

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius

A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 19, 2014

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Imperial Rome was vehemently hated by the occupied Jewish state. But in all fairness, the Romans were generally more interested in *money* than in confrontation, combat and glory. When it conquered, Rome made peace on reasonable terms. It built up the local economy and plugged it into the imperial trade network. Then Imperial Rome did what any other service-providing government would do. *It began to collect taxes.*

Some people think the tax issue in today's gospel puts the spotlight on two irreconcilable outlooks: Rome's interest in money and the Jewish interest in allegiance to God. But in fact *both* the Romans and the Jews were interested in money. The very people who came to question Jesus were involved in the Roman taxation system up to their eyeballs. Our Lord saw this for what it is and He let them have it! "Why put Me to the test, you hypocrites?"

One of the many ways Christ suffers is by enduring the snares and pretenses of sinners. For Almighty God this must be boring beyond what we can imagine. Not only did the crowd contrive to trap Jesus into controversy between Rome and Judaism, but it also approached the Lord with flattery. *Just like the Devil!* The people said, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man." What the Pharisees *didn't* know was the true nature of the One to Whom they spoke. God looks past the words to the heart. Simply put, you cannot con the Lord! As Saint John's Gospel tells us of Christ, "He knew what was in man; He needed no one to tell Him." That is the very foundation of whatever relationship is ever going to be built between our souls and Our Heavenly Father. *God knows us better than we know ourselves.*

Christ Jesus died for us and found it well worthwhile. But He suffers when we casually measure Him by ourselves. He suffers whenever in prayer we ask to be excused from some hardship that will strengthen us. He suffers whenever we presume on His character of love and mercy. He suffers whenever we accept God's providence as a matter of course while putting ourselves in harm's way. Christ suffers when we attempt to trade off our church work against our serious sins, or when we plead our good resolutions and make our promises in the absence of true contrition and sorrow for having offended His great love for us. In any and all of

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these ways we are tempting God. Of the Pharisees it says Jesus was aware of their malice. That is fair warning. The Lord Jesus does not find you and me so terribly hard to figure out!

Those Pharisees professed God's holy religion. We have that in common with them. But *theirs* became a religion of all form and no spirit, a matter of externals without a deep searching after God. That can be a root problem for Catholics. Dissent from Catholic truth is not an academic matter! Dissent eventually finds its expression in deviant and aberrant behavior. Why is that? It is because those who pervert the standard of our religion wind up not knowing God but only *their ideas of God*. That is when The Ten Commandments become The Ten Suggestions! No one is exempt: hierarchy or laity.

It is said the Pharisees had heard the Gospel. When their confrontation with Jesus was finished, perhaps they admired the way the Lord had avoided the trap they had set for Him. What a wasted opportunity that was! We would hope that having *wondered* at Christ they would follow Him. Having *marveled* they would have submitted to His sovereign and gracious authority. But no! What happened instead is sad and predictable. The Gospel says they marveled *and went their way*. Please God it is not so with us. Rather, when we hear the Gospel, guided by His wisdom, and submitting to His power, *we will go His way* and not ours.