

The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity; by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil.

Matthew 22:15-22

“Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?”

1. In this Gospel there is pictured to us, how high reason and human wisdom agree with the divine wisdom, and how shamelessly they attack even when they wish to be the most prudent; as takes place here among the Pharisees who were the best and the most intelligent people among the Jews, as they also prove themselves to be; yet their wisdom must become foolishness. They could not catch Christ in his sermons nor in his works; and yet they would gladly have had found a reason to put him to death. Therefore they thought to seize him in the most subtle manner, and propounded to him a pointed syllogism, so pointed that human reason could not have devised a more pointed one; and said to him: ***“Teacher, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, and carest not for any one: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?”***

2. They imagined thus: now we will lay hold of him: for he must answer either yes or no. Does he say yes, then we have conquered him; does he say no, then he is also caught. In that they say: “Teacher,” they aim to compel him to answer and rightly agree with them; and in that they say, ***“We know that thou are true,”*** they admonish him of his office. Where should Christ flee? Every door was closed to him. But he would not escape through the opening they made.

3. Was not this a subtle device? Do they not sufficiently show that they were prudent people? Whichever way their Lord had answered he would have been taken. Yea, did they not act wisely enough in that they brought with them the servants of Herod? and thought, indeed, they would accomplish their end by stratagem, so that he should not escape. They thought thus: Wait, we will now counsel him; does he say no, then the servants of Herod are present and will put him to death as a revolutionist and as one who sets himself against the Roman government. Does he say yes, then he will speak against the independence of the Jewish people, and we will excite the people against him. For the Jews wish to be a free people, and to have their own king, of their own blood, as was promised to them by God through Moses when he wrote in Deuteronomy 17,15: “Thou shalt surely set him king over thee, whom Jehovah thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king

over thee; thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee who is not thy brother." And they did not know differently than that the same kingdom should stand until the time of the true king, until the time of Christ; as the patriarch Jacob preached concerning it and said: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come," Gen. 49, 10. And to this end God also chose especially this people and formed a kingdom from them only for the sake of Christ. They had many other sayings to the end that they should not serve any one, they were the head and not the tail, etc., Deut. 28, 44. This and other like passages moved the Pharisees and scribes among the people and they boasted of it; as is now beaten into the people that the Church cannot err. Therefore they thought thus: Does he say yes, then he blasphemes against God and is worthy of death as a blasphemer of God, and the people will stone him; for God promised and agreed to give this people liberty and they were in all times God's people even in the midst of their captivity.

4. However, at that time as at the present, they had no king and therefore there arose among the people at large a great murmur, faction and insurrection. For this people were educated by the law that they should have a king of their own flesh and blood, as I said; therefore they did not cease to set themselves against foreign kings and rulers until they were destroyed and many consequently suffered death. And this happened frequently; for they were a stiff-necked, rude and hardened people; therefore the Romans, who at the time had the rule and authority over them, protected the country well and they had to divide it into four provinces, and in all places they thoroughly took possession by means of princes and tetrarchs; in order that they, thus divided, might not so soon come together and create revolution, so that they could be better kept in subjection where they wished to rebel against the Roman empire. Hence, Pilot was a governor appointed by Rome in the country of the Jews; Herod a tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch in the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, as Luke relates in 3, 1, and all for the purpose to make the Jews subjects of Rome. Hence the Jews became angry, raging and foolish, and especially at the time of Christ when they greatly desired to have their own king. Consequently the Pharisees now devised this scheme and thought thus: Wait, the Romans desire to have the authority and rule; if he answers no to our question, then the tetrarch is at hand and will behead him; does he say yes, then the people in a mass will rise up against him and we will accomplish our end. They wish thus, as they think, to find cause to put the Lord to death, or forever suppress his doctrine and work among the people.

