MATTHEW 22:15–22. (EHV)

> Then the Pharisees went out and plotted together how to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are truthful and teach the way of God in accord with the truth. You are not concerned about gaining anyone's approval because you are not swayed by appearances. So tell us, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus knew their evil purpose and said, "Why are you testing me, hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." They brought him a denarius. He asked them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" "Caesar's," they replied to him. Then he said to them, "Therefore give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. Then they left him and went away.

We're a little over two weeks away from Election Day. Which means it's the season for political ads, right? One commercial comes on saying you should absolutely vote for a person, and the very next commercial just comes short of telling you that he's the spawn of Satan. Even my two-year-old daughter now recognizes one of the senate candidates by name.

But even though the political ads can drive us nuts, voting is one of our most important civic duties. Those in office who run the local, state, and national governments are there because they were voted there.

But should the Church tell you whom to vote for? Should I as your pastor tell you whom to vote for? Is controlling the political scene part of the Church's job?

The Gospel text in front of us this morning is one of the most straightforward passages telling us of the biblical distinction between Church and State. We call the Bible's teaching on this distinction the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Let's review this doctrine this morning.

It was Holy Week, and the Jewish leaders were doing all they could to try to trap Jesus and undermine his teaching. In fact, the Pharisees and Herodians, who were normally enemies, banded together to try to trap Jesus. And they thought one way they could do so was by getting him to comment on politics. "Tell us, what do you think, Teacher? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

If Jesus said, "Absolutely, you should pay taxes to Caesar!" then he would look like a fan of Caesar, and they could attack him from several different angles. They could accuse him of approving of Tiberias Caesar, even though he was a man of questionable moral character, to say the least. They could accuse him of being against their own religion and people by being in favor of foreign rule, even though God spoke of David's house and kingdom enduring forever (2 Sam. 7:16). But if Jesus said, "Nobody should have to pay taxes to that foreign government!" then they would be able to report him to the Roman government as an insurrectionist, and they would also able to cite biblical evidence against him in that case, since, for instance, God had commanded the Israelites when they were exiled to Babylon to seek the peace and prosperity of their foreign captors (Jer. 29:7).

But Jesus gave them perhaps his most concise and brilliant response. He had them bring him a denarius, which was not only used to pay their taxes to Caesar, but which also represented their typical daily income. He had them identify Caesar's image and inscription on the coin, and

then told them, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." In other words, the State and the Church are two distinct kingdoms, and the existence of the one does not exclude or negate the existence of the other. Sometimes we call the Church God's right hand kingdom and the State God's left hand kingdom, but both of them are kingdoms that God has established. Both of them are kingdoms whose authority he upholds.

So what is the distinction between the two kingdoms? Why are they able to exist alongside each other?

First, the Church and the State have different governance. The State has authority over the body. The Church has authority over the soul, as long as they are representing God accurately and truthfully. The State is primarily concerned about physical well-being. The Church is primarily concerned about spiritual well-being.

That means, second, that they also have different goals. The State wants to promote and bring about obedience and justice, external peace and safety, prosperity and long life. The Church wants to promote and bring about faith in Christ and godliness, peace and security of conscience and heart, so that whether people prosper and live long lives or live in physical misery and die prematurely, they can be sure of entering, and will enter, eternal life with God in heaven. The State seeks the glory of mankind on earth. The Church seeks the glory of God in heaven.

And that means, third, that the two kingdoms also have different tools and instruments for carrying out their goals. God calls the tool of the State the physical sword, which stands for law and order, threats and punishment, including death—whether the death of criminals or the death of the State's enemies. Whereas the tool of the Church is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ. While there may be an appropriate place for leniency now and then, generally speaking, government is called upon by God to be strict and unforgiving. If the government is forgiving or too lenient, then, as Luther says, we would not be able to retain or preserve anything, because evildoers would be strengthened in their evil and wouldn't fear punishment in their evil pursuits. On the other hand, while there is an appropriate place for strong preaching of the law and condemnation in the Church, generally speaking, the Church is called upon by God to pronounce grace and forgiveness and to operate with gentleness and patience.

