

October 22, 2023 Sermon Manuscript

Matthew 22:15-22 (NIV)

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Resisting the Frameworks of Worldly Powers

The good news for our hearts this morning is that through faith in Christ we have become citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world, where we are not beholden to the the ways worldly powers frame current issues and events - we mustn’t be - but must instead be rigorous to engage all worldly matters like the Lord, where we value the wellbeing of all people (of every tribe & nation) and seek to bring about change through sacrificial love.

How do we remain faithful to Christ in this age of social media and 24 hour news cycles? It seems like everywhere we turn we are bombarded with both news & perspectives about current events & issues from the global to the national to the local scales. And yet, these news and perspectives - and hot takes - are never without *some* bias - and 99 times out of 100 in the case of politicians and the TV and radio talking heads the overriding motives are maintaining power and making money, respectively. Some of them may even invoke God or scripture to persuade us - seeking to be faithful to God - onto their side, and yet often the situation is not really being framed in accordance with what is most important to God, which is the well being of all peoples - and the options for how to respond almost *never* include Jesus’ way of sacrificial love.

This is precisely the dynamic confronting Jesus in this morning’s gospel passage from Matthew 22. But, as we’ll see, Jesus recognizes the manipulation for what it is and refuses to cooperate. Instead, He teaches us we are to “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” So, it will take me a little longer than usual this morning, by we’re going to get serious in unpacking what Jesus really meant by this statement, which I would summarize as good news that through faith in Christ we have become citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world, where we are not beholden to the the ways worldly powers frame current issues and events - we mustn’t be - but must instead be rigorous to engage all worldly matters like the Lord, where we value the wellbeing of all people (of every tribe & nation) and seek to bring about change through sacrificial love.

So, let’s begin with *how* the Pharisees and Herodians are attempting to trap Jesus here with the question they pose to Him. It’s somewhat of a surprise that they these two groups are collaborating, because the Herodians were Jews who were sympathetic to the occupying Romans and the rule of King Herod, while the Pharisees tended to be more aligned with a group of Jews called Zealots, revolutionaries who sought to undermine and even overthrow the Roman occupation of Israel - and certainly expected God’s promised Messiah to do so. Therefore, when it came to the issue of the taxes Rome levied upon the people in Jerusalem, the Herodians would’ve believed in paying them, while the Zealots and Pharisees would’ve been opposed to it.

But, you know what they say: “the enemy of my enemy is...” - what? - “my friend.” Even though the Pharisees and Herodians both wanted to get rid of Jesus for *different* reasons, they see in their

disagreement over taxes an opportunity to do *just that*. So they come to Jesus together, and in verse 16 they begin by flattering Him, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.” But then they ask Him to settle the issue they disagree about, saying, “Tell us... your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

Now the reason this is a trap is because they know if Jesus says it is lawful (if He condones payment of this tax), then they can frame Jesus as sympathetic and even supportive of Roman occupation, which would alienate the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people, who viewed Roman rule as oppressive and were at least sympathetic to the Zealot’s position that the tax shouldn’t be paid. But if Jesus says Jews need not pay this tax, then the Herodians could reported this to the authorities and Jesus could be arrested by the Romans as a revolutionary seeking to undermine their rule.

So Jesus’ opponents are seeking to entrap Him by framing the whole issue of Roman occupation into a simple binary choice - you either support paying taxes and are pro-Rome or you support not paying taxes and are anti-Rome. But Jesus refuses to cooperate and will not answer the question based on their framing of the issue.

Instead, He asks them to bring Him the denarius, the Roman coin used for paying the tax. And the denarius at this time had an image of Tiberius, who was the Roman emperor at the time. And the inscription read “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of Divine Augustus.” The Romans claimed his Father Caesar Augustus was divine.¹ So they bring Jesus the coin and in verse 20 He asks, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” And they reply ²¹ “Caesar’s.” So he says to them, “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Now, folks have often mistaken this statement to be dividing reality into two realms: where God’s authority is over the sacred and spiritual - the religious - and the worldly powers of Empire (nation states and governments) are sovereign over political matters, such as taxation and roads and healthcare, like you see on diagram A (from *Christians in Politics*) on your insert.² According to this understanding, Jesus and His salvation has little to do with political, economic, and social realities for humans, he’s just here to save us spiritually, to forgive our sins and take us to heaven when we die, but not weigh in on political concerns.

But this is absolutely *not* what Jesus is saying, as the big red X on the diagram is meant to indicate. Indeed, Matthew scholars Jeannine Brown & Kyle Roberts explain³ why Jesus cannot possibly be understood as saying that there could ever be any political realm or situation that is separate from His reign.

