

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

**By Eric Howell**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

**October 19, 2008**

Do you ever get uneasy praying the Lord's Prayer?

“Our father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”

It's easy to not get uneasy about this prayer. It's not ours; it's Jesus' and he taught us to recall it by heart such that in repeating the words we are praying in the way he would have us pray. The popular version, the one most of us learn to recite in church, is full of “thys” and “arts” and “halloweds” which assures us immediately that it's religious language, which signals to us moderns that it's tame and resists invading the rest of our lives. We feel a certain way when reciting it or when we hear the soaring arrangement sung by a talented singer. It is a beautiful prayer. But sometimes we think about the meaning of the words he taught us to pray and we feel uneasy.

Your kingdom come. Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of God, which most of us assume most of the time is about heaven or feelings or something “out there.” But he talked about it in ways that, when you get down to it, are unsettling. He described God's kingdom in a way that makes it seem near, like it's coming here—and like it's a bizarro version of our earthly arrangements, like an upside down version—you know—be like a child, the poor will be exalted, the rich brought down. The kingdom is found in that moment and person who sells everything to buy one thing of value. Stuff like that. When the disciples heard Jesus say that we should pray for God's kingdom to come, they knew that if it did come everything might change. And that's the unsettling part for me. If we listen to Jesus' message about the way of God and the lives God would have us live on earth, “thy kingdom come” is one of the most dangerous things we can say in church.

Anytime you start talking about alternatives to the way the world was arranged when we found it, you are talking about dangerous things. The people in Jesus' time knew this.

And so a tricky question is posed to the itinerant teacher who had made his way to the temple in Jerusalem, “Is it right to pay Roman taxes or not?” This particular question was just one small example of the larger problem that dominated discussion among everyone, from the ruling religious elite, to the educated scribes, to the local community leaders, to the radicals out in the desert. They had different answers, but they all agreed on the problem facing Israel, “What do we do about Rome?” Israel is God's chosen people, the light to the world. Now look at us: vassals of a vast Roman empire, taxed to pennilessness, conscripted into an army we don't want to serve to fight wars we don't want to fight, forced servants of a regime that claims divinity for itself and demands allegiance of its subjects. What do we do about Rome?

“Show me a tax coin.” Jesus doesn't have one. We do. One of us pulls a Roman coin out of his pocket—a coin with a profile of a garlanded head of the Caesar and an inscription proclaiming him a son of God on one side and a high priest on the other. Blasphemous stuff on

display right there in the temple. We don't know who, but it was either a Pharisee or a Herodian who produced the coin. Could have been either. Pharisees and Herodians represented two of the four major Jewish responses to the Roman problem. These factions operated like religious sects and like political parties. The four were Zealots, Pharisees, Sadducees/ Herodians and Essenes. Taken together, these four groups provided the context for Jesus' life and message.

**Zealots**—The problem is we aren't courageous. If we were braver, God would honor our courage and fight for us. All of you are cowards. Read Exodus. God is always taking the side of Israel against her enemies. Let's fight it out.

**Pharisees**—The problem is we aren't righteous enough. If we obeyed the laws of God more, God would honor our righteousness and rescue us. All of you are disobedient. Read Leviticus. God is always demanding that His people be pure. So, because we are still in slavery, we must conclude that there is unrighteousness among us. Let's root it out.

**Sadducees/ Herodians**—The problem is we aren't patient enough. We must be willing to work within the system to solve our problems. We wish things were otherwise, but this is better than not existing; and fighting the system is only going to get us into trouble. All of you are foolish. Read Daniel. God reminds Israel that hers is to accept and suffer her lot and make the best of a bad situation. Let's work it out.

**Essenes**—The problem is we aren't spiritual enough. The problems of the world are the problems of the world. We are going to retreat into community and shut out the problems of the world. All of you are compromised. May God strike you all down. Read the Prophets. God is always calling us to be set apart from the world. Let's get out.

These groups formed alliances and then broke them. The Zealots would skirmish with Rome and the Herodians would denounce them. The Essenes withdrew and wrote strange apocalyptic literature out in the desert. The Pharisees blamed individual sin for the problem. And all of them wondered about this surprisingly effective young preacher from Galilee. Is he one of us?

Who is Jesus? He's always talking about a new kingdom, so he's a Zealot. No, listen, he said he came to fulfill all the Law. He's a Pharisee. No, look. He taught that if a Roman soldier makes you carry his pack, carry it an extra mile. He's a Herodian. You are all wrong. Look at all his time in the wilderness and the way he calls the religious leaders vipers and hypocrites. He's an Essene. Fight. Judge. Cower. Hide. These were the options before Jesus. As it turns out, these are options before us, as well, for how we live as Christians in a world that is not always friendly.

For some, faith is a shield and sword with which to wage war in the culture. For some, faith is a spotlight and shovel to dig in your neighbors' dirt. For others, faith is a thin veneer over other cultural commitments, as long as it doesn't interfere or make it messy. For still others, faith is a wall to keep safe from the pollution of the world. And none are the way of Jesus.

