

Matthew 22:15–22

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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Let me make a couple of comments before we start about what I'm up to with this, or what I hope to see happen, and then we'll go right into it.

About ten years ago I was walking across the Luther Seminary campus and ran into two of my classmates, one right after the other. The first was a man I had gone to leadership training school with when we were fourteen, a kind of Bible camp meant to cultivate leaders for the congregations. We went to college together, in the old days when the church colleges sent loads of students on to the seminary, and then we went to seminary together. When I ran into him we had been ordained for thirty years, and he said to me, "I don't know what I'm going to do, Jim. I'm heading into the lectionary for the tenth time, and I don't know what I'm going to say. I've preached on these texts so often, I don't know if there's anything more to them. I just don't know where to turn." He was miserable and downcast about it.

Not ten minutes later I ran into another classmate. We had known each other for years and years, and I knew him to be a very fine pastor. He said to me, "You know, Jim, we're going into the lectionary for the tenth time now, and I'm finally hearing these texts. It's so much fun. I can barely keep up with them. They keep running away and I keep trying to catch up, but here they come again. It's just a joy."

About two weeks later I heard that the first man had been defrocked. I suppose there was a reason for his lack of interest. But I think you know which of the two you would rather hear preach.

There is something about these texts that becomes profoundly familiar. Most of us have been through them before. And of course familiarity breeds a kind of *laissez-faire*, a disinterest, or an assumption of control. Yet this is God's Word spoken to us in the text, and so there is something beyond us in it, something mysterious even about the most familiar passage. When the text gets out of your grip, when it breaks its constraints and turns on you, it starts

working on you. Instead of your interpreting the text, the text starts interpreting you. That's when it really gets to be fun.

Some of my friends in the Old Testament and New Testament departments get nervous when I talk like this, because they want to reduce interpretation to a technique by which you gain control and can then get up and use the text appropriately. But these texts are older than we are. They were here long before us. They were preached on by Saint Irenaeus and Saint Augustine, by Thomas Aquinas and by Luther. They will be here long after we're gone. Somebody will walk by your grave and say, "I wonder what family that fellow was from," and they will still be hearing these texts. The life is in the text, not in us. It is the Word of life. So the goal is not so much to master the text as to be mastered by it, to play with it until it becomes strange again, comes back, and starts to preach itself to you.

That's the magic moment in preaching: when you finally hear the text as an alien word breaking in on you. Luther used to say that the text becomes so dreadfully familiar because our hearts are as hard as adamant, and so the Holy Spirit has to come and break up the concrete and let a little sunshine in. That is what's happening in the text.

So what we are going to do in this text study is play. I don't want to give you any authoritative interpretation. I'm not an exegete; I taught church history all my life. But I have been mystified and delighted by these texts all my life too. When I was a young pastor I did formal, full-dress exegesis of every text I preached on. I did it every week and kept the note cards in a shoebox. Every once in a while I think I ought to throw them away. I never use them, but I love those old notes. I learned from doing that hard work. I don't do full-dress exegesis anymore, but I love these texts very much. I start on Tuesday. I read the text, meditate on it, and keep thinking about it through the week until I have to preach, and I pray that the text will disclose itself and get loose, so that I am not using it but being used by it.

That's my hope. We're not looking for the last exegetical word here. I'm hoping to engage you in a conversation that will be provocative and liberating, and give you a chance to play with the text until it starts to play with you.

The Pharisees and the Herodians

The text we are working with this week is Matthew 22: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said." Interestingly enough, the version of the text I was given begins with verse 16, so apparently the church officials are protecting the Pharisees again. I've

heard all kinds of sermons lately in favor of the Pharisees, arguing that we have given them a bad time. So we get public relations for the Pharisees right out of the box.

In fact the Pharisees were something like a first-century Chamber of Commerce. They were upwardly mobile lay people: not ordained, not part of the temple service, but people who worked in other professions and were concerned to bring Israel's moral health up to tone. You remember the Deuteronomic view that the morality of one represents the morality of all. So when somebody breaks the Sabbath, say by plucking grain and rubbing the heads together to make what we used to call wheat gum, that person drags down the moral tone of all Israel. The Pharisees were dispersed through the community, a kind of moral rearmament society seeking to bring the life of Israel up to standard.

