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**“Challenges of Dual Allegiance: God and Government” (Matthew 22:15–22)**

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I’ve been following the news from India, especially the political developments in recent days. One story I watched recently mirrors how the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus with a challenging question. The Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India recently issued a mandatory protocol requiring the National Song to be played before the National Anthem at official events. The order required singing all six stanzas, not just the traditional first two. Most importantly, a law was passed making it a punishable offense for up to three years if anyone intentionally disrupts the singing of the song. You may wonder what is wrong with singing the National Song. Nobody objects to singing the National Anthem, but there is a problem with singing the National Song for Muslims and Christians. The controversy centers on Vande Mataram, a song deeply rooted in India’s religious, historical, and political landscape. Written in the 1870s, the song played a major role in inspiring patriotic fervor during India’s Independence Movement. However, the song has remained a persistent source of controversy and debate. The controversy surrounding the song is that the lyrics reflect Hindu religious imagery and are contrary to the monotheistic beliefs of Muslims and Christians. The song invites citizens to bow and worship the nation, personifying it as a divine goddess. For Muslims, there is only one God, and the deification of land is blasphemy. Christians will worship only the Triune God. Most importantly, the motherland is equated with Hindu goddesses like Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. Recognizing communal sensitivities during the freedom struggle, the Indian National Congress passed a 1937 resolution stating that only the first two stanzas of “Vande Mataram” should be officially sung, not the full stanzas. They made these amendments because the first two stanzas

focus entirely on India's natural beauty, bounty, and fertility, and they contain no references to Hindu goddesses. The remaining stanzas deify the geographical boundary and refer to it as a goddess. The 2026 mandate to play the full six stanzas of the National Song at official events was objected to by Christians and Muslims, and hence they were labeled as antinational and were threatened with leaving the country and going to Christian and Islamic countries. So, the situation became: either sing the song or leave the country. Fortunately, the Supreme Court of India intervened and granted relief from singing the song. Imagine if the court hadn't intervened. If a Muslim refused to sing, they would be accused of sedition. If they agreed to sing the song, then they would be forced to set aside their fundamental beliefs. The Pharisees tried to trick Jesus into revealing his true self by posing a question that would indict him. They wanted to know whether he would obey the emperor and the state or obey God. If Jesus advised not paying the emperor's tax, they would accuse him of sedition. If he advised paying tribute to the emperor, then he would be labeled as a person who denied God and set aside the Jewish law. It is a challenge of dual allegiance to God and the State.

Just remember the sermon I gave on September 27<sup>th</sup>. I said it is difficult to deal with Jesus, and no one can challenge him with a dilemma or a question. Earlier, the chief priests and the elders challenged the authority of his actions in the Jerusalem temple. By what authority are you doing this? Jesus responds by asking whether John's baptism came from heaven or was of human origin. This dilemma leaves them trapped and afraid to answer either way; they reply, "We don't know." In today's Gospel reading, Jesus answers a dilemma posed directly to him. To whom do you obey: God or the emperor? He recognized the Pharisees' cunning and malice and asked them to bring a coin used to pay the tax. They brought him a denarius, and he asked, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" When they answered that it was the emperor's, Jesus gave a profound

answer: “Give to the emperor what is due, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). Jesus silenced the Pharisees with his brilliance.

Let us now reflect on how the Pharisees posed the question: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show no partiality to anyone; for you do not regard people with partiality” (Matthew 22:16). Every word and line of the Pharisees’ insincere speech reveals the truth about Jesus. Their pretensions are clear. What would our answer be if the Pharisees asked us that question today? Is it wrong to serve both the Government and God, especially when they contradict one another? Do we want to serve only God at the expense of the Government, or only the Government at the expense of our faith in God? I’ve seen the phrase “In God we trust” on one side of a coin in the US. This raises another question. Does that mean the state and religion are identical? Where do we draw the line, and how do the two differ?

Jesus’ answers suggest that the state and religion are two distinct realities, each demanding specific obligations from the people. As the coin bears the emperor’s face, we bear God’s image, because God has created us in God’s image. As created beings bearing God’s image, we owe our allegiance to God. Yet Paul says God established earthly authorities, meaning divine authority is superior to earthly authority. The state’s authority is derived from God’s authority; therefore, no state authority is above God. The state is fallible, but God is infallible. The state cannot invoke God’s name to legitimize its decisions, laws, and actions, or portray itself as God’s state. Since God grants the state authority, especially to govern civil society, that authority includes individual freedom to decide, to believe, and to worship God as people want. When the National Song was imposed uniformly on all citizens in India, God gave individuals the freedom to decide whether to sing it. When the coin affirms that we trust in God, that trust should not be mixed

with political gain or used to rule people. That trust is intended to establish institutional order and ensure we give what is due to the state. Jesus gave the Pharisees the same answer.

This leads us to reflect on the kind of authority God and the state have over their people. In political parlance, we use the word “Lord” to refer to emperors. When Julius Caesar was called Kyrios, it meant “Lord” in Greek. At the same time Caesar lived, people also addressed Jesus as “Lord.” The early Christians calling Jesus “Lord” was a dangerous, provocative, radical, and subversive challenge. Despite that, the early Christians boldly declared that their ultimate loyalty belonged to Jesus, not Caesar, and directly challenged imperial authority. Caesar’s Lordship was established and enforced through capricious, violent, exploitative, and oppressive rule. Jesus’ Lordship is servant leadership, manifested in his washing of his disciples’ feet. If Jesus, fully God and fully human, could exercise his authority humbly and lovingly, and redeem us through sacrificial love, then the rulers of the state cannot claim absolute earthly authority. Our allegiance to God rests on God’s non-negotiable authority, which subdues all earthly authorities; therefore, the state’s authority does not challenge ours, even though Jesus asks us to pay the emperor’s dues.

Our calling is not to surrender to the world and earthly authorities. When Jesus tells the Pharisees to pay the emperor’s dues, he does not ask them to surrender fully to the state. He reminds them to pay the dues to God as well. Our calling is not to flee the world or earthly authority either. Our identity and purpose of living in this world is to establish God’s kingdom. Our calling is to meet the needs of society that the state, in its fallible nature, failed to fulfill. And when Jesus teaches us to pray, he wants God’s kingdom to come to earth. Therefore, we are obligated to build God’s kingdom here. God’s kingdom on earth assures everyone of peace, justice, food, and a safe and secure livelihood. As disciples of the risen Christ, we must confront injustice, violence, and

oppression in the world. This is an ongoing struggle, and our hope lies in the risen Christ's reign and his second coming, which will establish his future kingdom. Every day, earthly Pharisees and rulers will throw conflicting challenges at us. But our faith is in the authority of Jesus' Lordship and His kingdom. May God grant us wisdom to navigate the challenges of conflicting authorities and help us to give our final allegiance to God. Amen.