

Two weeks ago, all four major sports teams in Philadelphia were playing. I don't think that it is an exaggeration to say that many Philadelphians and those in South Jersey & Delaware are somewhat fanatical about their sports teams. When they win they are ecstatic ... when they lose – which is generally accepted, they mourn.

In my mind it comes down to a couple of things – identification – that is, the people want to be the players on the field ... but more importantly, I think it becomes something that I would identify as Idol worship. When I am on the road at 7:00 AM getting ready to meet Jack at the storage center, I hear the reports of those who are on the way, or already at Lincoln Financial Field waiting for the Eagles to start at 1:00 PM. Maybe they just like to party before the game – but as we sometimes see, people live and die for their sports teams.

The same goes for Christmas. Last week, seven weeks before Christmas Santa arrived at the Deptford Mall. They all used to wait until Thanksgiving day. Now, that is late, because Christmas displays have been up at G Boys & BJ's since September. And all other retailers if they've haven't already, are preparing for the Christmas shopping season – with Black Friday deals being released weeks before the day – and none of it has to do with the birth of Christ.

In a couple of weeks we will begin the Advent Season – as we prepare for Christmas – the celebration of the birth of our Savior. We can say that all these things are distractions – the sports teams ... the stores ... all the advertising to get the best Christmas deals. Whether it is still the case, I don't know – but as a youth I used to deliver newspapers and the Thanksgiving Day edition was the largest of the year with all the ads for “Black Friday.”

But it is not only them. We might add all the special activities inside and outside the church. All these things tend to distract us from the real meaning of the season... the real meaning of Christmas. Now, you might rightly point out to me it is six weeks before Christmas and you're already talking about it. I plead guilty, but as we shall see, our Gospel lesson leads us to our topic.

In our Gospel lesson this morning from Matthew 22, we read the familiar account of those who wished to trap Jesus in his words. We know that the Pharisees wanted to get Jesus anyway they could and so they thought they would try to trap him in his words — so they sent their disciples and some others to try to entangle him. Notice how they set him up — or at least tried to — *“Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men.”*

They come up to him with this introductory statement — *“we know that you are true and only teach the way of God”* — obviously trying to catch him off-guard by thinking that he would have a swelled head, so that he would be trapped by his response to their question — which is: *“Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”*

This was one of those trick questions. If Jesus answers negatively — that they shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, then he could have been charged with treason, which was punishable by death. If he answers that it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, then he would have aroused the anger of the people who hated paying this tax. It seems as if he was in the proverbial “no win” situation — and that is the precise reason they asked it of Jesus.

Thankfully, our Savior knew what was in their hearts — he knew that they were out to trap him — and so he responds: *“But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites?”* You might think that the Pharisees would say to themselves – how did Jesus know our intent? He must be a prophet. But these Pharisees were so self-righteous it probably never crossed their minds – just like when they would not believe that Jesus gave sight to the man born blind and they would not believe and seeing the others that he had healed.

After being called hypocrites, Jesus then he goes on to answer their question — but in a way that which was totally unexpected to them ... and in a way that shut them up.

He says to them: *“Show Me the tax money. ‘So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?’ They said to Him, ‘Caesar’s.’ And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*

You see, the image of Caesar was on the coin, along with an inscription indicating him to be divine. Historians tell us that coins from that era had the head of Caesar on one side and then him seated on a throne on the other side, dressed as a high priest — making clear that he thought he was divine — that he was a god. So if Jesus said that one should not pay the tax to Caesar, he was in essence, questioning his “deity” — again, opening him to the charge of treason.

But Jesus’s answer is something that those who sought to entrap him certainly did not expect. He tells them that they are only to give Caesar that which was due to him. While he certainly was not giving approval to his designation as a god, he knew that because of Caesar — because of the government — that there was certain blessings that the people enjoyed — an orderly society, good roads, courts, etc. — and so therefore, there was a purpose for the tax, as much as the people hated paying it.

