



Table Talk

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, A

October 18, 2020

Matthew 22:15-22 “Is it lawful...?” Vs. 17



The Pharisees (the keepers of the Law) and the Herodians (the sycophants of Herod, the king of the Jews) come to trap Jesus (vs. 15). They obsequiously flatter him (vs. 16). And then they put him to the test, “Is it lawful...?” This is the snare they have set for him. The issue of taxes is simply the bait. The question, “Is it lawful...?” arises out of the Passover celebration. In the ritual developed over the years, there are four questions drawn from the Exodus tradition. This question concerning the Law is the question spoken by the oldest son... the wise son. It is the question asked by the wise of all generations of Jews. It is the question by which the wise seek to justify themselves.

You may recall the story of the rich young man (Mt. 19:16-22) who came up to Jesus and asked, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” He was merely asking, “What law must I obey to obtain immortality?” This young man wanted to be numbered among the wise... among the immortal... so he asks a question like that of those obsequious, and supposedly wise, Pharisees and Herodians, “Is it lawful?”

The Apostle Paul, preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, addresses this wisdom of the law, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom

of the world” (1 Cor. 1:20)? And he continues, “... it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21). And just what was it that Paul the Apostle preached? He preached “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). The gospel of Jesus Christ crucified “for you” will always be foolishness to the wise of this world. But, the gospel of Jesus Christ will always trip up those who seek to justify themselves by asking the legal question, “Is it lawful...?”

As we have from the story of the rich young man, the legal questions can be formulated in many ways. Like that seeker after salvation, we too ask, “What must I do to inherit eternal life” (Lk 18:18)? One of my seminary professors, Gerhard Forde, replaced that legal question with the gospel question, “What do you want to do now that you don’t have to do anything?”

Table Talk: : What laws have you set up so that obeying them assures you of salvation?

Pray: Heavenly Father, provide me with a preacher who will put Christ crucified in my ears that I may know I am saved. Amen.

Written by Rev. Timothy J. Swenson

Dean of Chapel for the Institute of Lutheran Theology

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Matthew 22:15-22 English Standard Version (ESV)

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.



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