

*Dan Ince October 18, 2026*

*Twenty first Sunday after Pentecost Proper 24 Matthew 22:15-22*

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

A number of years ago, a football themed movie came out called "Jerry Maguire". Two of the main characters were a professional football player and his high-powered sports agent. One of the more memorable scenes in the movie was when the two main characters were loudly arguing over their contract. At the end of the scene, they were both shouting at each other the mantra, "Show me the money! Show me the money!" I could not help but think of that scene when I heard Jesus saying almost the same words.

I've read that any collaboration between the Pharisees and the Herodians was extremely unusual because the two groups were constantly at odds with each other. The Herodians were collaborators with the Roman authorities and the Pharisees wanted the Romans out of Israel. However, the Pharisees had joined with the Herodians to try to trap Jesus. They said, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" This was a trick question because neither group wanted Jesus to agree with the other's viewpoint.

The Herodians were hoping that Jesus would say, "No, you should not pay taxes." If Jesus had fallen into this trap, then Jesus would have been in big trouble with the Roman authorities and the Herodians would have charged Him with treason.

If Jesus had taken the Herodian's position and said, "Yes, you should pay taxes." then Jesus would have lost the support of the ordinary people who hated the Roman occupation of Israel. The Pharisees were against paying any type of tribute to Rome and so, if He had agreed with the Herodians, the Pharisees would have charged Jesus with idolatry.

Both groups were trying to catch Jesus in a no-win situation. However, Jesus completely avoided their trap by saying, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax."

I think that it was interesting that Jesus didn't have the coin, so someone in the group had to bring him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." That is when Jesus answered with one of his most often quoted statements when he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." This cryptic answer apparently stumped both the Pharisees and the Herodians because the Scripture records that they were amazed and went away.

Our first impression of Jesus' reply is that He has laid down a simple principle to cover all the complexities of living in the real world. Give to the government what belongs to the government and give to God what belongs to God. The difficulty comes in sorting out the details. Just what exactly belongs to the government and what belongs to God?

Many Christian theologians point to Psalm 24 to answer this question, which says, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein. For it is he who founded it upon the seas and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep." According to this reading,

everything belongs to God. And more importantly, based on this Psalm, we must understand that we also belong to God. But, if that's the case, how do we decide what belongs to the government?

I think that many Christians are as confused today about what Jesus meant as the first Christians who heard this observation must have felt. Christians are all over the place in their understanding of the appropriate relationship between people and the world in general.

I read about a classic work on this subject that was written by H. Richard Niebuhr in 1951 entitled *Christ and Culture*. In it, Niebuhr, proposes a number of different positions that Christians can take in our relationship with the world.

One observation was titled: "Christ against Culture". In this view, Christ would have nothing to do with the so-called culture and is against it. This could also be described as "the condemnation of culture." In our text, the Pharisees represented this point of view and were the culture of religious purity. In their insistence upon absolute adherence to the Law, they argued against paying any tribute to Rome. The Pharisees worked with their Roman overlords only when it was absolutely necessary. When Jesus said in the Gospel of John, "My Kingdom is not of this world," people thought that He meant that the church was meant to be about getting to heaven and not about how things were run here on earth.

Another observation that is described in the book as the "Christ of Culture." In this view, the conflict between Christ and the government gives way to a harmony between the two. This could be described as "the adoption of culture." In our text, the Herodians fit into this category. This group of Jewish leaders have completely sold out to the

Romans. The Romans had placed this line of rulers in place as their puppets to rule in Rome's name. The Herodians were overjoyed to use Roman money since they saw the future of Judaism within the Roman culture of the empire.

But one thing we know about Jesus' answer is that he didn't make either of these groups happy. Both groups stormed off in a huff. Between these two extreme observations, Niebuhr lists several moderating positions.

These positions are affirmed in the book of Jeremiah, which says, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Since Jesus didn't tell us what he meant, I'm sure that, as usual, He intended for us to learn something as we ponder His response.

St Luke also referred to this question when he wrote, "The text does make two things clear: Christian disciples do not violate their faith when they pay taxes to pagan secular governments and whenever there are conflicts between one's country and one's God, there can be no question that God must be served".

Yes, we must strive for holiness in our lives. Yes, we must affirm that which is genuinely good in our culture. Yes, we must proclaim the Good News and seek to reach out to people while we can. And yes, we must be at work transforming our part of God's world. One way of continuing God's work during this time of stewardship is to support God's Church with your pledge of time, treasure and talent.

But we should also remember the response that Jesus gave us, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to

God the things that are God's." We belong to God and also know that, as Children of God, we'll always know God's love for us.

Thanks be to God's Love for us and Amen