Now this does not mean that we simply leave our Christian faith behind when going about our earthly business and affairs or when we are at the ballot box. No, whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we are to do it to the glory of God. Christians are representatives of Christ in all their vocations and doings. But it does mean that we recognize that government has a different role to play than the Church does. For instance, if a Christian is a judge, he doesn't stop being a Christian when he judges a criminal. But as a Christian, he realizes that God does not call him as a judge to forgive evil in his office, but to punish it. So he issues sentences to the glory of God and for the good of society. But he does so with a different heart than the unbelieving judge—not to mention that the unbelieving judge might accept a bribe that affects the outcome of the case, whereas the Christian judge should not. And because the Christian judge has a believing heart, he might witness to the sentenced criminal privately, or do his best to have

a Christian pastor visit the criminal in prison or to get him a Bible or other Christian literature in prison.

Or when Christians vote for people in public office, they do their best to learn as much as they can about all the candidates, and then vote for the candidate who will a) best promote obedience and justice, external peace and safety, prosperity and long life, and who will do so by b) upholding biblical morality—whether they realize they are doing so or not—since Solomon tells us that righteousness exalts a nation, while sin is a disgrace to any people, and the candidate who will do so by c) observing the biblical distinction between the two kingdoms—again, whether they realize they are doing so or not—so that they don't unduly stick their noses in the Church's business. Because we live in a fallen world, this means voting for the lesser of two or more evils, but that's worth figuring out. We certainly don't want to vote for the greatest possible evil. And that also means that Christians may vote for opposing candidates in good conscience, because they may be weighing these factors in different ways and from different perspectives. For instance, one Christian may vote for Candidate A because he agrees with his written platform. But another Christian may see how Candidate A talks and acts and conclude that there is no way he will actually act in accordance with his platform, so she votes for Candidate B, even though his platform is less than ideal. This is also why, no matter whom we vote for, we do well to commit the results of the election to the Lord of the universe.

Actually, the place where we first learn to put this distinction into practice is in the home, because any home is the building block of the State, but a Christian home is also a mini-church. So when a child does wrong, the Bible says that God wants parents to discipline and punish the wrong. But the Bible also says that God wants parents to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord. So as the upholders of law and order in our household, we punish our children for their wrongdoing, but as the spiritual leaders of our household, we also tell them why what they did was wrong and prompt them to repent and pronounce the forgiveness of Jesus to them. We give them rules and laws, but we also regularly share God's word with them, so that they learn to obey those rules gladly and willingly out of love for Christ, and not just out of fear of punishment and because they have to.

You see, then, that the two kingdoms are distinct, and that's why Jesus can say, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Paul tells us in Romans 13 the things that we owe to Caesar—obedience to the law, taxes and revenue in keeping with the law, respect and honor, if not for the person, then still for the office that he or she holds by God's ordaining. As for God, we owe him fear, love, and trust above all things. We owe him our prayers, worship, praise, and thanks. If anything goes against his word and will, we prefer his word and will to anyone else's. As Luther once said, whatever is temporal and transitory, in this we must be obedient to Caesar. But whatever pertains to eternal life, in this we must be obedient to God, even at the expense of disobedience to Caesar, if necessary.

So as a pastor, no, I'm not going to tell you whom to vote for, though I am going to encourage you to do your homework and to vote. What I am going to continue to tell you, regardless of the season, is to give to the government what is the government's by divine right and to give to God what is his by divine right. After all, you, just like me and everyone else, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But you are declared innocent freely, by his grace,

through the redemption won for you by Christ Jesus and his blood. He has joined you to this redemption and to his resurrection from the dead in your baptism, and he continues to offer you its benefits through his word and Holy Supper. So for all of this you ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey him eternally, including by upholding his distinction between the two kingdoms. This is most certainly true. Amen.