

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Did you ever have a “bad hair day”? I had one once, I think, but it’s been so long it’s hard to remember, but as you may have experienced yourself, some mornings you get up, look in the mirror, and like what you see. Other mornings, not so much.

That’s how it might be when we read a particular passage of scripture. Sometimes we read it and realize “that’s me”. Other times, not so much. There are times when I will read a passage whether I’m preparing my sermon, a Bible study, or doing my devotions, and think “that’s me”, and I feel discomfited, even convicted. I have often mentioned how much I relate to Peter, well-meaning but say the wrong thing. Other times I see myself in Thomas, or I find myself asking a variation of “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I might be chuckling at myself as I see my own foibles reflected in what I’m studying, or I might be thinking: “this is speaking to me personally, I need to change, to take it to heart.”

Now I find that it is extraordinarily helpful to know some of the background to passages of scripture, including our gospel this morning. And perhaps as I read it, I will see myself reflected somewhere in it, maybe you’ll see yourself as well.

We have the disciples of the Pharisees working along-side Herodians, an unlikely combination of parties, plotting together how to trap Jesus. I said they were an unlikely combination, think of it this way. We have disciples learning the Pharasaic way of doing things, of thinking, of living, and we have Herodians who are attached to the Herods, very pro-Roman in their thinking and their ways. Pharisees who are incredibly legalistic, crossing every “t” and dotting every “i”, who follow the letter of the law but not the intent of the law, who know scripture but fail to understand the meaning of much of it, they certainly aren’t in the Roman camp, but here they are working with Herodians.

They put together a well-thought-out question and pose it to Jesus, reasoning that no matter how he answers, one party or the other is going to capitalize on it. They aren’t seeking understanding, they are seeking an advantage, to be able to portray Jesus as either a pawn of the Romans, or get the Romans very upset with him. At this time the people love Jesus and the Romans are leaving him totally alone. But answer the question one way or another, and one party or the other is going to be very unhappy with him and he will lose credibility, his teaching and reputation will suffer.

None of the Pharisees or Herodians really care about paying taxes, they simply want Jesus to commit to paying them (in which case he’s selling out and his Jewish followers are going to be upset), or not paying them (in which case he’s inciting rebellion and those in Herod’s camp are going to be upset).

The way they see it, Jesus loses no matter which answer he gives.

So now the question is, what do you see in your reflection as you look at this passage. Ever tried to phrase something in prayer so that it gives God a better impression and we can hide our true motives? Ever tried to “corner” God into the answer we want? Maybe we’ve already decided what to do with what is rightfully ours, you know, time, talents, treasure, and we look for a loophole to get us out of giving generously. Have you ever attempted to excuse some behavior on your part that you know quite well isn’t pleasing to God, but you’ve done it and you intend to continue to do it? Ever done the wrong thing for what you think were the right reasons, or maybe done the right thing but for the wrong reasons?

The Pharisees’ disciples and the Herodians were amazed at Jesus’ answer, render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. It’s Caesar’s likeness, it’s his inscription, it’s used to pay a poll tax, it one way or another supports the government, peace, roads, security, pay it. Well, that’s the end of that.

Oh! But we’re not off the hook, not by a long shot. Render to God what is God’s. Well, you say, everything is God’s. Right! Including you and me. We are God’s. And God sees right through the ploys of his created beings, you and me, and he loves us anyway, in spite of our faults, our sins, our trying to trap him, trick him into getting what we want or what we think we deserve.

So do we walk away from God discomfited, angry at a response we don’t like? Do we try to rephrase things in hope that we can get what we want, even when we know better?

Do we walk away from the grace that God offers, the forgiveness of sins, the righteousness that comes from our faith in our Savior? Do we leave the loving presence of our God, or do we see ourselves with humble hearts for what we are, and accept the grace offered through faith, maybe chuckling at ourselves, and thanking God for grace and faith and forgiveness, for life, for all that we have, for all that we are!

Life, true life, is only found in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is no other way, truth or life. We will shortly receive a tangible taste of God’s grace at the Lord’s table, and we know we are loved by our God, that we live in our God, and that no matter what we see in the mirror, we see the reflection of our Jesus Christ cloaking us whenever we read a passage like our gospel this morning.

AMEN