Now we find them allied with the Herodians, Herod's apparatchiks. If you disliked getting worked over by a Pharisee, you might find the Herodians a little more cynical, and perhaps a little more fun, but just as hard to deal with. They had attached themselves to power. Of course the Pharisees knew their way around the halls of power too, and it is not surprising to find the two together. They came from the same class of people, the upper middle class, and they had the same agenda: to preserve, protect, and extend the prerogatives of the religious authorities, and so to preserve Israel's faith and sanctification.

So, as usual, we find the Pharisees out on patrol. That's what they do; they are moral vigilantes. It's no surprise to find them in a wheat field on the Sabbath, watching to see what will happen. Jesus has just come to town, according to Matthew. He has just come into the precincts of the temple, and the Pharisees are right there to meet him, the Herodians with them, looking for a little conversation.

"Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said." They have already concluded that this illicit, lower-class preacher from faraway Nazareth up in the hill country, the home of outcasts and rejects, this prophet of the outcasts, is a problem, and they are determined to put him out of business. Jesus expected this. He spoke three times of it happening. He has now come down to Jerusalem, as Albert Schweitzer put it so beautifully, to put his shoulder to the wheel of history. He has come down to face the music.

"So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians." This is a little mixed group of Pharisees and Herodians. No doubt they had met each other at the Junior Chamber of

Commerce or the Kiwanis Club banquet or its equivalent. They know one another, they have been watching this man, and now this little group sets off to meet him.

The Trap

Things get a little oily here, not to say slippery. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere.” You can just hear the sleaze rolling off it. It looks like a press conference with Newt Gingrich or somebody: the press is there, the politicians are there, they are going to have a little conversation, and now the courting starts. But this is not the wonderful courtship of love. This is the sleazy stuff of conflict. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere.” Isn’t that wonderful? I bet Jesus had to swallow a couple of times on that one. “And teach the way of God in accordance with truth.” Nice shot. “And show deference to no one.” Of course, we are only showing deference to you so we can lead you into our snare. “For you do not regard people with partiality.”

We are familiar with this, aren’t we? In the midst of conflict this is generally what happens. Liars always think nobody knows. They always think their opening gambit has gone unnoticed and that they have lulled their victim to sleep. But Jesus knows what is in the human heart. Nobody needed to teach him that, and he knows what these men are up to right from the start.

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Here comes the trap. It is a nakedly barbed question, and it poses a dilemma. If Jesus says yes, pay the emperor, he gets himself in trouble with Judas, with Simon the Zealot, and with all the rest of the radicals looking to overthrow Rome, and he becomes very unpopular with everyone who has set themselves against the Romans. On the other hand, if he says no, don’t pay the tax, it is just a quick step to the civil authorities: Pontius Pilate, always ready to wash his hands, and Herod, portrayed so beautifully in *Jesus Christ Superstar*: “walk across my swimming pool.” So we have a couple of real dingbats for political officials. One is a bureaucrat, Pontius Pilate, who even thousands of miles from Rome is worried about being implicated. The other, Herod, is very conscious of his own power and willing to take a man’s head to enforce it. If Jesus says don’t pay your taxes, they will be more than glad to take him out of commission.

So Jesus takes off the gloves. He sees the dilemma. It is not a very sophisticated one, and he sees it right off the bat. He sees exactly what these men are up to: in the end they are trying to get rid of him. He has anticipated that, and he knows how the conversation will end before it

starts. “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” A nice, friendly conversational style! But after dealing with these people for a while, I suppose he was entitled to it.

“Show me the coin used for the tax.” They had a couple of choices. Roman coinage was not allowed in the temple. When you went to the temple, you went to the money changers and exchanged Roman coins for the temple shekel. So it is entirely possible that the Pharisees’ purses carried two sets of coins, temple shekels and Roman coins.

