

The Pharisees' Counsel put to Naught

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Matthew 22:15–22 · Church Postil (Lenker edition)

15 Then went the Pharisees, and took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk. 16 And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. 17 Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? 18 But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? 19 Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny. 20 And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? 21 They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's. 22 When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way. Matthew 22:15-22

[1] This Gospel is in itself plain enough and easy to understand. Its contents are noteworthy, especially because of Christ's answer to a practical question and its doctrine. First of all our attention is directed to the intensely wicked, bitter and venomous persecution of Christ and his Word on the part of the Jews, who schemed to attack him with shrewd and deceitful questions. For these villains and base characters would gladly have put him to death as one who had wearied them beyond endurance and must be gotten out of the way, although they could find no cause for impugning either his doctrine or his life, eagerly as they sought to do so. They studied all sorts of devices and ways to catch him in his words and condemn him, which they kept up until God allowed them to vent their spite and crucify him. That class of people will obtain what they strive for, even to their own hurt. They had their time of probation and could have repented when the Son of God appeared in their midst, but they flatly refused to accept him, God suffering them to go their way and fulfill the measure of their sin to its utmost extent in that they murdered him who came to save them. Their end was destruction and obliteration as a nation. The enemies of the Gospel are no better in our day. They would put Christ out of the way if they could, and thus, it will be even to the end of time, with the same result. Amen.

[2] See now how they scheme and succeed. The wisest and most learned leaders assemble, put their heads together and decide on one of the many shrewd plans by which to cause Christ's death. Their wise counsel is as follows: If we weigh and balance the situation we find two ways to seize and accuse him. First, if he opposes Caesar, he can be charged with conspiracy; and if he is considered a conspirator we will have him in our control as one guilty, like a thief and robber, who would despoil the emperor of his majesty and crown and who is worthy of death, with which the law punishes such a crime. Should this scheme fail we can have recourse to another one, namely, to prove him to be guilty of robbing God, and have him condemned as a blasphemer. It would be regarded as a still greater crime to prove that he robs God of the honor due him and misleads the people under the cloak of serving him. For should he say, We must pay tribute to Caesar and acknowledge him as our sovereign; he would detract from God, who alone wants to be this nation's sovereign and who has chosen us from all races to have no king but him. This also would condemn him to death. Whichever way therefore, he may answer, he will be caught and fall into our hands. Does he favor Caesar, he robs God; and if he decides in favor of God he declares against Caesar and makes himself a conspirator.

[3] Such is the counsel of those wiseacres and petty saints who resolved to lay hold of Christ with all law and authority, as an enemy either of God or of Caesar. Not that they cared so much either for the one or the other, but in order to carry their point. They were indeed anxious enough to free themselves from the yoke of Roman power, causing frequent insurrections and drawing abundantly deserved executions upon their own heads, by hundreds and thousands, and finally suffering entire destruction as a nation. In like manner, they were before God thieves and evildoers in that they corrupted his Word and persecuted its pure doctrine. So entirely submerged in these two vices were they as to have become doubly worthy of death, before God and before Caesar; they manifested their wickedness, moreover, by attempting to catch an innocent man as if guilty of their own sin, pretending to be most pious saints before God and most loyal subjects of Caesar.

[4] The Jews were used to this from time immemorial; they had treated their prophets and many godly teachers in a similar manner, and afterwards did the same to the Apostles, so that it is no wonder if they treat us in the same manner. And what have the Apostles or we either to complain of in particular, since they did not spare their Lord and God? The world cannot do otherwise. It is under the devil's control, reveling in robbery and rebellion, at the same time imputing these crimes to Christians, as if they were sinners above all sinners.

[5] And see further how they play their trick and seek to entangle the Lord so that they may not fail in their plans. They do not put the question abruptly, but approach him with a neat introduction of flattery, as though they had the best of intentions and were really in earnest about the matter. They praise and humor him with smooth words; for they think he is human and a preacher like themselves, who thus, loves to hear such flattery and praise, and say: You are a true teacher and an upright man, what you say and do is right and good, etc., etc. With such praise a young fool might be misled to preach what the people want to hear, as nearly all false prophets do who look for the approval of men rather than that of God. They accept honor, and preach what is paid for; where their pay ends, there also ends their preaching. These were of a kind characterized by Christ when he says of them that they like to be called Rabbi, etc., Matthew 23:7. Because they are so foolish, they think he also likes to be tickled and can be fooled by servile adulations, surrendering himself to their two prongs and their deaththrusts, before he would be aware of any danger.