5. As the Jews now do here so it is everywhere that the principal things are overlooked and we worry ourselves about other unnecessary matters. Thus the Pharisees here take in hand and concern themselves about whether they are free or not, seeing they had in the law and in the Word of God the promise that they should be subject to none other than to their own king and yet now they are subject to the Roman emperor. They learned in their Scriptures how they should honour God and love their neighbour; they let go of that and concern themselves about other matters. They had the promise if they did according to the Word and commandment of God they should be a free people. About doing this they did not concern themselves and yet they wished to be free and have their own king. We act also in the very same way. We wish to enjoy Christian liberty and imagine if we destroy pictures or are disobedient to the government that we are by virtue of this Christians, and in this way we

overlook faith and love.

6. But what does Christ do when the Pharisees so cunningly lay hold of him? He slays them with their own words and catches them by means of their own counsel, by which they thought to catch him, he says neither yes nor no; as the Evangelist writes and says: *"But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why make ye trial of me, ye hypocrites? Show me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a denarius. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's."*

7. Here you see the master stroke the Lord uses. He asks them to hand him the tribute money and inquires whose image and superscription it bears. Then they answer him Caesar's. He then freely concluded that they were subject to Caesar, to whom they were obligated to pay tax and tribute. As if he should say: Have you thus permitted Caesar to come among you, so that he mints your money, and his coin is in circulation and favour among you, then he has triumphed in the game, as if he said: you are to blame that Caesar is your ruler. What should they do now in the face of this answer? They marvelled and went away, they thought they would conquer him in a masterly manner, but their wisdom and shrewdness deceived them.

8. This is written for our consolation, in order that we who believe in Christ should know that we have a wisdom that far surpasses all other wisdom; a strength and righteousness, which are not to be compared with any human strength or righteousness; for against the Holy Spirit no counsel can prevail. We have the power through Christ to trample sin under our feet and to triumph over death, also a wisdom that surpasses the wisdom of the whole world. If Christ live in us by faith then we possess him who establishes this in us; but it is not experienced except in times of temptation and opposition: therefore if I make use of it then he comes and gives me the power vigorously to press through all difficulties to victory.

9. In like manner we should not worry that our doctrine will fail and be put to shame. For let even all the wise and prudent of the world together rise up against the Word of God; they overlook the joke that they opposed it, that it took place for their sake. It may indeed happen that they may howl and bite and snap against it so that the people think the Gospel will fail; but when they set themselves against it and wish to overthrow it, then it is certain that they are weak, and by the same trick they wished to seize and take Christ, they themselves are finally caught. As we see in this Gospel, and here and there in the writings of Paul and especially in the history of St. Stephen we see how they failed to quote the Scriptures aright, yea, that which they did quote is used against them, for the Jews charged Stephen that he spoke against the temple, Acts 6, 7, and also against God who told them to build the temple, they brought forth passages of Scripture by which they tried to suppress and conquer him; but Stephen, full of the Holy Ghost, showed unto them by one passage of Scripture after another how God did not live in houses made with hands. David wished to build him a house, but he did not desire it. What was the reason? God had lived a long time before David's day among his people; he must indeed be a poor God who needs a house for his dwelling place. And thus by many histories he proves that God does not dwell in houses made by man. What should the Jews do? They have the passage clearly before their eyes, which they quoted against Stephen, (that he witnessed against themselves).

10. In like manner must all come to shame and be overthrown who rise up against this divine wisdom and the Word of God. Consequently no one should fear even if all the wisdom and power of the world oppose the Gospel, yea, even if they plan to suppress it by the shedding of blood; for the more blood is shed, the more Christians there will be. The blood of Christians, as Tertullian says, is the seed from which Christians grow. Satan must be drowned in the blood of Christians, consequently there is no art that can suppress the Gospel by force. It is with the Gospel as with the palm tree, which has the nature and character that it flourishes at the top, and one may laden it as heavy as he wishes; and especially if it be used as a beam or support it does not weaken under any burden, but rises in spite of the burden. Such is also the nature of the Gospel, the more one opposes it the greater it lays hold of us and the more one burdens it, the more it grows.