The **first** reason is because no one in Jesus’ day thought this way.⁴ As Andy Flanagan, director of the organization *Christians in Politics*, explains, in Jesus’ day the people had no notion of the religious and political realms being separate. For everyone listening to Jesus say these words in the first century, they would’ve understood the spiritual and political to be entirely interconnected. And this was not *only* the case for Jews, but for Romans as well, who very clearly saw the political and spiritual as intertwined, as evidenced by them stamping the claim that their emperor was *divine* on every coin.



¹ And the opposite side read “High Priest”

² See “Jesus and Politics” by Andy Flanagan of Christians In Politics <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=IRNnIYBI3A>

³ *Matthew* by Jeannine K. Brown & Kyle Roberts, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

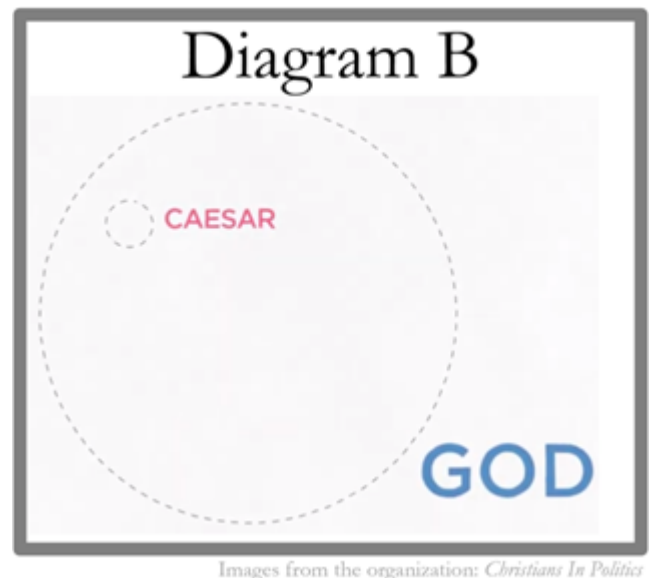
⁴ More than a thousand years before Jesus came around more than a thousand years before Jesus came, the people of Israel had - to God’s disappointment - asked Him for a king (1 Samuel 8).

Second, the salvation Jesus' brought to earth was clearly meant to have political implications.

- This is obvious all the way back at Jesus' birth, when King Herod was upset to hear that a "messiah had been born" and slayed every boy in Israel under the age of two to try to eliminate Him.
- It can be seen in Jesus choosing to describe the salvation He brought as a 'Kingdom': "the Kingdom of God," "the Kingdom of God". There's a version of the New Testament that recently came out which translates that phrase "Kingdom of God" as the "Empire of God"⁵ because that's what the Greek really means in today's terms: it's when we live as if God - not worldly powers - are the ultimate authority over all.
- [[Jesus also chose twelve Jews as His disciples, who He promised would sit on twelve thrones, representing the reconstitution of the twelve tribes of Israel.⁶ And He had them arrange His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which Matthew says fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah about Israel's coming King.⁷]]

So, all of this is to say that any suggestion that Jesus or the salvation He brings is *nonpolitical* or only spiritual - or that His words about Caesar in today's passage grant worldly powers ultimate authority over *any* realm - reflects a radical misunderstanding Jesus' ministry and its implications for the Christian life.

To the contrary, what Jesus *is saying* in "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" is that Caesar - representing the empires and governments of the world - *does* have a small delegated area of authority, but it is within the context of God's overall authority, as you see in diagram B.⁸ As Psalm 24 (below the diagram) says, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the compass of the world and those who dwell therein."⁹ And as Jesus would tell Pontius Pilate (in John 19): "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."¹⁰ So what the second half of Jesus' statement in today's passage rejects is the idea that there is *any worldly concern or situation* God doesn't have an opinion about. As Flanagan says, "God has an opinion on everything, including taxes, because He is in authority over all of it."



The good news is that through faith in Christ we have become citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world, where we are not beholden to the the ways worldly powers frame current issues and events - we mustn't be - but must instead be rigorous to engage all worldly matters like the Lord, where we value the wellbeing of all people (of every tribe & nation) and seek to bring about change through sacrificial love. As the scripture from Philippians shows,¹¹ once we are in Christ, we are citizens of *His* Kingdom - "our citizenship is in Heaven," in the family of God - which makes any earthly allegiance and citizenship we may have *entirely secondary* to our allegiance to Christ. And this means that we must engage every

⁵ Scot MCKnight

⁶ Mt 19:28

⁷ Mt 21:5

⁸ Flanagan: "He is the supreme creator who is reconciling *all things* in heaven and earth to himself."