[6] But the saying is true: "The Lord will have them in derision." It is not an uncommon thing for one man to deceive another, but no trickery will avail with Christ. He understands the wiles of men and can entrap them in their own devices. So here; he compels these hypocrites to speak the plain truth, although they have many other things in their hearts, and thus, perfectly puts them to shame. It is indeed true that he teaches the way of God right, and fears nobody, while not one of his enemies speaks from the heart. The lips may utter truth that amounts to nothing but lies. Christ's words are true, however they may twist them. They judge him by themselves and represent him as a disturber of the peace, who would rob Caesar of his tribute money and rally the populace around him in rebellion, while he is afraid to make such declaration in public. That is their design and scheme, but they veil it under the words: "Thou teachest the way of God in truth," praise not to be condemned so far as it goes. Caiaphas, the high priest, acted in like manner, John 11:48-50, when he said: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. If we let him thus, alone, all men will believe on him; and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." That was a true declaration, fitting them, while they dissembled as to their hearts' sentiments. They did not believe that the Romans would come, but were intent on putting Christ out of the way, thinking they would then fare better. And yet it happened to them even as they had prophesied, that Christ had to die for the people, and the Romans did despoil them of their land and nation.

[7] That is the lot of those who would deceive and mock God; they mock themselves and come to grief. They seek a teacher of truth, and they find such in him, against their wish, for he hits them on the head with truth in a manner that makes them reel in confusion. They wish to submit a puzzling question to him, not about the law and matters of salvation, but one that is unnecessary and insidious. They pass by the whole Pentateuch and what pertains to God's Word and way of truth, and catch on something calculated to confuse him. Moses has not instructed us about giving tribute, nor had Christ anything to do with that.

[8] There, think they, we have him securely as between two spears. Does he say yes, then we accuse him as one who would rob God; who holds heresy, and, as an apostate Jew, teaches contrary to Moses and the prophets: if, on the other hand, he says nay, we will know what to do, for the servants of Herod are at hand. He must fall into the hands of these tempters or into those of the rabble, in either case he is lost; indeed he must fall into the hands of both and surely die, for there is no escape possible in either yea or nay, represented by the two classes of people, Jew and Gentile. Was not that planned shrewdly enough? Who could escape from such a dilemma with gauntlets on both sides? They themselves would have failed to extricate themselves in a similar predicament.

[9] But the wise people met with a wisdom they neither knew of nor looked for; it was divine wisdom. Christ seizes the spear and club in their hands and turns their weapons against themselves, answering neither yea nor nay, but compelling them to give an answer which indicts themselves. There he is the Master as they had greeted him; he proves that he can answer their slippery interrogation by themselves. They are thus, obliged to run the gauntlet, and are caught in the net with which they had planned to catch him.

[10] As of in a playful mood, Christ has them show him the tribute money to start with, and asks whose stamp and superscription it bears. In that childlike way he may have made the impression that he did not know, or was not able to read, so that they concluded: We have him surely now; he is afraid and wants to dissemble in favor of Caesar, not daring to say a word against him, etc. Instead of that he takes the word from their lips, making them admit that they are caught. They must confess it, and cannot do otherwise than say, It is Caesar's. With that answer he turns the conclusion against them: If the currency and its image is Caesar's, also the superscription, then you have my thanks for saying yea yourselves to the question you put at me. Why need you bother me with a matter that you can settle so readily? This is truly digging a pit for others and falling in yourself; setting a trap and being caught in it.

