

Sunday, October 22, 2023 *"Loving God First"*

Psalm 99 | Thessalonians 1:1-10 Matthew 22:15-22

A young lady was soaking up the sun's rays on a beach when a little boy in his swimming trunks, carrying a towel, came up to her and asked her, "Do you believe in God?" She was surprised by the question but she replied, "Why, yes, I do." Then he asked her: "Do you go to church every Sunday?" Again, her answer was "Yes!" He then asked: "Do you read your Bible and pray every day?" Again she said, "Yes!" By now her curiosity was very much aroused. The little lad sighed with relief and yelled to his mother, "Mom this lady is ok. She can hold my quarter and watch your purse while we go in the water."

The little boy was straightforward and honest in his questions because he wanted to entrust to the lady something valuable. What do you do with what you deem as valuable in your life? Do you ask questions of those around you? Or do you quietly criticize without really knowing?

Our scripture reading from Matthew 22 continues with Jesus teachings. Those listening to him marvel as he has a way with words and stories. But the Pharisees the leaders in the synagogue are not so amazed and not being honest before the crowd of listeners. They went and plotted to entrap him in what Jesus said. They are looking for a way to get rid of this trouble maker named Jesus. He is just upsetting everything that has been so good at the temple and what might happen in the future with leadership and where the people may learn to live and follow in their faith.

The Pharisees are not being honest when they send some of their disciples to Jesus accompanied by Herodians. The Herodians are members of a political party which want political independence for the Jewish people as well as the desire to restore a member of their party to rule in Judea. The Pharisees sought to restore the kingdom of David. Together, they have no intent in entrusting Jesus with anything. They just want to be rid of him because the people are turning to him for direction and seeking his teachings and wisdom. The people are starting to believe that he is the Messiah. So when they ask a question they are not looking for the answer

but a reason to have him go away. They are looking for a way to get rid of this trouble making Nazarene named Jesus. They don't want someone to hold their quarter.

“Teacher, we know that you are sincere,” they say to him, “and teach the way of God, in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality“. All these flattering ways to describe Jesus,— Teacher, Sincere, way of God in truth— fair and equal--- but they are setting him up to ask him what he thinks. Not for a moment did they believe in Jesus' sincerity. And not for a moment did Jesus trust them either!

The question they ask is simply, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor (Caesar) or not?” In answering, Jesus did what he often did, he asked another question, “ Why are you putting me to the test? And calls them “you hypocrites?” No wonder they grew angry with Jesus! By calling them this, Jesus accused them of putting on masks and pretending to be something they are not. Not only this, he states as hypocrites they claim to know and follow certain beliefs but their behaviour counteracts those beliefs. The Pharisees were so angry it blinded them!

But how was Jesus going to answer their question? The poll tax mentioned in this passage was levied by the Romans against the Jews beginning in A.D. 6 when Judea became a Roman province. This tax was favoured by the Herodians, but the zealots and Pharisees resented it. Yet as they ask this question to Jesus together they form an alliance to trap Jesus with words. Should the authority of Caesar be recognized and the poll tax be paid?

What should Jesus say? Yes, to affirming the tax payment to Caesar? This would have pleased the Herodians but would have made Himself an even greater enemy of the Pharisees. If, by contrast, Christ were to have denied that the poll tax be paid, he would have made Himself out to be an enemy of the state and possibly, subject Himself to charges of sedition. But it is this simple question asked by the Pharisees and motivated by malice and discontent that prompts one of the greatest of Jesus' teachings. It may not seem like much on the face of it, but the implications of this teaching have echoed through the centuries and they have shaped western societies. Jesus said, Show me the coin used for the tax. IT was a denarius Whose head is this and whose title? “the Emperor’s.” Then Jesus says, “Give therefore to the

emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." Another translation states: Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

When Jesus said this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. What had he said to put them in their place? What had Jesus done to show these Herodians and Pharisees that he was the messiah for real?

Maybe we need to understand Jesus' response a little bit more.. Jesus said, "Give to Caesar /emperor the things that are Caesar's-his and to God the things that are God's".

What is Caesar's? What Is God's? and Which Will You Choose?

Through his words, Jesus indicates that the tax should be paid, since the emperor's image and inscription on the coin would cause it to fall under "things that are the emperor's." But the question remains, what belongs to God? Psalm 24:1 states "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." Jesus thus concedes payment of the census tax while subverting the reach of the emperor. Jesus simply affirms Christian submission to governing authorities but also He affirms the all encompassing reach of God's ownership as He is the Creator. On one hand, Jesus functionally said to pay the poll tax. Therefore, they couldn't go to Herod or Pilate, the Roman governor, with this statement and successfully charge Jesus with teaching insurrection. But at the same time Jesus also said even as Jews pay Caesar what belongs to him, they are also to give God what belongs to Him. In doing this, Jesus asserted that God is over all, including Caesar. But He did so in a manner that the Jews would understand this to be the claim. At the same time, there would be no words the Herodians or Pharisees could use to twist against Him in front of Caesar.

Jesus avoided their either/or trap with a both/and response. Jesus reframed the question, and engaged with them in the process to find the answer. He also did not put God and Caesar on the same level, but also avoided giving any grounds for the Jews to use against Him.

What do we choose? For some people the answer is simply existing in the state of the here and now but for those with faith in God, it is with whole faith and commitment that people are pulled in different directions. This is what it means to struggle with head/ heart; state/ faith and hope . Who do you love? Who do you put first?

Our hearts of faith will answer God of course but do we really act this way? Who do we put first? Often it is me- as individual seeking and searching for God. Me/ I am most important even before others who are in need, seek help or assistance. How are we to respond to this teaching? We are called by Christ to live in whole hearted allegiance to God. It is not easy but Jesus will show us and the Spirit will guide us. All we must do is be faithful and love God.

Why should we love God? Because God loved us first! We are to give to those in this world what they require and then give everything we know to God. This is ironic because even what we give to those who rule, all is God's. The question is therefore, are we willing to do this? Give to God what is required of us as faithful people?

Paul has learned how the Thessalonians have turned to God from idols and how they serve a true and living God. This too is our purpose in life as well- to receive the word with joy because it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Our purpose is to love God and live life fully on earth. We are to also remember that God created all things.. but what is needed and what is required of us is to first love God. Trust him with our lives for He is our source. And if value our lives we can entrust everything we are to God.

Jesus was asked a trick question yet through his wisdom he answered what was necessary to show the people who matters most. God. We are called to love God because He first loved us. Let us give thanks as we pray.

PRAYER

O God how we love you and thank you for all your blessings to us. Because you created us out of love we praise you and offer to you now our lives filled with hope. Help us to walk your way always. Hear now our prayers as we offer our love to you. SILENCE Amen.