⁹ Ps 24:1 BCP Version

¹⁰ Jn 19:11a

¹¹ Philippians 3:20-21 (NIV)

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

concern and situation in accordance with what is important to Jesus, but also in the manner that Jesus went about it. So let's address those one at a time.

And when it comes to **what is important to Jesus** - important to God - we actually get a hint about this *in* His statement about Caesar. After Jesus' questioners acknowledge that the image on the coin is Caesar's, He says "Then, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's." But then He follows that with "and (give back) to God what is God's," which raises the question: what (or whom) has God put his image on? What (or whom) has God put his image on? And the answer, of course, is us, humankind. In Genesis chapter 1, the triune God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...." And the writer of Genesis concludes, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Gen 1:26-27). So what God has given to us that He cares most about us stewarding well is our life and the lives of others as His image bearers. We are responsible for our life and the way our actions impact the lives of others; Cain would famously ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?"¹² And God's resounding answer throughout the rest of scripture is "Yes!"

So the overriding value for us - as we are confronted with current issues & events in our in our local community life, in national politics, and in geopolitics - our overriding concern as citizens of God's kingdom is to be the same as God's, which is the well-being of all people, of human beings - no matter their nationality or ethnicity or religion or lifestyle or class, they are all God's image bearers.

However, what is *equally important* is that **the way we go about** seeking for the well-being of others reflects the way of Jesus as well. A few weeks ago I was talking about how we as Christians are privileged to know and believe God's commands from scripture around moral law. And so, of course, if other people knew and lived by God's commands, it would be better for their well-being. But, many Christians have been misled to believe that the best way to pursue such well-being for others is to employ the worldly power of the state & the rule of law to impose Christian morals on the non-Christian citizens, to coerce them to abide by Christian morals. Thus, we have, for example, the Christian Nationalist movement, which pursues the myth of a "Christian nation"¹³ by pursuing legislation that reflects certain commands in scripture.¹⁴ But one reason we know Christian Nationalism is a heresy - in addition to the fact that Jesus never called us to seek for a Christian nation; so I guess *another* reason - is because Jesus makes clear that His kingdom is not achieved through the exercise of worldly power of coercion; as He also told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders..."¹⁵ The way of Jesus shows His kingdom is not achieved through the exercise of worldly powers of violence or coercion, but through loving sacrifice.

As citizens of the Kingdom of God, our king is Jesus, who established His rule through dying on a cross, through valuing others to the point of giving His life as a ransom for them.¹⁶ And, like we've been talking about in recent weeks, as we learn to look to God and receive His care for the needs we have for security, belonging, and value, this will free us up to function differently: for our hearts to love others sacrificially like Jesus did. The good news is that through faith in Christ we have become citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world, where we are not beholden to the the ways worldly powers frame current issues and events - we mustn't be - but must instead be rigorous to engage all worldly matters like the Lord, where we value the wellbeing of all people (of every tribe & nation) and seek to bring about change through sacrificial love.

And in today's passage Jesus actually models for us that one key for living this way is to **resist the way worldly power often insists on framing situations** in overly simplistic terms conducive to one

¹² Gen 4:9

¹³ Myth because god never encouraged us to seek to make a nation 'Christian', but rather to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).

¹⁴ I say 'certain commands' because they usually ignore all the scriptures about economic fairness and redistribution of wealth and just focus on issues of sexuality.

¹⁵ John 18:36

¹⁶ Mt 20:28

party's political or financial interests, *rather* than framing things in terms where equally valuing all human beings and their flourishing is preeminent. So, they ask Jesus if He "supports paying taxes to Rome or not," but if His primary concern is human flourishing, neither choice is satisfactory. So he refuses to answer the question on their terms and reframes the discussion by asserting - albeit cryptically - that God's concern is for the well-being of all people.

But what the worldly powers sought to do to Jesus here happens to us all the time. The powers of the world asks us if we're in favor of:

- Closed borders or open borders?
- Are we pro-gay or anti-gay?
- Are we pro-abortion or anti-abortion?
- Are we pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian?
- Are we conservative or liberal?

The problem, of course, is not that God doesn't have an opinion on the topics these binaries involve; the problem is these all frame issues according to the values of worldly power values not the values of the Kingdom. Indeed, all of these false dichotomies are meant to be able to easily categorize us as either enemies or a friends of some worldly power's interest and to make us forget that *we are friends of God*.

