

10/16/11

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. The text is the Gospel lesson, Mt 22:15-22.

15] THE PHARISEES WENT OUT AND LAID PLANS TO TRAP JESUS IN HIS own WORDS. 16] THEY SENT THEIR DISCIPLES TO HIM ALONG WITH THE HERODIANS. “TEACHER,” THEY SAID, WE KNOW THAT YOU ARE A MAN OF INTEGRITY AND THAT YOU TEACH GOD’S WAY IN KEEPING WITH THE TRUTH. YOU AREN’T SWAYED BY PEOPLE, BECAUSE YOU DON’T PAY ANY ATTENTION TO WHO THEY ARE. 17] SO TELL US, WHAT’S YOUR OPINION? IS IT RIGHT TO PAY TAXES TO CAESAR OR NOT?”

18] BUT JESUS KNEW THE EVIL THEY HAD IN MIND AND HE SAID, “YOU HYPOCRITES, WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO TRAP ME? 19] SHOW ME THE COIN THAT’S USED TO PAY THE TAX. THEY GAVE HIM A DENARIUS, 20] AND HE ASKED THEM, “WHOSE PORTRAIT IS THIS? AND WHOSE INSCRIPTION?”

21] “CAESAR’S,” THEY ANSWERED.

THEN HE TOLD THEM, “GIVE CAESAR BACK WHAT BELONGS TO HIM. AND GIVE GOD BACK WHAT BELONGS TO HIM!” 22] THEY WERE STUNNED WHEN THEY HEARD THAT, SO THEY LEFT HIM AND WENT AWAY.

(Gn 1:26-27; Is 29:13-16)

The word “HYPOCRITE” comes from an ancient word for "mask", so a HYPOCRITE is somebody who's wearing a mask. But everybody fakes things sometimes. Everybody’s got a *mask* on sometimes, which is why Jesus is always in your face. He's always leaning in, staring at our eyes through the little eyeholes in our mask. Interestingly, people who really *feel* like hypocrites – any here? – are not your real, championship variety. Of course, on the other hand, I know how to say, “I feel like such a *hypocrite*” in a way that makes me look *so* humble.

And on the *other* other hand, one of the more popular *masks* is, “I’m no hypocrite!” For instance, somebody bad mouths somebody and then, when they get called on it, they say, “Well, that’s how I *feel* and I’m no ... hypocrite!” Of course, that fake honesty is just a mask for the venom underneath.

So, let’s see: There’s a *humble* mask, and an *honesty* mask. And there’s a *confused* mask, too. As in, “I love my wife, but there’s this other woman down the street and I just don't know what to do!” ... Jesus says, “You *don’t*?” There’s even a *tender conscience* mask, as in, for instance, “But that other woman’s so lonely, it seems so cold to just leave her all alone. Ya know?” Too often, we *would* just obey our Master, but how *can* we when we’ve got all these supposedly troubling questions? Sometimes, you can come up with these real *stumpers* basically to keep Jesus out of your face. Such as, “Lord, I hear You say that I’ve got to go to church, but if I go when I don’t want to – Lord, do You *want* me to a hypocrite?” Jesus says, V. 18] ARE YOU TRYING TO TRAP ME?

I’m not talking about real questions. Real questions ought to be asked. If the answer’s needed, it’ll be there. I’m talking about *fake* questions, that if, supposedly, I could just get them

settled, I'd do right, if only I could be sure, well, if I could be sure, V. 17] IS IT RIGHT TO PAY TAXES TO CAESAR OR NOT?

The PHARISEES and the HERODIANS wanted to know. Sort of. As you know, the PHARISEES had self-esteem like other people have skin. They paid their taxes, but apparently not without a lot of soul-searching because after all, they didn't really belong to Rome because they were *God's* people which they would've thought would be perfectly obvious to anybody. The HERODIANS, as you may not know, supported King Herod (Herod – Herodians), because King Herod supported Rome, because Rome supported King Herod. HERODIANS said, “Romans, Jews, whatever, we can do business.” HERODIANS all had deep tans and trophy wives and Rome was a solid investment, so they paid their taxes and *said*, at least, that they were proud to – if, oh, *if* it was really okay?

