

Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 24A
October 18, 2026
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

“Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.”

Brilliant! Positively brilliant!
With one turn of a phrase Jesus deflects a question
that could have condemned him
in either the eyes of the Jews or the eyes of the Romans.

This was not an easy situation.
Even today the question of paying taxes
is often an issue for various religious persons.
The church is generally exempt, but not completely.
But members of the church are not exempt.
But the situation for Jesus was not an easy one.

In the first place, the men who walked up to Jesus
wouldn’t have been caught dead together in any other circumstance: Pharisees and
Herodians.

The Pharisees were observant Jews who adhered to the Torah,
the Law, who hated the Romans.

The Herodians were followers of the puppet king Herod,
who believed that cooperation with the Romans
was the best way to prosper.

And here they are together
and they seem to be cooperating with each other by asking Jesus:
“Is it lawful to pay the taxes to the Romans?”

It would seem each group was there to witness
for the two sides of the question.
If Jesus said it was lawful to pay taxes,
he would offend the Pharisees
because they didn’t believe that was true.
Even though they paid the tax,
they didn’t think it was right according to the Torah.
If Jesus said it was unlawful to pay taxes,

he would be convicted of treason by his own words
because Roman law said it was treason to refuse to pay taxes.
So here we have Jesus, seemingly between a rock and a hard place.

It's not an easy situation, practically speaking.
If the Jews don't pay the tax, they will suffer
because Rome has soldiers there to make sure taxes are paid.
But the taxes go to support the empire, and the empire means order, roads, education, public services.
Things had not been so good, from the standpoint of the civil world, since the Romans came to town,
and after the Roman Empire collapsed,
the world would not be in as good a shape
until the late Nineteenth Century.

But the Roman state was brutal.
Anyone guilty of treason would be hung or crucified.
By comparison, our government is humane and beneficent.
But various people argue about how our tax money is spent,
so: Is it lawful to pay taxes?

Jesus' response is measured.
"Show me coin used for the tax."
There's nothing in the text that says Jesus actually touched the coin, so I can infer that Jesus just looked at it.

"Whose head is this and whose title?" Jesus asks.
"The emperor's," they reply.

This might not seem to be important to us.
We're used to seeing George Washington's head on quarters,
or Jefferson's on a nickel, or Lincoln on a penny, while they last.
But the head of the emperor on the Roman coin was telling.

To pay the Roman tax, you had to buy a Roman gold coin.
You couldn't pay with any other coin.
That's why there were money changers.
Just like going to the bank and exchanging your currency
before you go to another country.

But there was more to it than just changing currency.
The emperor's head was surrounded by a Latin phrase:
Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Pontifex Maximus,
which means Tiberius Caesar,
august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.

The Romans were very tolerant of other religions.
They just required people to pay homage

to the God emperor once a year.
When a Jew handed over a Roman gold coin,
it amounted to paying homage to the emperor as a divine being.

Now what is the first commandment:
no worshipping other gods, and the second: no idols.

For a Jew, to hold this coin was an act of idolatry.
To pay homage to the emperor was an act of worship.
By using this coin, a Jew would be ascribing to the saying on it:
the emperor is the son of the divine Augustus, in other words, Tiberius is the son of god.
And that is blasphemy.

So Jesus dodges a bullet here.
In the words of the King James version:
“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.”

That was easy, wasn’t it? The Pharisees and the Herodians walk off, scratching their heads in amazement,
and Jesus goes back to his teaching,
and we can go back to bifurcating our lives.

But not so fast. I ask you, what is God’s?
This is a problem.
Dividing up the world.
Dividing our lives into that which belongs to the power of this world and that which belongs to God is not so easy.
Caesar has his head embossed on the coin,
but where is the image of God embossed.

The Pharisees and the Herodians left too soon.
They bought the answer too easily.
Come back. We need to talk about this.
Imagine if they had not been so anxious to trick Jesus
and had truly been interested in discussing the issue.
What if they had not gotten up and walked off.

What if we take this question seriously,
and don’t just skip over the answer as if it were obvious.
Does this truly mean that some things belong to those in power
and other things belong to God?

The temptation is to separate the world we live into categories:
God’s here and not there; God’s with us, but not with them;

It’s OK if I do some things on weekdays,
as long as it’s not on Sundays.

We seem to break the world up into pieces
and assign God's presence to some of the pieces, but not to others.

Jesus was a Jew, and every day of his life he prayed the *Shema*, morning and night: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One ... and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

When we pray the thanksgiving for the offering each week we say: "All things come of thee O Lord,
and of thine own have we given thee."

We acknowledge, just as Jews do, that everything belongs to God. When we sort through our lives and our belongings
and try to figure out what belongs to us and what belongs to God, we're really deceiving ourselves.

It's all God's because it all came from God.

That's what Paul was celebrating in his letter to the Thessalonians:
they had turned away from the worship of idols
and turned to a living and true God.
That was the assurance that Moses sought
in asking to see the Glory of God,
reassurance that God would be with him
as he continued to lead the Hebrews in the wilderness.

As it says in the Psalm today:
"Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God
... for the Lord our God is the Holy One."