11. Therefore we should not be afraid of powers. But we should fear our prosperity and good days which cause us more harm than our anguish and persecution; and we should not be afraid in the face of the wisdom and the shrewdness of the world, for they can do us no harm. Yes, the more the wisdom of the world opposes the truth, the purer and clearer does the truth become, consequently the Gospel can experience nothing better than that the world rise up against it with all its force and wisdom; yea, the more my conscience, sin and Satan attack me, the stronger does my righteousness become. For the sins which worry me, pain me; then I persevere harder and harder in prayer and in my cry to God; then faith and righteousness become stronger and stronger. This is what St. Paul means when he says in 2 Cor. 12, 9: my power is made perfect in weakness. Now since we possess such a treasure that becomes stronger by virtue of trial and opposition we should not fear, but be of good courage and rejoice in tribulation; as St. Paul says to the Romans, Rom. 5, 3: and as the Apostles did who departed from the presence of the council with great rejoicing, and thanked God that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the Name, Acts 5, 41. If Satan were only prudent enough to keep quiet and let the Gospel be preached, he would receive less injury from it; for if the Gospel is not attacked it completely rusts and has no occasion or reason to make its power and influence manifest.

12. Thus we are here still secure, no one attacks us; as a result we always continue just as we were, yea, we become worse. In that certain enemies attack us with the Scriptures, they gain very little. In that they have taken up their pen against us, they accomplish no more than if they blew into the fire; but if they had cast us into the fire or beat our heads, there would indeed be more Christians for our sake.

13. Consequently we have here a consolation, when we are attacked; that Christ is in us and holds the field of victory through us. Christ is so near us that we triumph at all times through him because we abide in Christ. As long as we do not have opposition taking us by the neck, he does nothing; but when we are attacked and conquered, then he is at hand and puts all our enemies to shame.

14. Here we may also learn the lesson that those who are a little more than other people, brighter, stronger, and endowed with special gifts of reason, nature and fortune, who are

more artistic, learned and intelligent than others, who indeed are gifted with speech and are talented to lead other people and are able to rule and arrange everything in the best way, they are the most opposed to God and to faith, and trust more in their own strength and reason than in God. For nature, poisoned as it is, leads them to the point that they cannot and will not use their gifts to the best advantage, for the welfare and edification of their neighbour; for they trust in their gifts, and think they will obtain now this, now that, and never remember that they also need God's help and strength to that end. As the Pharisees and scribes do here, who are so certain, as they think, if they thus lay hold of Christ, they would take him captive, for it is not possible, they say, for him to escape, we have ensnared him whether he says yes, or no.

15. Behold, how cunning and perverse human nature is! Methinks this is well pictured here. Aye, there is nought in man but evil, lying and deceiving, cunning and all manner of mischief. Indeed, in his very nature man is nothing else than a liar, Ps. 116, 11. One may not entrust anything to man. Do not imagine that any one tells you the truth; man lies in whatsoever he speaks. And why? The fountain is evil, that is to say, the heart is not good; therefore also the rivers flowing there from cannot be good. Hence does the Lord often times call men a generation of vipers and a brood of serpents, Mat. 22, 34. Is not that a beautiful title for man? Just you go and boast of your piety, your strength, or your free will! Before the world indeed one may be fine and pious, shining with holiness; but at bottom nothing will be found but a generation of vipers and a serpent's brood, and that most of all in the worthiest, most estimable, intelligent and wise people. If you peruse the history of the Greeks, Jews and Romans, you will find that the best and wisest rulers, who according to the judgment of men, governed well, have not thought of God, but confided in themselves alone; to God's might they have attributed nothing.