In addition Jesus was acknowledging that those in authority were place there by God. As we read in the book of Romans 13:1,2 & 5-7: *“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves ... Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”*

So Jesus is recognizing the authority of Caesar. At the same time, though Jesus is acknowledging that there is an even higher authority than Caesar — and that is God. The one true and only God — whom the Pharisees and their followers sarcastically said was the way that Jesus was teaching — was Sovereign over all — and therefore He was to be accorded those things which were due to Him — honor, glory, praise, thanksgiving, etc.

We read the response to the answer that Jesus gave: *“When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.”* They had not expected this answer — and in spite of themselves and their purpose — they marveled — and simple went away. The wisdom of Jesus silenced them — and they went their way — because they did not follow and serve the true and living God.

As we compare scripture with scripture — and we consider our Epistle lesson from Philippians 3, we see the words of Jesus reinforced where we read: *“Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that*

*they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame; who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”*

Notice the words — “*For our citizenship is in heaven...*” This is what Jesus was telling those who came to him — yes, he is saying, I realize that you have to pay taxes to Caesar — but remember, those who follow me are ultimately under a higher authority — that of God. And therefore they were to give unto God the things that belong to God.

As much as we get involved here in our earthly lives... as much as we are concerned with what is happening around us... as much as we want to participate with the rest of society, those all around us — such as with sports and Christmas — we must never lose sight of the fact that as Christians, our citizenship is in heaven. Yes, we can look around us — and participate in most of the things that society does — these are temporal blessings from God — but we are set our minds primarily on heavenly things — not earthly things.

We know that as Christians we have been the recipients of multitude of blessings from God — we have forgiveness of sin... we have access to the Father... we have the privilege of prayer — of coming boldly before the throne of grace... we can have the peace that passes understanding... but one of the primary blessings as Christians is that we have a one-way ticket stamped “heaven” — we have a place reserved for us that will result in our being in the presence of God — and so that is where our focus should be.

But, even more than that — we are currently citizens of heaven even while residing here on earth. Yes, we are residents of Cherry Hill, Mount Laurel, or what ever community we live in, we are residents of the New Jersey, and citizens of the United States with all its benefits and blessings — but as Christians, our primary citizenship is in heaven — and that is something that no one can take away from us.

We read in 1 Peter 1:3,4, words that we studied last year: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you...*” *reserved in heaven for you...* reserved in heaven for you and me — what a glorious thought. We are just passing through this world on our way to heaven.

So, what is our response to that? What do we do with the fact that our primary citizenship is in heaven?

We can follow the sports teams and rejoice when they win and be sad when they lose. But our whole lives should not revolve around them and if they win or lose.

And we think about the season that we are about to enter — the Advent season, followed by the season of Christmas. It is very easy for us to lose focus — to get involved by the consumer aspects of the season — and forget the real reason for the season.

Some of you might remember the Cabbage Patch dolls that were a big thing a number of years ago. To this day I remember a news report with a woman in tears because she couldn't get one for her daughter and she said that it just would not be Christmas without one.

We can get so involved in gift buying, decorating, etc — that we forget that we are celebrating the birth of our Savior — the Lord Jesus Christ... and even more... we are remembering the birth of the one who was born to die for our sins.

For the non-Christian — the season is an end to itself — it is a time for gift giving, carols, decorating — and all the other things that we associate with Christmas — which there is nothing wrong with, in and of itself — if we don't forget — as I said, the real reason.

We know that we love and serve a Sovereign God — one who is in complete control. And as I said on other occasions — whoever is on the “Throne” as it were, is there because it is His divine and perfect will. So, while some can be upset at who is in charge — and while we rightly can be concerned — we should be thankful that we know the God who is control — and given him the honor, praise and glory due his name.

There are many other aspects our lives — in our families, our schools, our jobs, our neighborhoods where this principle can be applied. But we must be careful — if you've ever heard the saying that someone “is so heavenly minded they are no earthly good.” We must never forget that God has placed us here for a purpose — to be a witness to him and a blessing to others. And so we must never completely separate ourselves from the world — but simply put it in its rightful place.

Because while there are many temporal aspects of our lives — ultimately, we know that our citizenship is in heaven — and therefore, we need to give unto God the things that belong to him.