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RENDER TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S, AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 22.15-21

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his talk. 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.

Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 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."

After a series of incidents with which Jesus had accused the highest spiritual leaders of the people of being thieves and assassins - thieves because they had taken possession of the people and assassins because they had used violence - there is now a counter attack on the part of these leaders, but they have a problem. Jesus is followed by a great crowd, so there is need to discredit Him.

The gospel that we read, Matthew 22, 15-21, is the first of a series of attacks with which these religious leaders, these spiritual leaders try to discredit Jesus, they set traps to defame and discredit Him on front of the people.

Let's read. "*Then..*" meaning this episode connects to the complaint that Jesus had made with the parable of the wedding guests that had refused the invitation for reasons of interest. Convenience is that which determines the behavior of the religious leaders. "*Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.*"

So, now there are a series of traps set for Jesus, from which Jesus exits laying traps for His accusers." "*And they sent their disciples to him,..*" and here is a surprise," *..along with the Herodians,..*" Pharisees and Herodians hated one another, because the Herodians were on Herod's side, who was a puppet king put there by the Romans and the Pharisees hated this king.

Between them, there was a great enmity, but now they had a common danger. Jesus is dangerous for both the Pharisees and for the Herodians, so they get together to fight to eliminate Him. "*..saying,*

"Teacher,..." watch out for this title, in Matthew's gospel it is always used by Jesus' opponents, or by those who are hostile, it is part of the curial language with which to sweeten that which they want to say, "...we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully,..." "

This statement is true; so they recognize that Jesus teaches the way of God according to the truth. "...you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances." It is actually they, which Jesus had accused of doing everything to be admired, here is the difference. The Pharisses do everything to be glorified, to be admired; all that Jesus does is not for his own convenience, but for the convenience of the good of mankind.

When the values of man are placed as the absolute principle that governs their own existence, it makes no difference, people's opinion does not matter. And here is the trap, "Tell us, then, what you think." it is an imperative not a question, but an imposition, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" What were Herod's taxes?

Ever since a Roman governor was nominated for Judea, there was a tax for all, men and women, from 12 to 65 years old. The question was misleading. Why? Due to this payment, there had been many uprisings. It is enough to remember that of the famous Judah the Galilean that rebelled against this tax. So the question is a trap, because they ask if it is lawful to pay or not to pay Caesar's tax, do not forget that we are in the area of the temple ,whatever Jesus answers it will be dangerous.

Because if Jesus says, "Yes it is lawful to pay Caesar's tax" He goes against the law for the only Lord of the people, the only one recognized as such, God. If He says, "No, do not pay" there are the guards and Jesus will be immediately arrested.

So however Jesus answers He damages Himself, if He says in favour, or says the contrary to this tax payment. And here, the Pharisees and the Herodians that have set the trap for Jesus, fall into their own trap. Aware of their malice, Jesus said, "Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius." At that time it was strictly forbidden to take Roman money into the temple, because in the book of Deuteronomy, in the commandments there is a law that there can be no human figure can be represented.

Therefore in the most holy place in Jerusalem, the temple, it was absolutely forbidden to take in money, Roman money, that had a human portrait. At the entrance to the temple, there were moneychangers that changed Roman money for that which was allowed in the temple. But the interest - it is this the complaint that the evangelist is making - it is the true god of these Pharisees, they that are obsessed with the idea of pure and impure which are thorough and scrupulous, when it concerns money they are not so subtle.

In the temple, in the sacred place, they take a coin that in the eyes of the religion is considered impure. But for interests, the conveniences, they are above all this. Here is Jesus' trap when they innocently present the coin. "And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." The Roman coin had on one side the image of Tiberius, with the words "Cesare figlio del divino Augusto,

pontefice massimo”, and on the other side there was the mother of the emperor representing the goddess of peace.

So two human figures. “*They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them,...*” they had asked if it was lawful to pay or no to pay, Jesus does not reply whether it is lawful or not, He used another verb, “to render”, meaning “to give back” “*Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” If you do not want this domination do not use the benefits, because this money is not yours, give it back to Caesar.

But, and it is here where the evangelist wants to arrive, “... *and to God the things that are God’s.*” What must be given back to God and what is God’s? Jesus in the parable of the wicked tenants used the religious and spiritual leaders that for interest took possession of the vineyard of the Lord, they put themselves between God and the people, imposing their traditions and their laws, concealing and obscuring God’s love for his people. Therefore there is need to ignore the lordship of Caesar but resort to God that which has been misused by the Pharisees.

The evangelist comments, “*When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.*” They leave only to return later, bringing with them, an expert, a doctor of law. This is the usual series of attacks against Jesus that the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees and doctors of law, do against to Jesus