16. From this it follows that the less adroit a person is before the world, the less will he do against God; and those who are ingenious and honoured in the world, lie and deceive more than the others, thinking to cover up their deception and malice by deceitful and cunning acts. True it is they may full well conceal it; the Holy Spirit, however, has a keen eye and knows them exceeding well. Therefore Scripture often calls such fellows lions, wolves, bears, swine, and wild beasts, namely, such as rage, eating and devouring everything with their deceit. Hence in the Old Testament the Jews were forbidden to eat some animals, as being unclean- those that are enumerated and others--for no other reason than that it might be thus indicated that there are some people who are strong, mighty, rich, adroit, learned, intelligent and wise, people that must be shunned and fled from as though they were something unclean; such people as mislead and deceive others by their appearance, their power and wisdom. For people will not consider them as such, nor believe that they are men who plan evil things and dare to carry them out. No man whatever, therefore, is to be trusted or believed. Believe no one: he will mislead you wherever he can. Aye, if indeed you trust any one, you will act against God, not trusting in him. For it is written, Jer. 17, 57: "*Cursed be the man that trusteth in man; blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord.*"

17. Now someone might object: What is to be done? Must we not have intercourse and dealings one with the other; and how otherwise could human life continue? Surely we must

buy and sell and market our goods among the people? If no one should believe and trust the other, all human dealings would come to an end! I answer: It is true one must deal with the other, and one needs the other's help. But that I demand: Whatever you deal about among men, in buying or selling, you are to consider it as something uncertain, which is not to be trusted and believed in. For certain it is, if you trust any man, you are already deceived, for human nature, in itself, cannot but lie and deceive. Everything is uncertain among men, their deeds and words are unstable; that you may well believe.

18. Therefore we are to put all our trust only in the Lord, and say: O Lord, thou art my life, my soul and body, my goods and possessions, and all that is mine. Do thou direct and ordain it all according to thy divine will. In thee do I trust, in thee do I believe. Thou wilt surely not desert me in such a perilous undertaking with such and such a man, whom I do not trust. If thou knowest it to be good for me, then see to it that he be true to me; if thou dost not see that it will help me, then do not let him keep his word. I am content, thy will be done.

19. As soon, however, as you think a purchaser to be an honest man who will keep his word, and of whom you are certain that he will not deceive you; so soon you have fallen away from God, have prayed to a spectre and put your trust in a liar. Therefore, in dealing with a man, just think in this wise: If he is true, it is good; if not, why then, in God's name, let him be; he cannot do otherwise than lie and deceive. I will leave it all to God; he will make all well.

20. Out of such false and wicked confidence placed in man there has crept into Christianity the abuse of the worship of saints. By this the Christian church, that is, the true assembly of the faithful, have suffered notable decline and damage. What else has saints' worship been but solely a devilish thing? For thus have people reasoned: Such and such a man has been holy; such things has he said and done; therefore we will follow after him, and teach and do likewise. St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and Gregory have done this; therefore it is right, and I will believe it. St. Francis, Benedict, Dominic, and St. Bernard have lived thus, have done such and such a thing; therefore will I also live thus, and do as they have done. Furthermore, St. Augustine has been saved by such a rule. Alas, what a poor, unstable, miserable thing this is, nought but lies and dreams of man. I should damn St. Augustine and his rule, had he laid it down for the purpose of being saved thereby. So blind and foolish is our reason, that it will accept even a spectre and a fiction., whereas only God's Word is to be accepted in matters of salvation. If, for example, Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas and Hanes preached the Gospel, I should have to accept it. And, on the other hand, if those who are considered saints arose and preached lies, about regulations, hoods and gowns, tonsures, ceremonies and other inventions of man, I ought not to accept them. For in such cases not the persons are to be considered, but that which they preach.

21. Now someone might say: See here, would you be wiser than all church fathers and saints, than all bishops and rulers of the whole world? Far be it from me. I do not claim to be wiser than they. But this is true. It is impossible for that which is wise, prudent, great, handsome, mighty and powerful before the world to agree with the Word of God. For thus it is ordained by God, that such people must always persecute the Gospel; if they were not

such the Gospel would not shine and triumph as it does. The Roman emperors Hadrian, Trajan and Diocletian were the wisest of rulers, and reigned so well that all the world praised their government. Yet they persecuted the Gospel and could not tolerate the truth. Likewise do we read of Jewish kings, Ahaz and others, who governed well, that they despised God's Word and acted contrary to God's will. In our times there have never been emperors, princes, or other people to compare with those. But then it had to come to pass that God put all wisdom of this world to shame through the foolishness of preaching, 1 Cor. 1, 21.