“And they brought him a denarius.” I had a friend, a great old pastor, who always suspected that the pious love money inordinately. He was convinced of it after a long ministry and long leadership in the church. These men knew the value of money; they were not stupid about it. It was not hard for them to put their hands on a coin. And interestingly, they put their hands on a Roman coin, so in effect Jesus has trumped them. Perhaps he knew a denarius or two would be kicking around in the Pharisees’ pockets. Perhaps they hadn’t brought their temple shekels with them that day. Who knows? At any rate, when he asks to see a coin, what he gets is a denarius, a Roman coin. Now he has them.

“Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’” Well, of course you know whose head it is. Emperors like to have their heads on coins and their titles on coins. They like to jingle around in people’s pockets, so that every time people spend money they know where it came from, who issued it, and who gives it its value. “They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’”

“Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’” He has not only broken the dilemma the Pharisees and Herodians tried to put him in; he has put them in a dilemma. He has exposed the money in their pockets. For all their shekel piety, he has shown what they carry with them and what they rely on. They thought they had him in a trap. Jesus reversed the trap and caught them. “When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.” They thought they were going to catch him, and they got caught.

Giving to the Emperor

Now we can ask what it means to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s. That is really the question here. If we answered it in the traditional, bourgeois Lutheran way, the way conservative Lutherans have generally answered it, we would break into a discussion of the two kingdoms. God rules with his right hand through the gospel and with his left hand through the agencies of the state. To give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s is to

obey the rules and regulations, to be good citizens, and to participate joyfully in public life. We could go to Luther's explanation of the Fourth Commandment, to Romans 13, to 1 Peter, and to a number of other sources, all of which counsel us to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar: to be a good citizen and at the same time a good Christian. We could divide it up that way and leave it as it commonly is.

But a very interesting set of texts has been selected to go with this gospel, and they are lots of fun. First, Isaiah 45:1–7, God's appointment of Cyrus. Cyrus, a pagan king, is identified as the Lord's anointed. "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes." That would be the equivalent of walking into a Tea Party meeting and announcing that Putin is the one God has chosen to shape the future of the world. It is a ruthless attack, typical of Isaiah, on the idols, on expecting too much of earthly realities and so making idols of them. Cyrus is appointed to expose the foolishness, the weakness, and the emptiness of the rulers. So we have a text informing the preaching of Matthew 22 that challenges the ultimate claims rulers make. Cyrus is sent to afflict the rulers, to strip them. "I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things." That is how the Lord brings the mighty down to the ground.

In the same way, 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10. Look at the last verses, beginning with verse 9: "For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God." These texts are turning us. Cyrus turns us away from the kings and princes in whom we trust. 1 Thessalonians 1 speaks of a community that has been turned from idols to the worship of the living God. And the appointed psalm, Psalm 96:1–9, with verses 10–13 as an option, is also a psalm about idolatry. So the gospel is set here not in the context of a two-kingdoms doctrine but in the context of a polemic against earthly rulers that runs pretty much throughout the Old Testament and into the New.

There are always these two sides. There is Romans 13, of course, and 1 Peter. But there is also the book of Revelation, in which the earthly rulers become the Antichrist. One of my old favorites is the fable of Jotham in Judges 9, the story of the trees who go looking for one of their number to rule over them. They start high, of course, with the olive tree, which doesn't want to leave its rich fatness to rule over the other trees. Then they try the fig tree, which doesn't want to leave its sweetness. Then they try the vine, which doesn't want to leave its wonderful fruit behind. Finally they go to the bramble, and the bramble says, "Of course I'll be

glad to rule over you, as long as you pledge unconditional obedience.” Sound familiar? A bramble could be elected bishop. That’s how it works.

Or there is the great story in 1 Samuel 8:11–18, where Samuel explains what you will get if you get a king: armies, taxes, and a king who helps himself to your sons and your daughters. Again, Scripture never lets up. And finally Psalm 2: the rulers of the earth take counsel together, and “the Lord has them in derision.” He laughs.