[11] Christ makes use of the same dialectics in answering others who would impugn his character, and entraps them where they meant to entrap him. As in Luke 19:21-22, where a servant had buried the pound entrusted to him in a napkin, saying: "I feared thee because thou art an austere man: thou takest up that which thou layest not down, and reapest that which thou didst not sow." He saith unto him: "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant," etc. That is, be it as thou hast said. Because thou regardedst me to be an austere man, taking what I had not laid down, therefore, it serves thee right that thou shouldst be treated in that way, and thy pound be taken from thee as from one who compels me to be austere and strict with him. I give this as a caution that people may learn to take heed and not trifle with holy things. For men can be deceived, but those who try to deceive God deceive themselves.

[12] I have often said that God acts toward man even as man is disposed; as thou thinkest and believeth concerning him, such he is to thee. The servant of whom we speak did not have an austere and severe man for his master; on the contrary, he was treated kindly and justly; but since he pictured him that way he must learn how it feels. It is the same with our belief or disbelief. If our hearts picture him as gracious or angry, pleasant or harsh, we have him that way. God is not to be mocked. Those who regard him as angry toward them will find him so; but whoever can say: I know that he will be a gracious father to me and forgive my sins, they will have that experience with him. There must, however, be no hypocrisy, no dissembling, as if the lips should say one thing and the heart thinks the opposite.

[13] Since, then, these people call him Master and a teacher of truth, although they do not believe what they say and simply try to catch and deceive him in his words; he turns the matter to their discomfiture and gives them an unexpected proof of what their lips profess. Like as if we were to regard him wrongfully as an ungracious and angry God, we would so experience him, for it is, as he says: "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee;" again: "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned," Matthew 12:37. That would serve us right and be just. Why dost thou not look him straight in the eyes and judge him as what he is, or believest on him as he reveals himself in his Word, namely, as a teacher and savior of all who are burdened with sin and desire to be godly? If such an ideal does not suit thee and thou formest a different one, thou must take what thou hast provided for thyself.

[14] This is the experience these plotters make. Their words pronounce him to be a teacher of truth, yet in their hearts they are false; however, he is a real teacher to them and exposes their knavery and hypocrisy. Christ is a good doctor. Such physicians as clearly understand the disease must be commended; they can help a patient so much better than one who simply experiments on the case. He soon learns what knaves they are; but since they call him Master, as if they would learn of him, they must hear what they do not expect, namely: "If I am a master and teacher of truth I will tell you truly what you see and seek: You are hypocrites in my judgment." That put in plain language means: "You are deceitful fellows." They deserve this, first, because they are not pious at all; secondly, because they cover up and decorate their falseness by making a pretense of virtue before the people. "You are double hypocrites; you do not seek the way of God nor the truth, yet you flatter me as teaching such to make yourself appear holy; and because you will not hear the truth that could save you, you must hear truth that shall reveal your hypocrisy and condemn it. For, I am, as you say, a teacher of truth. To some, that signifies life, to others, death and damnation, according as their respective faith and hearts may be. Therefore, I tell you plainly and truly what you are inwardly, namely, hypocrites and desperate rogues who are beyond help and advice and who belong to the devil. But those who are godly and would like to be so, to them I say: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," Matthew 11:28.

[15] Behold, thus, they find the right teacher of truth, not to their salvation, however, which they do not seek, but to their condemnation. They are enemies to the truth and do not like to hear such preaching; yet they must hear it, as if from their own lips, answering their question themselves, to their own exposure; as explained above.

[16] After this exposure and reproof of their impudence, silencing them with their own answer, the Master continues: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." Let the child be baptized that its name become known. In other words: "You want to take away from Caesar what is his, and have already taken from God what is God's. You, therefore, are rebels and blasphemers. You take and withhold, and not even question your own dishonesty, nor manifest a purpose to do what is right. That is indeed and rightly called disloyalty, where one refuses to give to Caesar what he can claim as his own.

[17] This truth they must hear from this teacher of truth, however much it may displease them to be so sternly rebuked. They hate to be called thieves and robbers, as if they were disposed to despoil the emperor (Caesar) of his authority and belongings and usurp the rights of their

superiors under a pretense of justice, for which they deserved punishment in body and estate as twofold rebels. This is the first thought.

