

**Pentecost 19 (Proper 24) Year A**  
**Matthew 22:15-22**

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### **Problem in the Text**

My brother in law, Ben is running for office in this year's elections. He is running for district's attorney in Asheville, NC. During a recent debate, the other candidate began to ramble during a lead-up to a question he wanted to ask Ben. He seemed to be trying to raise a point about victim-less crimes which he listed as DUI, statutory rape, or drug dealing. The problem is is that those are all crimes with very distinct victims. The candidate was trying to corner my brother in law about his support for de-criminalizing marijuana in the state of NC. What the man ended up doing was turning the spotlight on his weakness as a candidate. The current District-attorney was quoted in the local paper saying, "What strikes me about this is how much it made (the candidate), a public defender with no experience heading an organization, look unprepared, even a tad bewildered. He's the handpicked candidate of the progressive wing of Asheville's (local party) kingmakers, but he looked, well..." "Not ready for prime time — that's exactly what came to my mind," Moore said, adding that he plans to vote for Scales." The man tried to set a trap for Ben, but the spotlight turned upon his short-comings and made Ben's look stronger.

Jesus is being tested by his opponents in the Gospel lesson for today from St. Matthew. This question is meant to entrap Jesus. The Pharisees first act with flattery, opening with the very slick sounding "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." But then comes the "gotcha" question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" What is the trap that the Pharisees are setting for Jesus? The question is double-edged: it is about religious legalism and about revolution. The Jews were not supposed to put graven images on their coins – it is a form of idolatry. The Pharisees in their interpretation of religious piety would not even handle the Roman coins themselves. That is legalism. So if Jesus had said, "pay the taxes" he would be telling his followers to allow themselves to be tainted, to be unclean. If he answered, "Do not pay taxes," Jesus would have incriminated himself because to not pay taxes would be a way to rebel against the Romans. To call the Jews to not pay Roman taxes would have labeled Jesus as a revolutionary.

There had been such a rebellion in Jesus' youth, which the Roman governor quashed by capturing and crucifying the rebel leaders and leaving them on their crosses around the countryside as a warning to others to submit to Roman rule of law. (N.T. Wright) "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" was a loaded and even dangerous question. On one side of the question Jesus would be condemned by his religion and on the other side he would commit treason against the government. It was a test meant to condemn Jesus either way. But Jesus turns the question around and asks the Pharisees as they give him a denarius, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

### **Problem in the World**

For many years there has been an advertising campaign by Capital One Bank with a band of marauding Vikings. The Vikings originally represented the interest fees and hidden annual charges that some banks levied on credit card customers. They've become lovable tv characters for all of the funny situations they get into in the modern world as they use their credit card to shop or go on vacations. The ads always end with, "what's in YOUR wallet?" That's a good question for your finances and a good Gospel question. Capital One poses the question and reminds us to review our finances and chose our banks wisely. Jesus could ask us the same question today, "What's in your wallet?" It is a question that would stop me in my tracks coming from Jesus. "What am I giving to Caesar and what am I giving to God?" In other words, "What of me belongs to the world and what belongs to God?" It is an existential question. It's a question of priorities. It is a question of who do I belong to and how do I live into THAT reality in my everyday life?

We are human. We have societies to which we belong. Living into our faith does not mean we all must head into the deserts for a spiritual life as hermits. We have to live out our faith connected to the world. We must work hard to earn money which pays for our shelter, clothing, food and even our fun. This is all good. I do not think Jesus wants us to wallow in our sinfulness and deprive ourselves of joy in this life. But he does challenge us, as he did with the Pharisees and by his self-sacrifice on the cross. Jesus challenges us to “Give...to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

### **Grace in the Text**

What the Pharisees did not know was that Jesus had already been teaching his disciples that he was going to suffer death. In Matthew’s Gospel, by this point in time Jesus already knew that the world would condemn him to death on a cross. He had ridden into Jerusalem on the colt and hailed as the King of the Jews, and had stormed the Temple and thrown out the money-changers. Jesus was already beyond the Pharisees ridiculous attempt to entrap him. Jesus redirected the question to condemn the Pharisees in their plot. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” He’s caught them out in their game and trumped them, showing the Pharisees that they have trapped themselves into missing God’s call to them as His People. God’s call is not about legalism and piety.

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, as Jesus entered into Jerusalem and began to bring his message directly to the seats of power he set in motion the events that led him to death on the cross. The Pharisees hoped to entrap Jesus by showing him to be impious and not worthy of being a religious leader or to trick him into incriminating himself as a revolutionary. What they did not expect was that they would find themselves under the proverbial magnifying glass. They unwittingly set themselves and their motives up for ridicule and vilification. In their attempt to cut Jesus down to size, to undermine his teaching, they revealed their desperation to hold onto power. They came down on the wrong side of their faith and of history. Jesus was telling them that their concern for legalism and piety was not God’s concern. Jesus was a subject of the Roman Empire and did not fight that fact. He submitted to Roman authority and even gave his body to them for crucifixion. Jesus gave to God what was God’s on the cross: his suffering, his trust, his faith, his obedience, his spirit, everything about him that the world could not strip from him. Of course, the world learned three days later that in the act of selfless giving, Jesus also made it possible, in the resurrection, to deny the world his body and death.

### **Grace in the World**

The Pharisees thought they were going to take Jesus down as a religious leader or as a revolutionary. The world similarly tries to strip us of our relationship with God. This question of “God is not concerned so much with what we pay the emperor but rather with how it reflects our relationship with God. When Jesus flipped the question back to them with “whose head is this? Whose title?” he brought the Pharisees up short and brings us to consider “What’s in your wallet?” He wants us to look within ourselves, into our “wallets” and be bold in how we love one another and love God.

What of us, of our human condition, belongs to the Emperors, the powers, of this world? Many things do. There is a long list of things we need to attend to, to be concerned about – everything we can be certain about in life from taxes to our death. I think it is really our choice on how much we let those things rule our life. Do we pay the taxes? Yes. Do the taxes rule our life or do we invite God into the equation? What does God in the midst of our finances look like? Would that make us bolder in the way we love one another and our neighbors and God? One of the saddest parts of this Gospel story is that when the Pharisees heard Jesus say, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” They were amazed; and they left him and went away.” They made the choice that condemned them to being bound to their lives rather than rejoicing in the freedom in following Jesus. Their wallets may have been full of denarii, but their spirits were empty. The implied question is what choice would we each make in that same scenario? Would we give the Emperor what belongs to him and stay to rejoice in what we can give to God? Amen.