable to answer the many urgent issues of life and society, many people outside of the church feel that church is unnecessary because it’s irrelevant and has nothing to do with their everyday lives. The deeper problem of compartmentalized faith is that the politics and the state controls over most parts of our lives and Christian faith is eventually suffocated within the church building.

Have you seen candles in a jar with lids? Many candles sold today come in jars with matching lids. How do you extinguish these candles? You just need to put a lid on it and then, the flame of the candle is soon quenched. The same thing happen to the church. Our passionate flame of love for Christ is soon gone if our faith is enclosed only within the church building on Sunday mornings. We need to find a way to live out our faith in our daily lives, workplaces, school, and even in political arenas. (I would love to hear your stories and opinion on this matter. How can we integrate and practice our Christian faith in our everyday lives?)

### **Give to God What Belongs to God!**

As the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus with a binary question, Jesus reframed the issue by asking to see the coin used to pay taxes. Jesus said, “Do you have a coin? Let me see it.” And they handed him a **silver coin**. At the time of Jesus, the silver coin had a picture of Caesar with these words, “The Divine Caesar.” It claimed that the emperor is god.

When the Pharisees show him a silver coin, Jesus asks, “whose image and inscription is this?” “Caesar’s” they replied. Then, Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what belong to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Jesus managed to wiggle out of the trap. But it is not clear precisely what Jesus was getting at. Some people point to this passage as proof that God and politics should be kept separate. Others say that this story proves religion is a matter of the heart, and that Jesus doesn’t really care about mundane things like your political opinions and what you do with your money. And some have cited this passage as proof that Jesus taught that the law is the law, and our duty as Christians is to support the government no matter what. All three of these interpretations are dubious.

Let us ponder Jesus’ saying, “Give to Caesar what belong to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” To follow Jesus words, we need to do divvying up the work, separating what belongs to Caesar or to the nation and what belongs to God.

What belongs to Caesar or to the nation? National parks, my favorite places to visit, certainly belong to the nation. State parks also belong to the nation. The White House, the U.S. States Capitol building, and military bases all belong to the nation. What else? Do you have dollar bills? Every bill and coin you own belong to the government, though we use them. This dollar bill is a property of the United States of America.

Then, what belongs to God? While national parks and state parks are national property, nature itself belongs to God. As the creator of the universe, God never sold property to human beings. The White House is certainly a government property, but every single marble and piece of wood that was used to build the beautiful building comes from God's property. The same concept applies to the dollar bill.

As we do our divvying up work, sooner or later we are bound to ask the question: "What isn't God's?" Is there anything that doesn't belong to God?" Then, the divvying up ends. Everything is from God! Isn't it? Whatever Jesus is getting at here, he doesn't try to compromise in a matter that divides human loyalties neatly between God and the political powers. Jesus invited people to give ultimate loyalty only to God.

We must decide whom we will serve as our God. The Caesar or Our God. The United States of America or our God. I know this may sound troublesome you. Right? But we cannot serve two Gods at the same time. We can give our ultimate loyalty only to one.

I don't know whether you realize it or not, but when I stand at the center of the altar, for offering prayer or communion, I sometimes feel that I am standing between God and the Caesar because of the presence of the American flag and Christian flag at the both corners of the altar. Have you noticed it? (I guess everyone know which one is American flag. But have you ever realized that our church has Christian flag over there?) A flag is not an ordinary object. It symbolizes our country's core values, its dignity, and its power. That is why we take the flag desecration [테'씨커-레이션] seriously. Right? The location of the flag also symbolizes which flag is more prominent. According to the US Flag Code, "when the US flag is displayed from a staff in a church, the flag of the United States of America should hold the position of superior prominence, in advance of the audience, and in the position of honor at the clergyperson's right as he or she faces the audience. Any other flag so displayed should be placed on the left of the clergyperson to the right of the audience." The location of our flags in our sanctuary symbolizes that American values and power is superior to Christian values and power. Our country wants our ultimate loyalty, which belongs only to God. And we unconsciously give to our country what belongs to God.

But remember everything belongs to God. Remember where we belong and who we are. We are God's people. We are not anointed, and given our identity by politicians. We are redeemed and named worthy by God. We are God's people. God is the one who authored us. And breathes into us the breath of life. It is God, not political parties or nation-states that gives us our true names. Christians. We are God's people.

So don't compartmentalize your faith. Don't confine the divine flame of love within you inside a small church building but let it spread like a wild fire into your homes, schools, workplaces, and the world. To do this, give our ultimate loyalty to God. We are Christians first and We are Americans second. We are Christians first and we are either liberals or conservatives second. We are Christians first and whatever after comes second. Give to God what belongs to God and give thanks to God for being our God. Amen.