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Sermon Text: Matthew 22:15-22

GOD AND GOVERNMENT: A CHRISTIAN SERVES BOTH

So do you support the Black Lives Matter organization or are you a racist? Will you use my preferred pronouns or are you a hater? Do you drive an electric car or are you a climate denier? Those questions are contrived. They set up a false dichotomy intended to pigeonhole you or bully you into compliance.

In the same way, the Pharisees contrived to force Jesus into accepting a false premise. Are you a pagan supporter or a true Jew? Are you a rebel leader or a Rome-lover? Do you serve God or Caesar?

Hatred makes strange bedfellows. Normally the Pharisees and Herodians hated each other. The Pharisees postured themselves as the representatives of all that pertains to Judaism. They hated the Gentile Roman Empire and resented their heavy-handed occupation of Israel. The Herodians were the political machinery of the Roman King Herod. They savored any opportunity to oppress or humiliate the Jews. But in Jesus the Pharisees and the Herodians found something on which they could collaborate.

The Pharisees cherished their predominance in the Jewish community. They saw Jesus with all His popularity as a threat. They wanted Jesus dead. If they could make Jesus sound like He was anti-Jewish or disloyal to Jehovah, then they could convince the religious community that there were grounds for stoning Him to death. On the other hand, if they could make a public figure like Jesus sound subversive to the Roman government, then the Herodians would have legal grounds to take Him out. The Herodians would have relished not only taking out a Jewish hero, but perhaps along with him a wide swath of Jewish followers.

So Matthew 22 tells us, *Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"*

What's He going to do? If He says yes, He's doomed by the Jews, a traitor to His people. If He says no, He's doomed by the Herodians, an insurrectionist against Rome. He's

doomed either way. But what the Pharisees didn't consider is that they weren't dealing with a mere human. The man standing before them was also the Son of God, the Almighty One whose understanding spans from the tiniest neutron to the largest galaxy.

Matthew 22 tells us, *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, [that's a coin] and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

Jesus didn't answer either/or as they wanted Him to. He answered both/and. They hadn't figured that as a possibility.

You see, under the Fourth Commandment, God has instituted three representatives on earth to function on His behalf. First is the home to oversee our physical and spiritual care. Second is the Church for our spiritual care. And third is government to manage this physical life. And even though these three institutions are filled and operated by flawed human beings, God backs them with His authority and power.

When Jesus said, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's"* everything pivots on that word "and."

He masterfully expressed two realities. First, the word "and" separates. The sphere of government *and* the sphere of the Church are separate. The Church does not govern with soldiers, policemen, guns and jails. God has only given the Church words to wield. The government has authority over property and actions but not over the human conscience or beliefs. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In other words, keep them separate. When they venture into each other's sphere the result is usually disastrous. For a Christian it is not an either/or but a both/and. In the sphere of the Church we owe our obedience to the Word of God. In the sphere of the government, we owe our obedience to its outward laws, provided only that it does not command us to do or believe something that goes against God's Word.

The word "and" does a second thing. It also unites. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Giving to Caesar is the same as giving to God because the government is God's representative on earth. Church work is God's business, but governing is God's business too.

Today's lesson from Romans 13 said, *no governing authority exists except by God.* If the Pharisees knew their Old Testament Scriptures they knew very well that the governments

of the world, no matter how cruel or righteous, rise and fall only as God causes it to happen. Thus even the Roman government which was occupying and ruling Israel at that time did so by God's design. When Jesus stood trial before Pontius Pilate He said, *You would have no power over me if it weren't given to you from above.*"

Therefore to defy government, even unjust government, is to defy God. To obey government is to obey God. You are not paying your taxes to republicans or democrats. You are paying them to God. When you serve on jury duty, drive the speed limit, volunteer for the military, comply with the building code, report all your tips, study history, vote, observe the drinking age limit, report a crime, keep no large-mouth bass shorter than 14 inches, talk respectfully about the elected official, exchange vows before living together, then you are honoring God.

But we haven't always treated it that way, have we? We tend to get incredulous. Like, "Come on, Pastor, the size of a fish - what's that got to do with my relationship to God? You mean to tell me God would send my eternal soul to hell over a technicality of an inch or two?" We also tend to get defiant. "You mean God expects me to wear a mask even though there's clearly no immediate threat, even when the governor is overstepping his authority?" That natural defiance we all feel, perhaps depending on how much we like the politician - but that natural spirit of ours that bucks or chafes under the rules - that excludes us from a much more important kingdom - the kingdom of heaven. Yes, God is that stringent. Yes, it is that serious.

Thankfully, at all times, in every aspect of earthly life, Jesus honored His heavenly Father perfectly, submitting Himself, for His Father's sake, to the earthly government all the way to being unjustly condemned, humiliated and executed like a criminal on a cross. As He hung there Jesus was being condemned by an even higher authority. He was being blamed and punished by His heavenly Father for our sins against Caesar.

Because of His sufferings and death, Christ now gives His Church something to administer that He doesn't give to the government: the forgiveness of sins. For Jesus' sake, you and I are forgiven. Christ gives us His forgiveness in Words, and in Baptism and in the Lord's Supper. We give to God what is God's when we believe Him, when we take comfort in His forgiveness and find joy in our eternal rescue, when the new lease on life we receive moves us to support and bless our nation, to serve and respect our authorities and fellow citizens, to strive to be a godly influence on our society, to uphold the rule of law, not merely because someone benefits, but because God is honored by it.

So you see, it is not the either/or scenario that the Pharisees presented to Jesus. It is both/and. Government and God. God and government. A Christian serves both.