

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“To Caesar What is Caesar’s, and to God What is God’s”**

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Matthew 22: 15-22

They asked him, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?” The tax in question is the poll tax, imposed on Judea by the Romans when they began their occupation of the land. It was levied on every adult man and woman and cost one denarius per head, roughly a day’s wages. It was a tax detested by every patriotic Jew because it marked them as subjects of Rome. It’s a trap. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar? If he says, “No, you don’t have to” he can be arrested for treason against Caesar and that will get you crucified. If he says, “Yes, you must pay these taxes” then Jesus would be seen as loyal to Caesar, a collaborator with the occupiers, worse than a tax collector. Jesus would lose his popular support and credibility. So, it’s a pretty good trap. Darned if you do; darned if you don’t. How will he handle this hot potato?

“Show me a denarius” Jesus says.

Each Roman emperor minted his own coinage. The emperor ruling at the time was Caesar Tiberius. I have an authentic denarius here. It’s a silver coin and on it is the side profile of the head of Caesar. This coin is a sign of power and authority. This denarius, with Caesar’s image on it was a sign that, like it or not, Israel was a province of the Roman Empire. When one nation conquers another, one of the first things they do is issue new money. It’s a powerful message that the old government is defunct, and someone else is now running the show. In fact, this coin is one of the advantages they enjoyed under the emperor’s rule. Much like the Euro today, this denarius 2000 years ago made traveling and trade so much easier. So, the Roman denarius taken from their own pockets is incontestable evidence that they are under Roman rule. That settles it. They are subjects of the emperor. They owe him, not just taxes, but also respect and obedience. That is part and parcel of rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s.

No one really likes living under the authority of others. I don’t. You don’t. We want to do our own thing and follow our own rules. This has always been the case for fallen human creatures-whether it’s God’s law or the governor’s mandates or the cop pulling us over for traffic violation or the primary school teacher telling you to wait in line. We don’t like living under authority, because we want to be like God just like Adam and Eve before us.

Yet, as Christians, even when we ardently disagree with the authorities, unless they are forcing us to do something contrary to the laws of God, we are compelled by the Lord God to honor them, serve them and obey them.

Remember, Rome was a hotbed of state-sponsored persecution of Christians. Yet writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul said, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1). Instead of despising the authorities, Paul says pray for them.

In a little over two weeks our national election will take place, and, like it or not, whoever that person ends up being, we will be under his authority. We will have to submit to that authority, and as Christians, we will have to show honor and respect. If you don’t like the way that sounds, your argument is with God, not with me.

It's worth noting this attempt to trap Jesus happened early in Holy Week, that Tuesday. This means just three days later Jesus Himself would be tested on this very issue. Would he submit to the authorities, even when they are cruel and unjust and of inferior intelligence and strength? Without flaw, he submitted Himself to the soldiers who arrested him, to Caiaphas the High Priest, to Herod the King, to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. He didn't fight back. He didn't conspire. He didn't mock or berate them. He even submitted himself to those low-level thugs in soldiers' uniforms who mocked him, berated him, flogged, and crucified him. Early in the week He tells us "give to Caesar what is Caesar's." Later in the week, Jesus gives to Caesar what is Caesar's. He submits to him and gives him the respect that is due him.

Of course, today this means if you owe taxes, you have to pay them. But it also means we refuse to play in the dirt and sling mud at our politicians. No, we engage respectfully and responsibly with politics, even when we are the only ones playing by those rules. God has set us apart for Himself and expects us to live by higher standards.

When I was at the seminary, a guy came back from studying in Cambridge, England. He was from the Midwest but came back with a British Accent. To the rest of us he sounded phony and elitist and we fixed him of it. The point is, he was influenced by the voices around him.

We are influenced by the voices around us and can pick up their "accent." Given the current political environment, that is *not* a good thing. As Christians, we need to listen more to Jesus than to Fox News or CNN. We need to be more interested in what Jesus has to say than whatever is on Facebook, Instagram, Tic Toc, or this blog or that. As Christians, we need to be more attuned to Christ than to Trump or Biden or any other politician. As Christians we want to echo the teachings of Jesus more than those of the Republican or Democratic platforms. We want to be formed by Him for His Kingdom, rather than formed by the world for the world.

Far too often, you and I have imitated the wrong people. As Christians we must engage in the political process, and not abdicate our civic responsibilities. But we must not do so in unchristian ways; we are called to higher standards. Giving to God what is God's includes trusting in God alone. Don't put your trust in princes, policies, platforms, or judicial nominees or congressional elections. Trust in God alone.

"Give to God what is God's." What else belongs to God? You do! You are God's. You belong to Him because He has made you for Himself. You belong to Him because He has redeemed you. Jesus submitted to the authorities *for you*, to die on a cross for you, bearing your sin. He has chosen you, cleansed and forgiven you and set you aside for Himself. You are a lamb of His own flock, a sheep of His own redeeming.

This coin has the imprint of Caesar's head on it and his name. You have the imprint of Jesus' name on you. When you were baptized, you were baptized into His name. You bear His name. He owns you lock, stock and barrel, but not in the way an emperor lords it over his people. No, He owns you as one who has adopted you and loves you as His own, taken responsibility for you and your sin, and died your death. You belong to Him, and that supersedes any other claim on you. Caesar's name may be written on this coin, and the United States of America is written on all our money, but God's name is written on you. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Give Jesus your sin to forgive, your prayers to listen to, your hopes and dreams. Give Him your death. Give Him your life. Don't try to pay God taxes or for services due. After all, what can we render to the Lord for all His benefits to us? Instead, we will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving, with our lips, our money, our lives. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Amen.