

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Test of Loyalty

Matthew 22:15-22

Religion and politics. Though these two topics are often banned from dinner table conversation, the Bible has no trouble raising these subjects. Everywhere you look in the Scriptures, someone or some group is trying to navigate through territory where the reign of God and the realm of earthly rulers are interwoven. In today's text from Matthew, Jesus himself is the target of an attempted trap where both the Lord and Caesar get brought into the conversation.

A small party of religious leaders approach Jesus with a question about taxes, always a political hot potato. But before they get to the question, they begin with some flattery, part of their strategy to back Jesus into a corner. Then comes the loaded question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" Keep in mind that taxes were more than just a source of revenue for the government. They were also a means of subjugating and exploiting people, keeping them under imperial control. So if Jesus answers yes, pay the tax, he'll alienate the nationalists who are resisting Rome, and if he answers no, he'll be defying Caesar and making himself subject to arrest by the Romans. Right there at the volatile intersection of religion and politics, the trap is laid. Now the religious leaders can step back and watch Jesus step into it.

But Jesus comes up with a third option that defies their either/or thinking. He tells them to show him the legal tender used to pay the tax. Notice that they don't have to go far. They have some of Caesar's currency right there in the sacred precincts of the Temple. It's a coin with the emperor's face on it, along with an inscription stating his name, Tiberius, and the name of his father, Augustus, the first emperor to be deified. How ironic that in holy space devoted to the worship of the Lord, the one true God, there's this currency bearing the name of a ruler who is regarded as a god. No wonder so many Jews considered it blasphemy.

But it just goes to show how most of God's people, including the Pharisees and the Herodians, have been participating in Caesar's economy, either willingly or because they have no choice. It's not as if the Pharisees and the Herodians can approach the issue of taxation from a neutral and uncorrupted position. The Pharisees were good at making deals with Rome even as they opposed its rule. And the Herodians were even more overt supporters of the Roman regime. Both groups were in bed with the Romans in order to pursue their interests. There was no shortage of political and religious maneuvering. Everybody had to make their compromises.

Jesus' answer, though, is different from a compromise. When asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?", Jesus doesn't simply split the difference and give each party some of what it wants. Instead of making a deal, Jesus makes them think. He stuns them into a recollection of who they are, in light of whose they are. After they identify the face on the coin, Jesus tells them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (v. 21). In one respect, this could be an indirect yes. Go ahead and pay taxes to the emperor. It's

not against the Torah. But there's more in play here than just taxation. According to Jesus, the coin bears the emperor's image, so return it to him. It came from him and belongs to him. But you, you bear God's image. You belong to God. This means that in every realm of life, you're faced with making distinctions and decisions about who owns you and where your ultimate loyalty lies.

Nothing magnifies and intensifies issues of loyalty like an election season. In just over two weeks, we'll go to the polls, either in-person or by mail. The coronavirus pandemic has changed many things about the process leading up to the election, but it hasn't changed the divisive dynamics that drive our political decision-making. We're still a deeply fragmented nation. The potency of the issues, and the tone of the debate, have driven us into competing camps where we spend a lot of our time listening only to others who already agree with us. And though social media has its benefits, it has also thrown fuel onto many of the political fires burning in our society. I can understand one author's wisdom when he says. "... I've held the strong conviction that the days around each national election should be dubbed National Stay Off Social Media Week. It seems apparent: as Americans, we love to hate. We have a strong tendency to demonize The Other."¹

Rather than demonizing one another, Jesus' answer to the taxation question calls us to view others, particularly those with whom you disagree, as individuals created and loved by God, made in his image, objects of his mercy in Christ. What matters most isn't whether they bear the inscription "Democrat," "Republican," "Liberal," "Conservative," "Biden Supporter," "Trump Supporter," whether they identify as red or blue, or whether they wear the sticker of a donkey or an elephant. The most decisive thing about them is that they bear the image of God, and that you, as a fellow image-bearer, relate to them with the kind of humility, decency, and respect that's consistent with being a follower of Jesus.

