

“Trapped by God”

Can you imagine man trying to trap God? Regardless of whether they know or believe that Jesus is truly God – that’s what the Pharisees are doing – trying to trap God in His words.

They’ve been plotting. Their plan is laid out. They send their disciples – along with unlikely co-conspirators – and they read from their cleverly devised script. “Teacher” they begin. What a nasty trick – they don’t believe Jesus is a teacher, not their teacher. They’re not here to learn anything – only to spring a trap.

They butter Him up – as if He can so easily be coerced by flattery. “We know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.”

Have you ever done that – tried to sweet talk God in order to get what you want – not really concerned about “the way of God” – only wanting your own way – trying to trap Him in His words – using God’s Word to give approval for your sin?

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

They have no idea who they’re dealing with. Jesus can smell their trap a mile away – He knows their every thought – the evil desires of their hearts. They’ve set the trap – asked their carefully crafted question – but Jesus simply will not play their game.

They think they have Him trapped. Their question is designed as a “gotcha” – no matter how He answers. If He says it’s lawful to pay the tax, the Pharisees will splash it all over social media that this Jesus fellow is pro-Rome, that He sides with their occupiers. And if He says it’s not lawful to pay the tax, well, then the Herodians who have sidled up to Rome will make sure the powers that be, know this Jesus fellow is a rebel.

As He does so often with His antagonists, He doesn’t answer their question. You see, the real question is this – will they (and will you), give to God “the things that are God’s”?

God's Word says in Romans 13: "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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (v. 1-7)

Jesus is the one who has instituted the authority that Caesar wields – and also King Herod, and Pontus Pilate, and Cyrus in the OT reading. They are His servants, His ministers – who are given to serve the citizens they have been placed over. They are to punish the evildoers and commend those who do good.

And here in our text, those opposed to Jesus would use Caesar as bait for their trap. They do not honor him. They do not respect him. They do not realize that he is God's servant, authorized by God Himself. So, you see, the real issue, is that they do not give to God "the things that are God's."

The primary work of the governing authorities is to provide earthly peace. Whether they believe in the one true God, or not – God is at work through them – using them for the good of all people, and ULTIMATELY, for the sake of the Church.

It is through the Church that the Word of God is proclaimed to all people. His Law and Gospel preached into ears so that God the Holy Spirit might bring them to repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ.

That is what Jesus is doing here in our text – calling out the malice and hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Herodians – destroying their trap – calling them to repentance, so that they might give to God “the things that are God’s” – confessing, and believing, that this Jesus fellow is God’s Savior of the world, and their Savior.

And so it is today, even as Israel and Hamas wage war against one another. I don’t know how this will end up – and I can’t tell you specifically what God is up to – but I can tell you that God is at work.

Earthly peace has been destroyed, people are suffering, and lives have been lost. ULTIMATELY God is at work so that Jews and Muslims alike would repent – believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior – and love one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Dearly beloved, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, stands before you today – you who have tried to trap Him in His words – subverting His authority. You do not give to God “the things that are God’s” when you do not confess your sin – when you don’t believe that He is at work, even through the governing authorities – and when you do not believe that He is at work through His Word and Sacraments, for your repentance and salvation.

Will you honor Him? Will you be taught by Him, and follow in the way of God? Then repent of your sins, and look to Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness.

He who has endured the malice, hypocrisy, and rebellion of the world – does not forsake His enemies – but takes their sin as His very own, and dies for them on the cross of Calvary. Jesus has shed His blood for you, for your sins – and by His blood, you are redeemed. His blood releases you from the bondage of your sins and sets you free.

When Jesus says, “I forgive you all your sins – give to God “the things that are God’s” with the “amen” of faith. When He gives His Body and Blood into your mouth – do not marvel in unbelief – but give to God “the things that are God’s” – saying, “this is true.”

When the world all around you is in chaos, and fear seeks to overwhelm you – remember that all things are God’s – that all things are in His hands – that He works all things for the good of those who love Him – working for you good, for your salvation. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds,
in Christ Jesus. Amen.