[18] Secondly. Just as they have been shown to be thieves and robbers toward the state they are similarly guilty of robbing God. They withhold what is God's and even claim to be in the right by so doing. The prophet Jeremiah, 23:11, calls those who do not preach God's Word in God's name "profaners," as withholding it from the people for whom it was given; they rob and take, not from God in heaven, but from the people to whom God sent and commanded it to be given, and give them something else instead of it. Thus, they profane and rob God, withholding the honor and obedience they owe him. Such fruits they are, these smart saints, who wished to bring Christ in reproach! It is on that account that they must hear the rebukes administered to them and be exposed as God-thieves who deserve capital punishment.

[19] Let us now pay attention to the hypocrites of our day — those prudish pietists, bishops and the Pope's whole coterie of clerics, who persecute Christ and his followers in that they reject and condemn his Word and the acknowledged truth of the Gospel. Christ rightfully calls them robbers and profaners of God and of Caesar. They are obedient neither to God nor to the true Christian church; neither to the state nor to any constituted authority, but would be lords themselves and live and do as they like, none daring to oppose them. They are disobedient in person, and also assault innocent Christians, devour and kill whom they can and would destroy God's kingdom completely; yet they wish to be well spoken of as being in their right, being obedient, pious and peaceable, and regarding us as heretics and sinners against God and Christendom and against the powers that be, who therefore, deserve death. Just like these in the Gospel, who would give neither to God nor to Caesar; pretend to great piety, while they seek to put Christ out of the way as one teaching what is opposed to religion and to patriotism.

[20] But how, if the wheel should reverse itself and throw the guilt, which they now heap on us Christians, upon their own heads so that they receive the reward due to the openly condemned rebels and God-thieves, who profane the majesty of both divine and human right? True, neither the Gospel nor Christ himself makes use of physical punishment, yet they should beware lest others come (and I fear very much that such will be the case) who will handle them roughly, teaching them, as others have been taught, that they must cease to persecute Christians. This would be treating them after their own fashion. The Pope, with all his apostles, disciples, lawyers and theologians, teaches: Violence need not be endured, but

vim vi repellere licet, that is, open violence may be repelled by force. They say, what Christ teaches, Matthew 5:39, is not a duty, but simply counsel, and no one is bound by it, namely: "I say unto you, resist not him that is evil; but whoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also," etc. Their interpretation of this has the sanction of all high schools, institutions and monasteries; it can be found in all their books, nor do they hesitate to praise and justify it, holding that no one is obliged to take wrong even from the emperor, but that it is right to resist evil and strike back in self-defense, let it hit Caesar or whom it may.

[21] It were, therefore, not wrong, according to their own teaching, to resist such insufferable injury by force; and I would not lament so very much if, as a punishment from God, it should come about through some false preacher or rabble leader that such tyrants were killed. For they are intent on disorder; their teachings and doings instigate uprisings and war, while they throw the blame on us who teach righteousness, hold the government in honor and oppose conspiracy by word and deed. They would gladly kill us, and although they fail in their loyalty, they want to be honored and safeguarded in their mischief so that no harm may befall them. The popes with their followings have taught thus, not only, but they also practiced it by their acts, opposing kings and emperors as it suited them, despising all authority and trampling the law under their feet, even claiming divine right for their doings. They would do the same now, if they could, boasting that they are in supreme authority and owe allegiance to no ruler.

[22] If they should now allow such doctrine to be preached among them, as I myself could do if I were so minded to avenge myself (may God forbid it), or the public would take such teachings from their books and statutes, and a general uprising should follow, whom would they have to blame and who could reason otherwise than that it served them right? Why are they so desperate and perverse that they reproach Christ with his teachings as seditious and blaspheme him who is their Lord, while they themselves are rebels and profaners of God? They disseminate and defend such godless and seditious teachings, and persecute us who preach the pure Gospel, as they well know, and with all faithful ones resist and preach against disloyalty and disorder. They themselves must acknowledge, if they would or could do so in their concealed malice, that they owe it to no other source than to our preaching that they for so long a time have been and are yet secured against rebellion, for if it had not been for us they might have had some different experiences. By their teaching they could not maintain nor enforce peace, favoring uprisings as it does, and if I could approve of it I would not trust myself to advocate or at least wink at any resistance of their adherents in self-protection by force.