Herodians and Pharisees hated each other very much but then they found something that brought them together and that was hating Jesus. The business community hated Jesus because He was always in your face about GIVE TO THE POOR AND YOU SHALL HAVE TREASURE IN HEAVEN. And the religious community hated Jesus because He was always in your face about repenting – as if *they* needed to! But neither group dared to come right out against Jesus, because for the moment, the crowds thought Jesus could do no wrong. So, VV. 15-16] They LAID PLANS TO TRAP JESUS IN HIS own WORDS. THEY SENT THEIR DISCIPLES to Jesus with tender consciences in deep confusion to ask Him: IS IT RIGHT TO PAY TAXES TO CAESAR?

It was supposed to be a TRAP: See, if He says, “Yes, pay taxes to Rome,” then He's a collaborator and the crowds'll turn on Him because the crowds hate collaborators as much as they hate paying taxes. And if He says, “No, don't pay taxes to Rome,” then He's an agitator against the government, and a HERODIAN will pull out his cell phone and their Roman partners will come and get Jesus out of their faces for good.

So, VV. 16-17] “TEACHER,” THEY oozed, “WE KNOW THAT YOU ARE A MAN OF INTEGRITY AND THAT YOU TEACH GOD'S WAY IN KEEPING WITH THE TRUTH. YOU AREN'T SWAYED BY PEOPLE, BECAUSE YOU DON'T PAY ANY ATTENTION TO WHO THEY ARE.” Okay, that's disgusting and it can still be done *today*. It goes like this: “Lord, people might condemn me, but You're not like people. You're so understanding and You know that being a Christian is more than just a bunch of rules. And I'm so glad that whatever I do, and whomever I do it to, I can count on You not to be judgmental.” *That's* EVIL.

Back then, they told Jesus in essence, “TEACHER, WE KNOW we can count on You to tell it like it is and You don't care who's listening. You wouldn't care if we were all wearing *wires*, which of course we're not. No, You'd say it right into the microphone. “So,” they said, putting on their confused masks, IS IT RIGHT TO PAY TAXES TO CAESAR OR NOT?”

V. 18] He KNEW THE EVIL THEY HAD IN MIND. He always knows what everybody's got in mind and He's always leaning in. He's always saying, “YOU. ME. *Now.*”

They answered, “Yes, *certainly*; that goes without saying. But can we just talk about TAXES for a minute?” And then, maybe, about the age of the earth, and then about the people in distant lands who’ve never heard the Gospel – shouldn’t You really be going and talking to *them*?”

He looked into the little eyeholes of their masks AND VV. 18-19] HE KNEW THE EVIL, AND HE SAID, “YOU HYPOCRITES, WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO TRAP ME? SHOW ME THE COIN THAT’S USED TO PAY THE TAX. That was a Roman silver coin called a DENARIUS with a picture of the emperor on it, the way we have George Washington on our quarters. Jesus said, SHOW ME the money.” He knew they’d have one or two of them in their pockets. See, they had questions about giving up Roman money; they had no questions at all about keeping it. Jesus says, “SHOW ME THE COIN. Maybe they thought He was stalling for time. So THEY GAVE HIM A DENARIUS. AND HE said, “Look: V. 20] WHOSE PORTRAIT IS THIS?” Isn’t it funny how He knew all about Roman currency? Isn’t it funny how He knows everything about everything, including our taxes and our money and how we spend it, and ourselves and how we spend ourselves on things that aren’t Him?

He said, “WHOSE PORTRAIT IS THIS? WHOSE INSCRIPTION?” “CAESAR’S,” THEY SAID. So their big moral question was whether or not they ought to give back money that's got the owner's name on it? Christ said, GIVE CAESAR BACK WHAT BELONGS TO HIM. AND GIVE GOD BACK WHAT BELONGS TO HIM! What does that mean?