So on the one hand, in Romans 13 and 1 Peter, we see government identified as God’s hand reaching into public life to serve us. On the other hand, in these passages, we see the contention in which the penultimate always wants to claim ultimacy for itself. That is the temptation of government, whether it is the government of the state, the government of the church, or governance of some smaller order. Like the bramble, it wants to say, “I’m in charge here, and you had better submit.” It wants to turn its penultimate value into an ultimate claim, and so it defeats itself.

When this gospel is read in the context of these passages, Isaiah 45, 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10, and Psalm 96, then Jesus’ answer about the coin is not an endorsement of a theory of governance; it is a critique. When Jesus says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,” he is in effect saying: give the old boy what he needs and get on with it. Don’t get all fired up and start putting your faith in these people. That is a sure recipe for disappointment. Instead, you are to fear, love, and trust God alone.

As Luther points out in his explanation of the First Commandment, if you set your heart on a politician, good luck. Inevitably you will be disappointed. Liberal or conservative doesn’t make much difference; in the end they all come home empty-handed. But if you fear, love, and trust the One who genuinely is ultimate, the One who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead and sent his Spirit to create faith in us, then you live as one of the children of the King, a son or daughter of the Most High, one of the blessed ones, and you can live in confidence.

So with this word, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” Jesus reminds the Pharisees and the Herodians to whom they belong. They are engaged in a penultimate calling. The problem is that they have made it ultimate. They are judging the quick and the dead, and they have become tyrants because of it.

To give to the emperor what is the emperor’s is to be a good citizen: to pay your taxes, to go about your responsibilities, to contribute to the public welfare, but not to depend on your

contributions. It is to turn to the good Lord in confidence and hope, knowing that his promise abides forever. We give the government the obedience necessary to get along in this life, and we expect the Lord Jesus to take care of the final things, now and forever.

So you see what is happening here. With these words Jesus frees us from the claims of the powerful. He frees us in the earthly order, in the realm of the penultimate. He loosens us from the ultimate claims of the politicians, so that in the freedom of faith we can turn to him in trust and love and in the hope he provides, and look back on the penultimate with a little humor and say, "Nice try. See if you can do better next time."

That's part of the fun. The text is finally liberating. To put it provocatively, this is an eruption in the middle of a Tea Party meeting. You had better not say that on Sunday, but it's lots of fun. Here are these deadly serious, earnest, self-absorbed Pharisees and Herodians, who could have written books on the third use of the law and are intent, intent, intent on realizing genuine piety, and with one distinction Jesus cleaves through their self-absorption to raise them to newness of life in Christ Jesus. That is really good.

Questions and Answers

A question about treating this as a stewardship text.

I think you could do that. In a down-to-earth way, "Caesar" includes not only the tax man but also the church, which as an earthly institution needs your funds in order to function. But notice that the context here has been set by the church officials who put these three readings together. If you take Matthew 22 out of the context the lectionary has given it, it is very easy to move in that direction.

When we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," Luther explains that God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter forever. The kingdom of God is not the church. God claims the tithe; he claims our earthly gifts. He gives us more than enough, so that we have something to give away and the joy of handing it over to others. The tithe is one of the deep joys of life; you don't want to miss it. When I was a young pastor, one of my all-time favorite pastors, out in Montana, taught me to tithe. Christ frees you from your money so that you can give it away. He makes it penultimate. He reduces it so that it no longer has ultimate significance, and then you have a little room to move with it. Money is not the

last thing that defines you. Christ Jesus is the last one to define you, and he defines you by saying, “Your sins are forgiven for my sake,” and by promising to raise you from the dead.

A question about faith: the First Commandment as fear, love, and trust.

Exactly. Christ Jesus claims our fear, love, and trust, and this is faith. The First Commandment is a commandment to faith, and Luther defines it as fearing, loving, and trusting God above all things. God is the one to whom we constantly turn; we love him and trust that he will provide. You often see this at hospital bedsides, where people are having a difficult time. I once buried two women who had died across the hall from one another. One feared, loved, and trusted her good works, and she was reciting them right up to the last minute. The other had been kicked around and abused all her life, and could no longer even call Jesus by name. She called him “the good man,” because she knew there was only one of those. She said to me, “I’m counting on the good man. He won’t let me down.” That’s faith.