[23] But we will neither teach nor allow that Christ's words are nothing more than counsel; we teach that Christians must suffer wrong, if needs be, and leave vengeance to God. They are to be what the Scriptures call them in Psalm 44:22, "sheep for the slaughter," who may expect death every hour of the day. The Papists know full well that they are safe in our presence; they show their gratitude by persecuting, devouring and murdering us unceasingly, until we are entirely done for. But may it not also happen that in so doing they will meet with such as will defend their rights against them and give them their due so richly deserved, thus, paying for what injury they have done to the Gospel and to us? Their doom is sealed. For the present we must suffer, and leave to God how and when he will avenge us. The punishment they deserve is in God's hand to be meted out in his own time and manner. Although they pretend to be afraid of us, we will do them no harm, allowing them to imitate the Pharisees over against the common people who adhere to Christ. Others will give them what they fear from us, as did the Romans to those who opposed and suspected Christ and his adherents, giving them their full reward when they believed themselves secure.

[24] That is the way these will fare in time. They are afraid, though they know that we have attempted nothing to their hurt, nor do we now do so; we offer them peace and uphold peace, exhorting and teaching our people and the public generally to abstain from disloyal acts. We will not stain our hands with their blood. That is something we do not wish to be guilty of. We glory in our innocence over against them before all the world and will not implicate ourselves in their downfall. But others shall arise who will visit upon them what is written of that class of people in the Bible, as, for instance, in Proverbs 10:24, "The fear of the wicked, it shall come upon him." And as Christ expresses it in Matthew 12:37: "For by thy words thou shalt be justified." Thou hast complained of disloyalty, disloyalty shall be thy portion. We will then say, Amen, and deo gratias, thanks to God, besides.

[25] Let that be said on this text to those who would reproach Christ in order to promote their own reputation and standing, so that they may see and learn what sort of a truth-teacher he is, exposing their lies and falsehood and fastening on them what they like to accuse him of, as being real liars and murderers, or misleaders and rebels; they insist on such a course, but endeavor to throw the suspicion on Christ and his adherents, in spite of the fact that these are and teach the very opposite.

[26] But we must keep this Word before our eyes; it is our rule of conduct toward the two kingdoms, God's and Caesar's, so that we may give to each the honor due him as both of

divine order and example. That in both there are many who are not God-fearing, who abuse the charge and position committed to them, especially toward Christians, persecuting us as disobedient and disloyal, we admit, but it does not disturb us. We must and are willing to suffer this, at the same time we maintain our right to punish them by word of mouth, telling them the truth and hurling back the accusations heaped upon us. In so doing we satisfy justice and fulfill our duty; the rest we commit to God, how and by whom he may want to avenge us.

[27] We have said much about the teaching of Christ's answer; for it is the doctrine we insist on, that the two powers or governments, God's and Caesar's, or spiritual and temporal kingdoms, must be kept apart, as Christ does here in a clear and brief declaration, making a distinction not only, but also illustrating finely how each is to be constituted and administered. When he says, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," he refers to the relation of subjects to their rulers; the other part, "Render unto God the things that are God's," is especially intended for such as are in authority.

[28] For it is thus, ordained of God that subjects must and shall give to their rulers what they need; when he commands them to give, it is implied that these may take; and where we are to give what is due, there we infer that we owe them something, so that the language might be: "to return," rather than simply to render or give. That is something for subjects under civil authority.

[29] On the other hand, there are restrictions placed upon rulers that they govern in the same spirit, and not take from their subjects what is not due them; but remember to give and do also what they are in duty bound to do by virtue of their presiding over countries and nations, so that they may grow and prosper. That is why they were elevated by God to their respective positions of honor, not that they sit there simply as place-thieves, and doing what they like.

[30] But if that were emphasized it would be found that the world is full of real thieves and rogues, rulers as well as subjects, and the number would indeed be small from the highest to the lowest, who obey and do what is right. Subjects are most generally so disposed as to cheat their ruler and appropriate to their own use what is his, wherever they can, to say nothing about giving cheerfully, hesitating as they may do to admit that. Princes and office holders wish to have the name of being Christians and obedient subjects of the emperor, yet they do only what suits them and, if they could, they would gladly usurp the places of their superiors.

