

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
October 18, 2020

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Thanks to Hollywood we think of ancient Rome as chock full of depravity, brutality, and intrigue. Movies about Caligula and Nero made lasting, if false, impressions. Most historians tell us the Romans were generally more interested in *money* than in combat and glory. When it conquered, Rome made peace on reasonable terms, built up the local economy, and plugged it into the imperial trade network. And then Imperial Rome did what every other government providing services would do and has always done. *It began to collect taxes.*

Some people think the tax issue brought to Our Lord's attention showed the collision of irreconcilable outlooks: Rome's interest in money and Jewish interest in allegiance to God. But in fact, *both Rome and Israel were interested in money.* The very people who questioned Jesus were involved, up to their eyeballs, in the Roman taxation system. And the Lord knew it. "Why put Me to the test, you hypocrites." That sounds tame by the standards of today's crude invective! But the Son of God was letting them have it.

Right here we see one of the many ways Christ suffers. He has to endure the snares and pretenses of sinners. And for Almighty God this must be so boring! Not only did the ancient Jews contrive to trap Jesus in controversy between Rome and Judaism. That was bad enough. But they also approached the Lord with *flattery*. Just like the Devil! The Jews said, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man." But what the Pharisees *didn't* know was the true nature of the One to Whom they were speaking. God looks past the word to the heart. Saint John's Gospel says of Jesus, "He knew what was in man; He needed no one to tell Him." In every day speak that means: "You can't con Jesus!" And that is the very foundation of whatever relationship is 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* when we take for granted His loving and merciful character. *He suffers* whenever we accept God's providence as a matter of course while putting ourselves in harm's way. In any and

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

What we have in common with those Pharisees is we profess God's holy religion. But *theirs* became a religion all of form and no spirit, a matter of externals without a deep searching after God. And that can be a root problem for us. When we dissent from Catholic truth we cannot call it an academic matter. Dissent eventually finds its expression in deviant and aberrant behavior. Why? Because those who pervert the standard of Christ wind up not knowing God but only *their ideas of God*.

We are told the Pharisees heard the Lord. And when the confrontation was over, perhaps they admired the way Jesus had avoided the trap they set for Him. But what a tragic waste that is! We would hope that having wondered at Christ they would then follow Him; having marveled, they would have submitted to His sovereign and gracious authority. But no! What happened was sad but predictable. The Gospel says they marveled and went their way.

Please God it will never be that way with us. When we hear the Gospel, guided by His Wisdom, and submitting to His power, we will go *His* way, and not ours.