It means, “Rome is nothing. And money is just a temporary convenience. But how dare you keep back the only thing of value on this planet?” Christ says, GIVE IT BACK! On this whole little globe there's only one thing of any real consequence, and He says it's got His IMAGE on it, made IN HIS IMAGE by Him, for Him. Jesus says, GIVE Me BACK WHAT'S Mine! What did He want? He wanted them.

V. 22] WHEN THEY HEARD THAT, THEY WERE STUNNED. It turns out that, my goodness, He really *wasn't* SWAYED BY PEOPLE and He really *did* tell it like it is. AND THEY WENT AWAY AND LEFT HIM ALONE. Because He saw through them and still kept leaning in. Because He kept leaning in and raising His hands to pull off their masks. And they ran, because they didn't want Him close, didn't want Him in their face, didn't want to get real, didn't want Him.

But we knew they wouldn't want Him as soon as we heard the word, PHARISEE. It's no surprise that HYPOCRITES don't want God. The wonder is that God wants HYPOCRITES. Who'd want a Pharisee? Who'd want a Herodian? Or whatever they're called, who'd want somebody who says things we don't really mean and play confused when we're just unwilling and play smart when we're just unfaithful? Satan told Jesus, “Lose the people; keep the cash.”

But the One who wants us is the One who knows us through and through, the One who knows every way that we've held ourselves back from Him and given so much of ourselves to nothing instead. The One who's got no illusions about any of us – that's who wants us back. The One who knows what's under the mask – He's the One who hates that mask, who leans in,

and looks through the eyeholes, and says, “SHOW ME your face.” Do I want to wait till judgment day and have my mask ripped off when it’s too late in front of the whole universe? The Lord says, LET ME SEE YOUR FACE. He says, “I would die for that face.”

He says, “GIVE Me BACK WHAT’S Mine!” He said that just a couple days before Good Friday. And He knew what He’d be doing then. He knew what He’d be doing stripped naked, God with no mask at all, just sheer, naked love, dying to get BACK WHAT BELONGS TO Him, dying to get us back before dark, dying to cover us, not with masks, but with His blood and righteousness, so that we can sing on the Day of final unmasking, so that we can be real and free and safe forever.

Oh, guys, way too often, we give ourselves and take ourselves back. You know what I mean? We get honest and then reach for another mask. Did you know there’s even a mask of *unbelief*? When supposedly, we’ve lost our faith, supposedly, we just don’t believe anymore, when what’s really underneath is just some tantrum in the heart or some terror inside or that woman down the street or some penny ante idol that’s eating our soul bite by bite. So many masks, till we hardly know who we really are. Only the Lord Christ can unmask us, *and* take off the mask underneath and the mask under that, and whatever He finally uncovers – listen: WHOEVER SAVES their *lies* WILL LOSE their SOUL, BUT WHOEVER LOSES their masks FOR JESUS’ SAKE, WILL FIND their own true face.

GIVE GOD BACK WHAT BELONGS TO HIM. Again and again, GIVE BACK your invaluable self. You can tell how invaluable by the price tag and by how glad He was to pay it. Let us GIVE GOD BACK every side of us in whatever condition and every trailing shred. He’s here now. Only hold still while He leans in. Don’t talk.

And here comes the last hypocrisy: Where you say, “It’s too late.” He says, “That’s too bad. GIVE Me BACK WHAT BELONGS TO Me.” Or I say, “But *I’m* too bad.” He says, “Too bad. GIVE Me BACK WHAT BELONGS TO Me!” Or we say, “Really, You don’t want me. I’m a disappointment. I’m a phony; I’m a fake; I’m a HYPOCRITE and You’re not listening to a word I say!” And He says, “*Should* I?” And He reaches for the mask. And you say, “No! Don’t! I’m ... I’m ... I’m ...” And He pulls the mask away and says, “What you are ... is Mine.” Amen.