[31] The same is true of the knights who wait upon and assist the princes; if they could do so, they would gladly confiscate everything, strip their chiefs of what they have and trample them under foot; instead they take villages and castles, delight in being called “dear subjects,” advise and govern in their own interests, thus, reveling, oppressing and plaguing both lords and subjects, according to their sweet will. By the way, how many princes and office holders are there now in high positions who could claim that they give to Caesar what is Caesar’s? Would not all rather fill their own coffers, bags and pockets? This all can do; but giving to Caesar what belongs to him is difficult to find; taking and stealing from him is much more common.

[32] There is a similar state of things in all other situations and offices. Servants deceive and cheat their masters, maids their mistresses, day laborers and mechanics those for whom they work. It is so in daily intercourse, at the market and elsewhere; stealing and robbing, even boldly and openly, is the common practice. In that way things go on among high and low, so that there is no royal residence, no city, no house, that is not full of knaves and thieves. Were the world plagued with this sin only, it were already too much and it deserved to have been destroyed long ago; and yet no one wants to be charged with and punished for theft, the evildoers would rather claim honor for their misconduct; especially is that the case with the lords of the nobility who strut around in glittering chains. But if they were treated as they deserve they would not be allowed to wear them on the streets, but would be dealt with as those who stole five or six dollars. It is here, as the saying goes, “Little thieves are hung in iron chains; the big public thieves are permitted to walk about with chains of gold.”

[33] It should not be thus, but everyone respects his estate and position and does as it behooves him. Yea, sayest thou, is it not enough that I take nothing from anybody? Yea, truly; but there are many ways of taking; not only from under the bench where there is nothing that belongs to thee, nor out of the bag or chest of another, but also where thou art unfaithful to thy employer and permittest damage to ensue because of negligence or mischief, rather than in consequence of a mistake. As, for instance, where a citizen or neighbor overcharges another, and the nobleman filches and squeezes. According to the seventh commandment all such sharp dealing is called stealing and doing wrong; those who practice it are thieves who care nothing for a troubled conscience, and the maxim, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” becomes a rare bird. All the world is full of the perversity, “taking from Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” from the bottom up; from servant up to knights and princes, so that there is no estate on earth so plagued with thieves and rogues as that of the emperor’s and government’s.

[34] Government must also be told how to act toward its subjects. Those in authority also rob and take what is not theirs, and that on the responsibility of their superiors. As when an emperor or prince goes on, plaguing land and people with unnecessary assessments and other burdens. In that situation thou must also hear thy text. If thou desirest the subjects to put into practice their lesson and be honest with thee, thou must also avoid taking from them what is not thine. For Christ does not say here, Render to Caesar that which he wants and likes, but he assigns limits to him, how far he may reach, that is: "The things that are Caesar's," or what he is rightfully entitled to.

[35] Therefore, land, cities, homes, are not to be governed as the one in authority over them may like, as if an employer could treat his employees to suit his notion, contrary to the Lord's justice. Nay, the employee would say, I owe thee what is thine, not what thou mayest desire to have. One might require so much as my head or fist, or he would not pay me wages or food and clothing, and so plunder and plague me as not to leave a rag upon my body. That would be taking the rights from the manservant, and her property from the maidservant.

[36] So also if a burgomaster, ruler or office-holder should compel and plague the people to serve his whims, that could not be regarded as a lordly right, but would be stealing and doing wrong, just as much as if a fellowcitizen should steal from them. However, there is no position nowadays so insignificant but that its occupant should not desire to have the right and the power to do and command what he pleases, studying how he may oppress the people and holding that his authority empowers him to squeeze, drive and torment everybody as he pleases. Even as is now the case more especially with the poor clergymen and preachers, so that there is danger in all estates, especially in the higher ones, for in them the really great thieves are to be found. A house-servant may make a householder poor by his dishonesty; but a nobleman can steal what amounts to something, namely, a whole principality, land and people.

