

“A Matter of Choice”

(Matthew 22:21)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Text: **Matthew 22:21**

Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Dear friends in Christ,

The events of today’s Gospel reading occurred soon after Jesus’ Triumphal entry; He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey being cheered by a large crowd. Next day Jesus returned to the Temple precinct where He overturned the tables of the money exchangers, released doves, and drove out the lambs and goats that were destined for sacrifice and proclaimed, “***My Father’s house is meant to be a house of prayer not a market place***”.

This act angered Jerusalem’s religious leaders so they sought a way to get rid of our Lord. Now, there were several factions in the city at the time – the Pharisees and the Herodians – and both were hostile toward Jesus for different (political) reasons. But on this occasion they joined forces because they had a common enemy: Christ Jesus. Wanting to trap Him they asked: “***Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?***”

Our Lord, however, saw through their clumsy attempt to trap Him. You see, if Jesus answers ‘yes’ then the Jews who despised their Romans occupiers, would turn on Him. And if Jesus answers ‘no’ then the Herodians would report Him to the Roman authorities and have Him arrested. Their strategy is equivalent to the modern-day Catch-22 situation: that’s where ‘you’re damned if you do, and damned if you don’t.’

So, instead of giving the Pharisees and Herodians a yes or no answer, Jesus did something totally unexpected. He replied: “***Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.***”

You see, plans to trap Jesus by His own words never succeeded. Not just because He was more clever than His opponents, but because He never lost sight of the truth. In this instance His opponents posed a question that in their opinion had only two possible answers: either, it’s OK to pay taxes to Rome or, it’s not. But what is the truth?

Let's pause here for a moment. The issue of whether or not to pay taxes goes beyond 1st century Israel. Today, some 2,000 years later, many people and especially big businesses still look for excuses and loopholes in order to minimise their tax commitments to the nation. And what about us? If we wish to be true and faithful Christians, should we pay tax?

The truth is that if we consider our lives most of us have had enough money to pay our taxes, make offerings to the church, and even care for ourselves, or our families. You see, God is gracious for He provides us with the resources to do all three, and still have a little left over.

So it's not a simple 'yes/no' answer – even for us.

In our Gospel reading Jesus' opponents try to trap Him with a Catch-22 question and, believe it or not, the devil tries that on us too. For instance, when reading the Bible it's easy to think that only 'good people' go to heaven, and 'bad people' go to Hell. The problem is, however, we are left with the nagging question: 'How good do I have to be in order to be good enough to go to heaven?'

In other words, what can a person do to get around this 'Catch-22' dilemma?

Well, for starters, a person could reject that they are a sinner, and tell themselves they are a 'good' person: and you know where good people go! Unfortunately, this logic contradicts the apostle John where he says that "***If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; [and] if we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us.***" (1 Jn. v8,10)

Then on the other hand, a person could admit they are a sinner. But that creates another problem: since we have no way of redeeming ourselves heaven is out of reach for us – again! As a result we feel hopeless because our sin seems so black that either God cannot, or will not forgive us. Utter despair! You see, it was this sense of despair that drove Judas Iscariot to commit suicide after Jesus was arrested – having betrayed Him for 30 pieces of silver.

However, my friends, it's a great comfort and relief to know that our Lord Jesus has provided us with a solution to this Catch-22 dilemma.

In his first letter, the apostle John declares this good news: "***If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness.***" (1 Jn. v9) This, my friends, is Christ's amazing alternate answer to the Catch-22 dilemma. And this solution – of confession and absolution – is possible only because Jesus kept the law perfectly – and suffering the death we deserve.

You see, since Jesus paid the penalty for our sin on the cross we are no longer in a “damned if you do, and damned if you don’t” situation. We need no longer deny our sin, nor do we have to despair of heaven because our salvation is not our responsibility, but Christ’s! The good news is that since Jesus has earned our forgiveness He now offers to cleanse us of all our sin, making us ‘good and acceptable’ in God’s sight.

Furthermore, by rising from the dead and ascending to the Father’s right hand, Jesus blazed the trail to heaven for all who believe. As John tells us in Revelation, our Lord “***will wipe every tear from their eyes...[and] there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.***”(Rev. 21:4) On the Last Day Jesus will return as judge of the living and the dead, and all who lived and died trusting in Him will be ushered into paradise.

Although Jesus’ opponents failed to trap Him they did manage to crucify our Lord. And when He died on the cross the powers of sin, death, and the devil gloated – thinking they had won. However, these enemies of ours didn’t realise Christ’s death was His greatest victory. You see, my friends, it’s by virtue of Jesus’ suffering and death that we receive the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

My friends, though you and I will die one day – unless Jesus returns in our lifetime – it’s by this victory that all who believe in Him will rise to life eternal! Therefore, we need no longer despair of our salvation, for there is no other way that leads to life everlasting than faith in Christ Jesus. To God be the glory. **Amen.**

The peace and love of God which passes all human understanding, keep our heart and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sermon by Pastor Ernie Kiss 18 October 2020