Why do we feel like we must accept the binary choices that worldly power is constantly presenting us with? If we want to remain faithful to Christ, we're going to have to do the hard work of *resisting* these dichotomies based on the worldly values of power & control - we're going to have to get used to responding with phrases like "It's complicated" or "I'm not sure yet" - and seek instead to do the hard work of discerning what sacrificial love looks like. And what it looks like will rarely fit simplistically into the binaries of worldly power, of Democrat or Republican, of Israel or Palestine.

[[Now, I know I'm going long. Some of yall may be thinking twice about this pastoral appreciation thing. But I wanna address this way in the middle east.]] ~~You know, when it comes to this war in the Middle East~~ - just to pick *one* matter that's been in the forefront for all of us recently - when it comes to this war in the Middle East worldly power wants to make us feel compelled to take a side. Don't they? But must we choose? Why couldn't we instead admit our absolute powerlessness to do anything about it and instead hit our knees and lament for everyone involved on both sides who is having their lives and families ripped apart or who is captive to genocidal ideology? The good news is that through faith in Christ we have become citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world, where we are not beholden to the the ways worldly powers frame current issues and events - we mustn't be - but must instead be rigorous to engage all worldly matters like the Lord, where we value the wellbeing of all people (of every tribe & nation) and seek to bring about change through sacrificial love.

But maybe we can also ask God to cultivate in us an imagination for how to love where He would have us. You know, while the worldly powers responded to the Hamas' terrorist attack by cranking up the war machine, there is a Roman Catholic clergyman in Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Pope Francis' representative in the Holy Land offered to exchange *himself* for Israeli children taken hostage by Hamas and held in Gaza. Did you see this? If you read the news report, while he admitted that Hamas is hard to get in touch with, he said (quote), "I am ready for an exchange, anything, if this can lead to freedom, to bring the children home. No problem. There is total willingness on my part."¹⁷ And *that*, my friends, is the Kingdom of God: valuing the well-being of others (who aren't even of his religion or tribe) and seeking for it through loving sacrifice.

Now, is every Christian in the world called to do this? No. We all have different responsibilities and spheres of authority. But here you have someone local to the conflict, who we know has no wife or children he is responsible to, and importantly - he has authority there - he's the Roman Catholic Church's rep *in Jerusalem*. This is the Kingdom of God breaking in - this is the stuff of turn the other cheek,

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jerusalem-catholic-patriarch-offers-be-exchanged-gaza-hostages-2023-10-16/>

praying for your enemies, going the extra mile with your oppressor, that makes those who only have an imagination for worldly power go, “Huh?”

Now, we may sneer cynically and say, “What difference does it make? Hamas won’t even take his phone call.” I understand. But what if it hadn’t just been Cardinal Pizzaballa?

If you’ll indulge me, just take a moment to imagine if those in power on either side of the Palestinian conflict had taken this posture of loving sacrifice. For example, what if the leaders of Israel - what if Netanyahu - had offered to trade places with the hostages. You don’t think that would’ve changed the dynamics of the conflict? Or what if before the war, leaders of Hamas repented of their vow to wipe Jews off the face of the earth and offered to sacrifice some of their own interests to improve the conditions for the Palestinians being oppressed by Israel’s system of apartheid in Gaza & their Palestinian re-settlements?

But worldly power has no imagination for sacrificial love; their only tools are violence and coercion. And this is why, if we seek to take the way of Christ’s kingdom seriously, we should be prepared for those who are stuck in the idolatry of worldly power to think we’re weird or absolutely nuts. Sorta like [[Peter when the soldiers are there to arrest Jesus and Peter strikes one of them and he tells them to put away the sword. Peter must’ve been thinkin, “You gotta be kidding me!” Or]] in today’s passage, after Jesus responded, verse 22 says they were amazed - they didn’t know what to do with him - so they left Him and went away.

The good news is that through faith in Christ we have become citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world, where we are not beholden to the the ways worldly powers frame current issues and events - we mustn’t be - but must instead be rigorous to engage all worldly matters like the Lord, where we value the wellbeing of all people (of every tribe & nation) and seek to bring about change through sacrificial love.

Will we repent of living captive to the ways and perspectives of worldly power, and instead be uncompromising in seeking to live into our identity in the Kingdom of God; resisting the ways of worldly power and pursuing an imagination for how we might stand in solidarity with the poor and destitute and underprivileged, those exploited by worldly power, by loving them sacrificially?

Will we trust Jesus enough to forsake worldly power and stand only upon Him? Because all other ground is sinking sand.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.