So Christ Jesus gets our faith, and our neighbors get what’s left over. Perhaps our ultimate gift back to him is our sharing. To be able to say to someone, “Your sin is forgiven; Christ is for you” — what is better than that? That is praise, the real stuff. God is at work in us both to will and to work. You are the salt and the yeast; you are handing over, blessing, giving, and granting. You can’t run out of that, and of course that is the deepest praise.

An observation on the preceding text, the parable of the king’s wedding banquet.

That’s great. So it is Christ Jesus who gets them thrown out. Once again the stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone.

A question about funerals where the dead are praised as saints.

You just pray against that stuff. I don’t know how many funerals I’ve been to where the dead become the incarnation. I told Carolyn that if she eulogizes me, should I go first, I’ll come back and haunt her. I want somebody to stand up and say, “This was a red-blooded sinner, and Christ went and found him.” I’d like some of my sins discussed, not too much, but just enough that you know I belong to Christ Jesus. He is the righteous one.

A couple of weeks ago I was doing some work on the house in Oregon and called a firm to do some pipe fitting in the air distribution system. They sent a man out to make the estimate, and he was fabulous, really sharp. When I called back to make the deal, I said, “I think the world of the workman you sent out.” The owner said, “He’s way better than I deserve. I always try to

find workmen who are better than I am, and this man is great.” I said, “Well, if the good Lord ever dealt with us the way we deserve, it would be terminal.” He said, “That’s right. He comes to us in the forgiveness of sins, or we don’t have any chance at all.” Then he said, “Are you a Lutheran?” I said, “I am.” He said, “So am I.”

People get buried like the works-righteous, and it’s no fun at all. You want somebody to say, “He was a real sinner. Let me tell you what happened in the pool hall in Baltic, South Dakota.” Then the funeral might be worth going to.

A question contrasting whose image the coin bears with the image we are called to bear.

Sure. Remember the great hymn “On My Heart Imprint Your Image”? That’s a wonderful contrast. Nobody remembers Caesar; he is long gone. But that image is embossed on you by Christ Jesus. He has stamped himself on you, and we ask that his image be imprinted on us. I think that’s a wonderful way to go at this text: the gift is given, and Christ Jesus is stamping his image on people right in front of these men.

A question about those who lose what they hoped to gain.

When we pray “Thy will be done,” we pray that God will hinder and defeat every evil scheme and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful self. When we lose, it usually isn’t voluntary. Things get taken away from us. In the course of life we lose what is precious to us and what has defined us. That is a little of what is happening in this gospel: these men are losing their own righteousness and being anchored in Christ. They are losing their ultimate claims and being reduced to the penultimate. This is what the Holy Spirit does in repentance: he brings us down so that we lose. So instead of exhorting people to loss, it is worthwhile to identify the ways in which we do lose, and what we lose, especially in family life and everyday life.

Such losses drive us to repentance and to the cross. It is passive repentance, worked in us. Nobody sets out to lose. When I see losses coming, I try to avoid them, of course. But I understand what Paul means when he says, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” Sometimes my losses have been my biggest gains, because Christ Jesus never leaves us without himself. What has been defining us is taken away, and Christ Jesus anchors us more deeply in our true identity in him. If you keep the language passive, this becomes a really rich vein in the life of the church.

And we lose our idols and immediately attack those who have taken them away. That is the normal procedure for the old Adam: if you lose something, make sure the one who inflicted the loss loses more. That is the way of death and the way of loss.

You folks are a step ahead of me all the way, and that's fabulous. God's peace to you. You know my joy in you, my confidence and delight. This is God's Word, and I can see the good Lord working in your comments, pushing and pulling, putting you on your hind legs so that you can declare Christ Jesus and his gifts and benefits to everyone. Have some fun. We'll see you next week.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrpCvxWNCLM>

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