



Pentecost 21A (Proper 24)

Sunday, October 18, 2026

RCL: [RCL] Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; **Matthew 22:15-22**

Opening Prayer |

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Context |

Throughout Matthew, Jesus's teaching underscores the importance of the Jewish tradition found in the law and the prophets. He testifies that he did not come to abolish, but to fulfill them (5:17-20).

Yet, there is a tension throughout the Gospel: a tension between this respect for Jewish tradition and the revelation that, in Jesus, God is interacting with humanity in a new way (cf. 12:6, 9:2-8). Jesus is frequently at odds with Pharisaic leaders over the proper interpretation of the Jewish law.

Today's reading shows one such interaction between Jesus and a group of Pharisees. The scene occurs in Jerusalem during the final week before Jesus's crucifixion. The narrative makes clear that Jerusalem will be dangerous territory for Jesus, yet his mission compels him to go there anyway. During his triumphant entry into the city, the crowds shout "Hosanna," meaning "save us" (21:1-11). Jesus creates further spectacle, in the Temple, when he overturns the tables of the money changers and drives out the buyers and sellers (21:12-17). Later, Jesus returns to the Temple again and teaches a series of parables (21:23-22:14). Today's reading comes during that same visit to the Temple.

Theological Reflection |

In the film *Return of the Jedi*, when the Rebel spaceships are about to attack the Death Star, the Rebel leader Admiral Ackbar realizes that they have been led into a trap by the evil Galactic Empire. His alarmed exclamation of “It’s a trap!” evolved into a popular online meme—one that would be appropriate to illustrate today’s gospel reading.

The scene opens with a group of Pharisees “plott[ing] to entrap [Jesus] in what he said” (v. 15). This is not the first time religious leaders have attempted to test Jesus, trying to get him to say something incriminating (cf. 16:1, 19:3). Here, they collude with some Herodians. Not much is known about this latter group, but they are likely a type of secular political party who supported the pro-Roman client king ruling Palestine.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were an unlikely pairing, as the Pharisees were typically critical of the Roman occupation, while the Herodians were active enablers and benefactors of it. But here they are united in their opposition to Jesus’s message concerning the Kingdom of Heaven.

The disciples of the Pharisees approach Jesus first with insincere flattery before asking whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor (vv. 16-18). At the time—not unlike in our time—taxes were a hotly debated topic. The Jewish people resented paying taxes to a far-off ruler who had stolen their land. Even worse: the Romans used the taxes not just as a source of revenue but as a means of further subjugation.

The Pharisees and Herodians attempt to trap Jesus with this question because they know that answering either yes or no will cause trouble for him. If he answers “No,” then he is guilty of advocating for disobeying Roman law. If he answers “Yes,” then he will surely lose the support of the Jewish masses, who resented the Romans and their taxes.

But Jesus is “aware of their malice” and avoids the trap, calling them out for testing him. He names them, in turn, as “hypocrites” (v. 18). Jesus exposes their hypocrisy by getting them to produce a denarius, a coin that represented about a typical day’s wage. The fact that they have the coin on hand shows that they are already participating in the very economic system they are questioning him about. Jesus doesn’t have a denarius on him.

A denarius had the emperor’s image engraved upon, it as well as his title, which claimed divinity. By getting them to produce the coin and read its inscription, Jesus is further exposing the hypocrisy of his questioners: right here, in the Temple, with this coin, they are violating the commandment against graven images (Exodus 20:4).

In the end, Jesus doesn’t answer the question about paying the emperor’s tax. (He has already pointed out the exploitive nature of the tax earlier, in Matthew 17:24-27, yet he still paid the tax with a coin that Peter takes from a fish’s mouth.) In this exchange, he

acknowledges the reality of Rome's political power and that not everyone willingly participates in the economy of the empire; they simply have no choice.

However, Jesus's answer does not grant moral authority to the emperor. In Jewish religious thought, foreign kings could only rule Israel if God allowed it. The emperor may be able to tax the people, but he does not hold power over God. Jesus says to give "to God the things that are God's" (v. 21). And as Psalm 24:1 reveals, "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it."

Jesus's teaching here is a reminder that even though the emperor may hold political power, it pales in comparison to the power of God. This little coin with the emperor's image on it is nothing compared to all that belongs to God. The emperor's image may appear on the coin, but every human bears God's image (Gen 1:26). Even the emperor's face on the coin bears tribute to his maker.

Jesus's answer about taxes leaves discernment up to the individual about how to participate in the structures of this world, but it also offers the strong reminder that we are called to live according to the values of the kingdom of heaven. Our whole lives should be given to God (Romans 12:1).

Jesus's questioners leave "amazed," but the text is ambiguous about whether or not the plotters' trap worked in the end (v. 22). Perhaps his answer did lose Jesus support from among the crowds, because later that week, the same crowd who hailed him at his arrival in Jerusalem will shout for him to be crucified (Matt 27:22-23).

Jesus *is* a revolutionary, but his revolution is not about stoking political revolt. Jesus is moving toward the cross, and his revolution only comes through love (Matt 27: 32-54).

Discussion Questions

- When have you felt trapped in systems or situations in which you had no choice but to participate, but which troubled you with their morality?
- Recall a time when you struggled to discern how to live out your faith in the world. What cleared your vision?
- You bear God's image. What parts of your life do you need to commit or recommit to God?

Faith in Practice

Make a list of things that belong to you or that you consider "yours." How might it change your understanding to think of these things as belonging to God? Is there anything you would want to change in your daily life? How does this shift in perspective invite you to think about stewardship or charitable giving?

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