[37] Therefore, we must tell them how Christ has limited their prerogatives in this text, so that they may not do what they might personally wish. It would go entirely too far, and the Pope's rule would go into effect, they being flogged by their subjects; but we neither teach nor approve of such practice. Christ does not say *de facto*, *sed de jure*, not by fact, but by right; that is, he teaches what each man must do, namely, the subjects must give, and the government must not take more than what is due; but who is to punish where both parties sin against the law is not stated.

[38] Christ does not do, as the Pope teaches that one should hit back, nor does he allow anyone to avenge himself, neither the employer nor his employee; the infliction of punishment and judgment he reserves for himself as the highest Lord and God. "Vengeance is mine," saith God, Deuteronomy 32:35. He who does not give heed to this teaching will experience this judgment. If God does not punish by the ordinary authorities he will do it by pestilence, war, revolutions and other plagues; for he can punish rulers as well as their subjects. Therefore, both are instructed as to their duty, and we will abide by his declaration. We must not and will not coerce anyone by violent measures, but say only what is right and resist wrong-doing by word of mouth. Whoever will not mind that, we excommunicate such an one in accordance with Christ's teaching, telling him that he belongs to the devil, and let him go. Others may punish the Pope and his followers who will not abide by the Word of God, but resort to violence.

[39] This is a brief statement as to the first estate or government, both in its higher and its lower functions, to show how far we are away from our true position and how full the world is everywhere of thievery. But these matters are worst of all, if one is to expound this passage (Render to God what is God's) and speak of the God-thieves in the spiritual government of Christendom, in which I and the likes of me are. For as high as heaven is above the earth, so dangerous and difficult is this office in comparison with secular or imperial positions which, indeed, are also dangerous where their occupants do not call upon God for help to discharge their duties properly and without injury to their subjects. But if unfaithful ministers or preachers get into their office they will be, not thieves of bread, meat or clothing, wherewith the body is nourished and with which jurists busy themselves, who teach nothing further than what ministers to the belly and try to check that class of stealing; but those who occupy the office that is to give the bread of eternal life to souls and, instead, cause them everlasting thirst, hunger and nakedness, taking away the word by which man is nourished from death to life, such are not simply belly-thieves, but thieves of God and of the heavenly kingdom.

[40] Such now is the Pope with his bishops and all their retinue, who do not preach to the people, rather preventing them from receiving God's Word and what it gives and affords; doing their very best in mischief when they forbid and hinder the sacrament to be administered under both forms, as Christ instituted it, and they well know, in sheer violence and blasphemous thirst; they cannot rightly be called anything else than sacrilegious, public thieves of God, robbers of his Word and sacrament.

[41] There are among us also some who so plague and press the poor pastors with hunger and care that they cannot do their work properly; some also lowering their calling so as to reach out for the heavenly things and at the same time hanker after carnal goods, as the cliques of Pope and priest also do, who are charged with spiritual matters, but do not preach them nor suffer it to be done. They practice the two kinds of robbery and deserve all the more severe punishment. Yet the world is just as full of this miserable dishonesty as of the secular sort, and they are thieves through and through, from top to bottom, from the least to the greatest.

[42] But how will it be in the end when the final judgment shall take place? What does it mean that God must continue to call and preach: “Do render both to God and to Caesar,” but all in vain, and should thus, be mocked and his Word trampled underfoot? Are we not to expect that at last there should rain upon the world a flood with thunder, lightning and hellfire? It cannot and must not be otherwise, because the trespass against God’s and Caesar’s right continues so boldly and so eagerly and turns the single into a double robbery, ever defending its course and resisting its punishment. God will and cannot suffer that forever. I would that he might take us and ours away in mercy so that we be spared the coming calamity! Wickedness is so very great, and so manifold in the whole world, that it exceeds the leaves on the trees and the blades of grass upon the earth in number. May God preserve and deliver us from this distress, and grant grace that we may hold to his Word in earnestness and be delivered from such evil! Amen.

SOURCE

Martin Luther’s Church Postil, the complete Lenker edition in one volume (Lutheran Library, CC BY 4.0), PDF pages 1638–1654. Heading in that edition: “Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity. Second Sermon. The Pharisees’ Counsel put to Naught.”