22. All this is shown to us in this Gospel, which, though apparently simple and ordinary, is exceedingly rich and comprises many things. How then does the Lord finally deal with the Pharisees after they had shown him the tribute money, and answered that the image and superscription was Caesar's? The Evangelist tells us that he answered thus: *"Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesars; and unto God the things that are Gods."*

23. Although they did not deserve it of the Lord, yet he teaches them the right way. And with these words he also confirms the worldly sword or government. They had hoped he would condemn it and speak against it; he does not do it, however, but praises earthly government and commands to render unto it what is due to it. It is therefore his desire that there should be magistrates, princes and masters, whom we are to obey, be they what they may and what they list; neither should we ask whether they possess and exercise government and authority justly or unjustly. We should only pay heed to that power and authority which is good, for it is ordered and instituted by God, Rom. 13, 1: You are not allowed to upbraid the government, when at times you are oppressed by princes and tyrants, who abuse the power they have from God: some day they will surely have to answer for it. The abuse of a thing does not make it bad, if it was good in itself. A golden chain is good, and it is not made worse by being worn around a whore's neck; or if someone were to destroy one of my eyes with it, should I therefore blame the chain? Truly nay.

24. Thus one must also bear the authority of the ruler. If he abuses it, I am not therefore to bear him a grudge, nor take revenge of and punish him with my hands. One must obey him solely for God's sake, for he stands in God's stead. Let them impose taxes as intolerable as they may: one must obey them and, suffer everything patiently, for God's sake. Whether they do right or not, that will be taken care of in due time. If therefore your possessions, aye, your life and whatsoever you have, be taken from you by those in power, then you are to say: I give it to you willingly, I acknowledge you as my masters, gladly will I be obedient to you. Whether you use the power given to you by God well or ill, that is your affair.

25. But what if they would take the Gospel from us or forbid us to preach it? Then you are to say: The Gospel and Word of God. I will not give up to you. This is not within your power, for your rule is a temporal rule, over worldly matters; but the Gospel is a spiritual, heavenly treasure, and therefore your authority does not extend over the Gospel and God's Word. We recognize the emperor as a master of temporal affairs, not of God's Word; this we shall not suffer to be torn from us, for it is the power of God, Rom. 1, 16, against which not even the gates of hell shall prevail.

26. Therefore, the Lord beautifully summarizes these two things, and in one saying distinguishes them from each other: *"Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."* This honour is due to God, that we are to hold him as a true, almighty and wise God, and attribute to him all the good things that can be named. And even if I do not render him this honour, he still keeps it; nothing is added to or subtracted from it. But in me he is true, almighty and wise, if I consider him as such, and believe him to be such as he proclaims himself. To the emperor, however, and to all in power, are due reverence, taxes, revenue and obedience. God will have the heart; body and possessions are the government's, which is to rule over them in God's stead. This St. Paul says to the Romans in round and clear words, Rom. 13, 1-7: *"Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment. For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldest thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same: for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience' sake. Hence for this cause ye pay tribute also, for they are ministers of God's service, attending continually upon this very thing. Render to all their dues: "tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour."*

27. And for this reason also has government been ordained by God, that it may uphold general peace, which thing alone cannot be paid for by all the money in the world. We just noticed a few things in the uprising of the peasant, what damage, misery and woe are caused by rebellion and the breaking of peace. God grant that things do not go further and that we experience no more. Enough is said on this Gospel. Of temporal government we have written a special booklet. Whoever desires to read it may do so. There he will find more on this subject.

