

# Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

## LEGALIZED AND GOSPELIZED

Matthew 22:15-22

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Mat.22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21They 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." 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Legalized

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *Tested*

Despite the "malice" (v. 18) of the religious and political leaders (the Pharisees, their disciples, and the Herodians), and their desire to "entrap" (v. 15) Jesus, it is they themselves

who are entrapped, ensnared, tested by the same Law with which they sought to test Jesus. Thus they proved themselves to be “hypocrites” (v. 18), and more so since they had sought (albeit unawares) to put the Lord their God “to the test” (v. 18; see 4:7). The question to them, as also to us, is “To whom are we obligated?” The testers thought they could trap Jesus by making a clever distinction between the things belonging to Caesar and the things belonging to God, as if one could get away from one’s obligations either to Caesar or to God. But Jesus does not play their game. Instead, he presumes that all things belong to God, so that whatever Caesar may have stewardship over was given to him by God. No wonder the testers were amazed! They failed their own test. Anyone, therefore, who seeks to parse the Law to avoid their total obligation to God (e.g., going to church, tithing, loving only one’s family or one’s neighbor) will instead have the whole Law as witness against them.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Legalized***

Anyone who looks at a relationship to Caesar legalistically (v. 17) will also hear the question of allegiance to God (in v. 21) legalistically. The trouble is, as the whole Law proclaims, “anyone” is really “everyone.” Everyone legalizes the Law and is in turn legalized by the Law. As the Sermon on the Mount put it, there is no way to avoid the Law (see 5:17-20). Our legalization consists in this: in order to win the Law’s approval, we invariably seek out its “smaller” parts and rely on them instead of the whole; or, alternatively, we seek to avoid the Law altogether. But, in that very “partiality” or wish to avoid the full weight of the Law, we find ourselves overwhelmed by the Law and unable to escape its condemnations. When we seek to domesticate the Law, to give ourselves the power to choose our destiny, we find ourselves condemned instead. We are legalized by the very Law we want to legalize! We invariable seek for ourselves a power that properly belongs to God. Simply put, we

do not want to let God use the Law! From Jesus' perspective (v. 21), not only are we guilty of parsing the Law (though compounding guilt does not make us more guilty) but, in "truth" (v. 16), it is impossible for us to fulfill the Law. For only Jesus the "Son" can "fulfill" the Law and bring our legalization to an end (5:17; see Rom. 10:4).

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Left, as in Left Behind***

We can't fulfill the Law because the Law itself makes that impossible. We have no choice. It simply is not in our power to permit God to use the Law upon us, so as to "fulfill" it. Instead, when we use the Law to "legalize" ourselves (as we must), we usurp the work of God. So we are left with a conundrum: If God uses the Law upon us, we are condemned; if we try to use the Law instead, we are still condemned. Those who flee the Law must be up to something! But because the Law is ubiquitous, that too is impossible. The Law traps us in our sin, allowing no escape. Hearing only the truth of the Law from Jesus, the Pharisees and Herodians "left him and went away" (v. 22). That is the final consequence of being legalized by the Law. The full burden of the Law sends us far away from God.

## **PROGNOSIS: Gospelized**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Righted, as in Receiving Righteousness***

The truth is, no one can possibly believe in a God who invariably condemns us, especially when the Law is inescapable and we have no choice in the matter. We simply cannot believe that God might have a greater purpose in store for us, or that death might somehow "make room" (Luther) for true faith. Startling as it is, that's just what God-in-Christ was doing! Jesus, who proclaimed the truth of the Law, that the Law kills, freely submitted to the Law's condemnation in order to fulfill

the Law. The Law was fulfilled in Jesus because he, and he alone, freely submitted to the Law. THEREFORE, God raised him from the dead never to die again. But Jesus did not fulfill the Law merely to show us that it could be done, that is, on his own behalf. Rather he submitted to the Law's condemnation in our place (pro nobis, for us) because we could not, and will not! This "righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (5:20). Although we ourselves cannot believe that God "works life in death" (Luther), Jesus' death and resurrection FOR US assures us just that. We who trust that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor 5:19) receive Jesus' righteousness as though it was our own. In so trusting we are "righted" to God.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Gospelized***

Because righteousness belongs properly to Jesus, it is only "ours" insofar as we are yoked to Jesus by our faith in him. By the power of the Holying Spirit, we are invited to die with Christ (now apart from the Law), believing that he, not us, has fulfilled the Law "for us." This is the Good News (Gospel) that Jesus brings into a legalized world. Now, instead of merely being legalized to death by the Law, we fulfill the Law by trusting Jesus with our lives. Nothing else is necessary (to please God).

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Amazed***

We are gospelized back into a legalized world. No longer willing to parse the Law in vain attempts to fulfill it (for Jesus has rendered that moot), or attempting to avoid the Law, we are freed by Christ from the Law's legalizations and final condemnation. Without legalizations, the only thing to do is to love. Now, our work has no other basis than the love of Christ. We live under the same presumption as Jesus, that all things belong to God. That includes "the things belonging to Caesar" (v. 21), our "own" belongings, our bodies, our hearts, our

wills, even our faith. Isn't that "amazing"? Now, when we hear verse 21, we hear it gospelized, without fear, righted to God. Instead of fleeing the world to get away from the Law, we are empowered to embrace the world and all its legalisms, loving others unconditionally and proclaiming the Gospel to all who will hear it.