Hand me a coin. Someone did. Picture the scene if you will. The coin, a picture on which is the closest any of the people standing there will ever see of the most powerful human in the world, is being held by the hand of the one who is the closest image any of them will ever see

of God. The image of the emperor was stamped on the money. The image of God was made flesh and stood before them. The *Imago Dei* held in his hand the *imago Caesar*.

This coin represented the power of this world and was located at the intersection of religion and politics, of Israel and Rome, of what was supposed to be and the reality that was. It was in this way an incarnation of the unseen emperor. Jesus, standing there holding it, was the person at the intersection of the divine and the human. He was the image of the invisible God, the incarnation of God who, as the Council at Chalcedon described, was both God and man “without confusion, change, division, or separation.” Would that our faith be just as simple to live out. Would that it be the case that when it comes to the things of God and the things of this world that we could know the right way to go without confusion, change, division, or separation. Jesus tells us to be very careful about not confusing that which belongs to Caesar and that which belongs to God, but he doesn’t tell us which. And we’ve been uncomfortable ever since with the issue. When you live in the new Roman Empire, like we do today, it’s not always easy to tell what is God’s and what is Caesar’s. So, unlike our Lord, we are often confused, changing, divided, and separated. And uneasy.

Jesus would have been more helpful had he answered the question differently. He could have said, “Of course pay tribute to Caesar. This is your country. Pray like this, ‘My country right or wrong. Still my country.’” I would feel less uneasy when the American flag shows up in the front of sanctuaries or is draped over altars or when the 4<sup>th</sup> of July falls on Sunday mornings and I get asked if we are going to have a patriotic service. I could say, “My presidential candidate will save and solve everything.” “In God we trust” on our money and Ten Commandments on courthouse walls would be less confusing, or war would be less complicated.

Or, conversely, Jesus could have responded, “Of course not. God’s kingdom is not of this world. If you want to follow me, then get serious. Follow me. Any other allegiance, any other commitment, any relationship with the state or culture is compromise.” I would feel less uneasy about elections because I wouldn’t feel compelled to vote. I could say “to heck with both presidential candidates. It won’t do any good anyway.” I could ignore national policy and issues of social justice. I would feel less uneasy about those who roundly condemn our nation and give it up as hopeless. I could withdraw and just be an individual Christian without concerning myself with these things.

Sometimes I wish Jesus would have said, “Look guys, you won’t understand this now, but Matthew, you or Mark write this down—someday Rome will just be a city in Italy and there will be a new, even more powerful empire in the world whose reach and power will make Rome look like the Moabites.” (Get it? The Moabites? They would have gotten it). “They’ll have coins with their founders on them. It will be called America and in America there will be people called Democrats and Republicans. Now write this down. I’m going to tell you which political party is the way of Jesus. Here it is . . .”

If you are uneasy about these things, too, you are in good company. Jesus’ answer, “Give to God what is God’s and give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” reminds me that when I don’t feel uneasy is when I should be most uneasy.

When we assume that God is absolutely on my side in a conflict, I am uneasy. When we pray “thy kingdom come” and I don’t invite God’s ways into my life, I am uneasy and I should be.

When we sing “God Bless America,” I wonder how God judges how well we have used the blessings we already have, and I am uneasy and should be uneasy. When we choose allegiance to Caesar and hope God is a cheerleader, I am uneasy and should be uneasy. When I enjoy my church life and church friends and neglect the suffering of our world or the injustice in our nation, I am uneasy and should be uneasy.

But Jesus doesn’t give us easy answers. He doesn’t lay it all out for us and draw the clear lines. He doesn’t pick a political party and then condemn the others. Jesus’ answer was clear, yet ambiguous. In its ambiguity, it is an invitation to those of us years later wrestling with the same questions authentically and hypocritically to accept that the tension we sometimes feel as Christians living in this world is part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The uneasiness is the gift of grace; the subtle signal that something deserves a closer look, further evaluation, deeper prayer, new eyes. As Stanley Hauerwas notes, “For many, this account of Jesus’s claim that we are to give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and God what is God’s creates an insoluble problem because they do not see how followers of Jesus can then live in the world as we know it. But to recognize that we have an insoluble problem is to begin to follow Jesus. Jesus’s response to the Pharisees and Herodians does create an insoluble problem, but that is what it is meant to do. You know you have a problem, at least if you are a disciple of Jesus, when you do not have a problem.” [*Matthew (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)*, p. 191]

So, “Our Father who is in Heaven, honor and glory be to your name. Your kingdom come. Your politics come. Your economics come. Your race relations come. Your international conflict resolution come. Your food distribution come. Your justice come. Your health care system come. Your educational system come. Your kingdom come to the inner city, to the rural crossroad, to the downtown sky-rise, to the national border, to the high school, to the church, to the home, to our hearts. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Your will be done in us today.”