In the Disney movie *Toy Story*, Woody (a plush toy cowboy) confronts Buzz Lightyear (a toy astronaut) with the fact that he is only an action figure and not really a space hero. At one point earlier in the film, Woody shouts, "You're not a space ranger! You're an action figure—a child's plaything." After failing in an attempt to fly, Buzz realizes the truth of Woody's statement. Sad and disillusioned, he hangs his head in resignation, declaring, "I'm just a stupid, little, insignificant toy." Later, Woody tries to comfort Buzz by underscoring the love of the boy who owns them both. "You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest, and it's not because you're a space toy; it's because you're his." Buzz lifts his foot and sees a label affixed to the bottom of his little shoe. There in permanent black ink is the name of the little boy to whom he belongs. When Buzz sees the image of his owner, he breaks into a smile and takes on a new determination.²

Knowing to whom you belong makes a difference. It makes a difference in how you see yourself, and in how you see others. It shapes your loyalties, and how you live out those loyalties in the challenges and complexities of each day. This includes your political loyalties. When Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," he doesn't mean that politics and public policy are a separate realm of life from which we as God's people should separate ourselves, and instead focus exclusively on "spiritual" matters. On the contrary, the affairs of government, at all levels, is deeply spiritual business. Even though we should never completely identify any particular earthly kingdom with the kingdom of God, we do believe that God can be present and at work through the decisions and actions of those who hold authority. In other words, the reign of God embraces all aspects of life.

In Jesus' time, that primarily meant obeying laws and paying taxes. In our own time, in the context of a democracy, giving to Caesar can have even broader implications, because we have even more avenues for participating in political processes, through communication with our representatives, running for office, peaceful protest, and informed voting. Being faithful to God can involve all these, and other forms of civil action. But we always do so within the conviction that obedience to the government must be secondary to allegiance to God. I like the way one author has captured it when she says, "When God's people stand, they sing not 'Hail to the Chief' but hallelujah."³

During the coronavirus pandemic, we've seen this distinction between God and Caesar play out in cases where churches have argued that government restrictions on worship gatherings hinder the free exercise of religion. In one respect, churches want to acknowledge and respect the government's authority to establish and enforce guidelines and laws that protect the public's health. They want to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But in another respect, churches want to give to God what is God's by being faithful in gathering, in-person, as an expression of what it means to be people who belong first and foremost to God.

This doesn't mean that everyone who belongs to God through Christ will reach the same conclusions about who to vote for or which policies to support. I assume that I'm preaching to a congregation that reflects a lot of the ideological diversity of our country. You don't all have the same party affiliation or come down on the same side of the issues. But you do confess the same Lord, and you share the conviction that being made in God's image and redeemed in Christ binds you to each other in a fellowship that transcends party lines.

Remember that you belong to God, whose image you bear. When sin had disfigured that image, God sent Jesus, ruler of all, to redeem you and restore the divine image in you. By faith in him, you've become a citizen of the only kingdom that's eternal. So you and I have to stay on the alert for anyone or anything that tries to claim us, imprint its image on us, and demand our ultimate allegiance.

During election season, the temptation is even greater to make an idol out of our politics and our political leaders. Or to put it another way, to take the political story and make it our ultimate story. Author and teacher Scot McKnight has written:

At no time in my life have I seen the church more engaged in politics and more absorbed by a political story. I'm not referring here simply to Republican vs. Democrat or Conservative vs. Progressive. Rather, I mean the belief that what matters most is what happens in D.C. and if we get the right candidate elected America can be saved. Blogs, Facebook updates, Twitter posts and websites are tied together and double-knotted with this political narrative. It is so pervasive many don't even know it's running and ruining our public and private lives. Ask them about a candidate and their blood pressure pops or their mouth spews or their mind runs into the wall of exasperation [Italics his].⁴

Between now and November 3, there will be plenty more elevated blood pressure and heated rhetoric. Notice that instead of delivering a lengthy speech, Jesus himself captured the truth in one sentence: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." We're still learning and living our way into what that means for us. We know that part of what it means is to exercise our voting power, helping shape the lives of others through the leaders we elect to office. I emphasize that they are leaders, not saviors. And as we choose among them, may God help you and me to use our vote faithfully, in ways that respect the image of God in others and demonstrate love of neighbor.

Author J. R. Briggs quotes some sound and timely voting advice that can guide us in our discernment and could serve our country well. This person says:

I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them (1) to vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy, (2) to speak no evil of the person they voted against, and (3) to take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.⁵

Those aren't the words of a current candidate, a popular author, or a blogger with millions of followers. They were written by Methodist Church founder John Wesley in his journal on October 6, 1774—almost 250 years ago. May their enduring truth give us light as we give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

¹ J. R. Briggs, *The Sacred Overlap: Learning to Live Faithfully in the Space Between* [ePub Edition] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

² As summarized by Greg Asimakoupoulos. Preaching Today website. Accessed October 14, 2020 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/may/13058.html>>.

³ Jen Pollock Michel, *Surprised by Paradox: The Promise of And in an Either-Or World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019) 102.

⁴ Scot McKnight, "Christianity Tomorrow." Jesus Creed website. January 21, 2020. Accessed October 15, 2020 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/january/christianity-tomorrow.html#_ftn1>.

⁵ Quoted in Briggs, *The Sacred Overlap*.