

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – 2026

Isaiah 45:1-7

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

On just a human level, it's unwise to debate people who are smarter than you. I wouldn't wrestle Hulk Hogan, I wouldn't box Muhammad Ali, and I wouldn't have a sing-off against Freddy Mercury. Some of you may want to play chess against Bobby Fischer – not me. I'm not going to pit my grilled steak against anything that Bobby Flay could make. I wouldn't play one-on-one against Kobe Bryant either. I'm not all that smart, but I know when I'm overmatched. It isn't humility; it's a desire not to appear foolish. I'm big on not appearing foolish. I subscribe to the proverb that it would be better to be silent and thought of as fool than to open my mouth and remove all doubt (Proverbs 17:28).

Some Pharisees pick a fight that they cannot win. They approach Jesus with a political question. Matching wits – that's what a debate comes down to, and the Pharisees are thinking that they can match wits with the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Their game is to attempt to impale the Lord Christ on the horns of a dilemma. And they team up with the Herodians. They are strange bedfellows, these two groups – the Pharisees and the Herodians. It would be like the Crips teaming up with the Bloods or the Hatfields teaming up with the McCoys, but hey, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, right? The Pharisees despised Rome and their tax and the Herodians were okay with it. The question is about paying taxes to Caesar. It's a game of "gotcha." These guys think that they can corner Jesus, catch Him in a conundrum and expose Him as a fraud. Remember, the life of Christ presents a picture that is still moving. So, keep in mind, this episode has a contemporary application for all of us.

The first thing these outmatched charlatans do is butter up our Lord. It's hypocrisy, pure and simple. Listen to these conniving words: "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" (Matthew 22:16). They honor Jesus with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him. Jesus knows it. Hypocrisy is very much alive in our day. People use Christ's church for an end that is not to His glory but their own. Politicians... watch out for them. Those who would transform Christ's church to look like the culture around us... watch out for them. They masquerade as angels of light, but they are servants of darkness. Such people are full of pride and villainy. Here's their question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (Matthew 22:17).

It's clever on a human level. If Jesus says that the tax is legal, He will flame out the Jews who are suffering under Rome's iron fist. If Jesus says that the tax is unlawful, He will become an enemy of the state. Either way, Jesus appears to be cooked. Here's where we come to you. You are a disciple of the truth, aren't you? You have aligned your life with Him who is the way, the truth, and the life, haven't you? Is the truth *ever* cornered? Is the truth *ever* a loser? Jesus said this: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31). Do you believe that? Free from what? Do you consider yourself to be free from death, free from fear, free from slavery to sin, bondage to lies, free from being held captive by popularity or vain philosophy or the ebb and flow of human religion. We

*are* free. The truth has set us free. The truth can't be taken captive. The tomb is empty and that is the truth and that is freedom. You are forgiven, Christ reigns over heaven and earth, and heaven is your home. That is freedom. It is also true, and the truth can't be taken captive.

It's going to be maligned, the truth. Get used to it. The truth will be abused, in a human sort of way. Doesn't matter. The truth prevails... always. Don't forget it. The truth can't be pushed around, can't be undone by sophistry, can't be hidden under a bush. What do you think of that? That's marvelous, right? That clears your head, right? That makes you stand up straight, right? Christ's cross is beautiful and powerful and liberating. Christ's cross is the most truthful thing that this world has ever known. Hypocrisy might fight its petty worldly battle, but it can never win. Let joy fill this house! Christ reigns, His truth is marching on, and we are in His procession. We *will* hold to His teaching. We *will* abide in His Word. The truth sets us free and we were created to be free.

Our problem is sin. Sin has done a number on us. Adam and Eve were created in God's image and that image was lost. Pride replaced love in Adam's heart – the image was lost. Lust for more replaced delight at being created in God's image in Eve's heart. The image – God wants it back. Humanity was created in the Creator's image, and the Creator wants His image back. So, God the Father sends His Son. Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). Humanity rightfully belongs to God and only the Son of God could return to the Father what rightfully belongs to Him. So, the eternal Son was incarnated, made man, becoming like you in every way except He is without sin. God wants back what rightfully belongs to Him. And Jesus is the instrument. Jesus will render unto God what belongs to God. By death and resurrection, Jesus will render humanity back to the Father.

The truth can't be cornered. After their clever question, Jesus asked to see a coin. "Show me the coin for the tax" (Matthew 22:19). A denarius was handed to Him. Jesus asked a question about ownership. "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" (Matthew 22:20). "Caesar's," they replied. Then give it to him. Whose inscription is on you? Whose likeness do you bear? Whose fingerprints are all over you? Who is the Potter to the clay that is you? "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). But sin is the problem. The image of God, our original righteousness, true knowledge of God, true holiness, a will that is completely harmonized to God's will – that was lost. Human effort cannot restore the image. Sin must be paid for. Sin must be removed.

Look at Jesus on the cross. He is mutilated, scourged, defiled. His flesh is torn. His blood is spilled. He looks horrific. That is sin. He took *our* image as He was crucified. Our sin, our broken image, our depravity – He took it and it wrecked Him. On the cross Jesus is actively rendering unto God what belongs to God. He is taking your sin and thereby returning you to the Father. That is the truth that sets you free. No power on this earth can undo that reality. It isn't up for debate. But we'll talk about it to anyone, anytime, anywhere.

We give to God what belongs to Him. What is that? All that we are, all that we have. By serving our neighbor we give to God what belongs to Him. By tithing to His church, we give to God what rightfully belongs to Him. By forgiving those who sin against us, we give to God. By honoring our wives, we give to God. By nurturing children in the faith, we give to God. You've

been recreated. Christ's image has been imprinted on your being. You have been minted by Jesus' death and resurrection which enveloped you as you were washed in His blood in holy baptism. You bear the image of the King. Honor God in your body. Women, you are regal. Hold yourselves as daughters of the King, which you are. Be quick to teach your daughters what it means to follow Christ, heart and soul. Men, you are to embody both strength and sacrifice. You are protectors. Be quick to teach your sons the way of true masculinity. Here at Christ the King we render unto God what is God's. In this, as in all things, we follow Christ our Lord.