

Let the Earth Rejoice

THE 20th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 24[a] October 22, 2017

MATTHEW 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” ²¹ They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

The Lord is concerned with the whole world—he desires all the Earth to be included in the rejoicing of his gifts. Psalm 96:1:

¹ Oh sing to the LORD a new song;

sing to the LORD, all the Earth!

² Sing to the LORD, bless his name;

tell of his salvation from day to day.

He wants no family on the face of Earth to be left out. His concern stretches to all languages and peoples, all families, no one on Earth to be excluded from his desire.

³ Declare his glory among the nations,

his marvelous works among all the peoples! ...

⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,

ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

⁹ Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;

tremble before him, all the Earth!

[Psalm 96:3, 7, 9]

The Lord is concerned with all peoples, all nations, all families, no one left out, and we don't want to miss what this concern is. When the Lord wants to hear the whole Earth singing a new song, every family rejoicing, and all the peoples ascribing glory to his Name, what is it over which these peoples and families are to be found rejoicing?

For, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law think it is one thing which brings rejoicing, and Jesus thinks it's another.

When Jesus speaks of God's work on Earth, he draws a bright line between God and Caesar:

¹⁹ [Jesus said,] "Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

[Matthew 22:21]

In our American politics, this might be thought of as a division of Church and State. James Madison, chief architect of the Constitution, wrote of "the great Barrier" protecting the citizen in the free exercise of religion, even saying that any ruler who over-leaps this great Barrier is a tyrant.

So maybe in our own constitutional law we have a bit of a view of what our Lord establishes when he says there are those things which belong to Caesar, and those things which belong to God, and even a child can see on a coin which is head and which is tails.

But the Pharisees are not interested in this distinction. They teach the Law. The Pharisees think the world can be redeemed by the Law.

But here is what the Law does—it entangles people. The Law enmeshes them in a tangled network of rope and knots, until the sinner is so confined, so constricted, that he presumably can't sin because his every move is measured and controlled, until everything he does is within the binding of the Law. So the Pharisees had lists of rules and regulations to get the sinner completely under control, so that, if the sinner followed all these regulations, he could never end up breaking God's Law. And they wanted to get Jesus under the Law's control, too.

Matthew 22:15:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle [Jesus] in his words.

If we want to know what the teachers of the Law want to do with the Law, it's there in that word: *entangle*. The Greek word is the word for a netting you throw over a bird to entrap him: entangle, constrict, limit, ensnare—it's like trapping a bird under a net.

That's our life under the Law. The Law brings accusation. Accusation brings fear. Fear brings attempts to self-justify. Self-justification brings all sorts of entrapment to the Law, as we try, somehow, to satisfy the Law, while it, all the while, continues constricting us in the terrible net of rules, regulations, control mechanisms, and finally, death. Solomon describes it using the imagery of trapped fish and ensnared birds. Ecclesiastes 9:12:

Man knows not his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net, Like birds caught in a snare, So the sons of men are snared in an evil time, When it falls suddenly upon them.

Jesus came to cut us from the entanglements of the Law. So the Pharisees found themselves needing to stop Jesus from cutting sinners free from their net. So to trap Jesus in the entanglements of the Law, they asked him a Law question:

¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

[Matthew 22:17]

But Jesus wants to cut the sinner free from the entanglements of the Law, so he brings it back to what God really wants to do, to what the gift is which God really does have for all peoples and all families:

²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus now has all eyes fixed not on how Caesar must be a god-fearing Christian, nor on how God must be a good Caesar, but on what God intends for the sinner. And that brings us to the better question: How will God justify the sinner? How will God bring rejoicing from the mouths of all those on the face of the Earth who are stung by their sin and their fear their death?

Because, God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son. But he didn't send his Son to set up the most efficient system of taxation or build the best roads—that authority he has given to Caesar. He didn't send his Son to set up the best court systems and to establish police forces—that authority is given to Caesar.

But he sent his Son with all authority in Heaven and on Earth to forgive sins, to justify the sinner, to bring the Word of eternal life into the midst of those fearing death.

He sent his Son for the Gospel.

Which means, while we are in this world, we can end up with a quite wrong view of things.

While we are in this world, we can end up thinking, like the Pharisees, of earthly kingdoms as belonging to the Lord, instead of as being what the Lord has given to the authority of Caesar, that is, to earthly governments.

So we will hear such as expressions as, Iran is a Muslim nation. But in our Lord's way, it is a nation of peoples, of families, whom the Lord loves, and in which many people and many families have been entangled in the worship and legalism of a false god of a manmade prophet named Mohammed.

We will hear of Utah being a Mormon state. But in our Lord's way, it is a state with many peoples and families whom the Lord loves, but in which many of those families have been entangled in the worship of a false god invented by a false prophet named Joseph Smith.

We may even hear of America being a Christian nation. But in our Lord's way, it is a nation of many families and peoples, some of whom have faith in him, some of whom chase after man-made gods and are entangled in manmade doctrines, but all of whom he loves.

So the Father, who loves the world, sent his only-begotten Son, not to set up a currency or tax-system, not to make worldly governments agencies of the church, nor the church an agency of worldly governments, but he sent his Son to cut the sinner free from the strangulation of the Law; to forgive the sinner of all sin, to justify the sinner, and to bring the sinner into that which cannot be attained by the Law, eternal life.

For the Law was not originally meant to entangle. Nor to accuse or bring death. The Law originally set all things in God's good, life-giving order. The Law is holy—it was given to order all things toward the benefit and the life of those he created.

But when we brought sin into the world, when we rebelled against the holy Law, that same Law became to us always an accusation, entangling us in judgment, entrapping us in shame, constricting us, like birds caught under a terrible net.

So Jesus came to cut the trapped bird free from the entanglement. The Father sent him to release from the condemnation of the Law, to let the Law bring down its final judgment on his head, instead of on ours, so that, at the sacrifice of the cross, we find our release from the entanglement.

Then, if Jesus didn't come to entangle in the Law, and not build a worldly kingdom, then why would we, as his people, be concerned with the things of government, with the things of our society? Why would we care about justice, and the protection of families and property?

Love of neighbor.

When we are concerned with justice being brought to those who do evil, with people not being oppressed, with children being kept safe, with families and with the institution of the marriage of man and woman being protected, it is not because we would confuse the government with being the Church, and we think we are building up the Church; it is because we love our neighbor, and know that our neighbor benefits from proper justice, the protection of life and property, and the building up of families.

When we show honor to our nation and respect to those serving in uniform, it is not because we are confusing the police officers and the armed forces with the Church, and we want to honor the church, but it is because we love our neighbor, and we know that our neighbor benefits and thrives when there is peace and good order, protection from earthly enemies, and neighbor does not live in fear of neighbor.

But when we turn to our Lord Jesus, we know that we are turning not to an earthly Caesar or worldly government, but we are turning to him who was sent by the Father to save the sinner. To him who loves all sinners on the face of the Earth, all families of every language, and wants all to be cut free from the Law's entanglement of death, and to live in his abundant grace of the justification of the sinner.

We are turning to him who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, so that his salvation may be proclaimed throughout the nations, and all the families and peoples of the Earth may rejoice in grace, ascribing to him the glory due his Name.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.