

**Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstons Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
22 October 2023**

Matthew 22:15-22

One of the problems with using a lectionary for Sunday church, rather than reading a Bible book sequentially, is that we often lose the sense of continuity. Let me give you an example: Back on September 24, our gospel reading was from Matthew 20:1-16, the parable of the workers who came to the farm at different times of the day, but all got the same pay. The very next Sunday, on October 1, we were at Matthew 21:23-32, and the chief priests and the elders are asking Jesus by what authority he does what he does. By going from 20:16 to 21:23, we missed 18 verses of chapter 20 and 22 of chapter 21. Not only that, but the setting changed all together. In chapter 20, Jesus has left Galilee and is marching through the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. By the time we get to Matthew 21, however, Jesus is in Jerusalem and he is starting the last week of his ministry, meaning that he is about to die. We missed a great deal in those forty verses. Now, I believe it is important to mention briefly what is happening in our passage today because the setting and the conflict determine how we interpret this passage.

Jesus has been in Jerusalem now for two days. On Monday of that week, we see Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (21:1-11) and his cleansing of the Temple (21:12-17.) The next day, on his second day in Jerusalem, Jesus has one of the busiest days of his life in Matthew's narrative. He starts the day by cursing a fig tree (21:18-22), then, when he arrives at the temple, the chief priests and the elders question him about his authority to do what he does (21:23-27). Jesus answers the question by asking them about John the Baptizer, which catches them in their own hypocrisy. Then, Jesus tells them two parables: the parable of the two sons who are asked to go into the vineyard (21:28-32) and the parable of the wicked tenants who killed the heir to steal his farm (21:33-44). Both of these parables are addressed to the chief priests and elders. Jesus compares them to the wicked son who didn't obey the Father, he never worked in the vineyard, although he had promised he would. They were also like the wicked tenants who killed the heir and refused to pay what was owed to the farm owner. Then last week, we heard another parable directed against the chief priests and the elders. A banquet was set, but the guests refused to attend and killed the messengers (22:1-14). By rejecting Jesus, these people rejected God's kingdom and it would be taken away from them and given to more deserving guests. In fact, all these three parables end with judgements against them. We end this section by reading that they knew these parables were about them and they began to look for ways to arrest Jesus (21:45-46).

Now the cast of characters changes. In the passage given to us today, we see the Pharisees and Herodians try to ensnare Jesus. Next week we will see the Herodians try to entrap him, then a Pharisee lawyer, then a group of Pharisees. Then we see Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, followed by a long discourse filled with woes against the Pharisees, the foretelling of the destruction of the Temple, and language about the judgement at the end of days. No wonder by Wednesday, they all wanted to kill him. The passage today takes place during that very long Tuesday of Holy Week.

The fact that the disciples of the Pharisees have joined forces with the Herodians highlights how much all these enemies see Jesus as a threat to their power. Pharisees and Herodians walk in different circles. In fact, they are known adversaries on many political and

religious matters. The Pharisees resent paying taxes to Rome and avoid carrying on their person the Denarius, the coin used to pay taxes to Rome. This was especially the case within the Temple grounds. They obey the emperor out of fear of retribution, but they secretly resent his power and are bitter opponents of tax collectors, whose job it was to gather these toll taxes for the empire. The Herodians, on the other hand, are disciples, servants, and followers of the royal family who were the rulers of the Holy Land. You have heard of Herod the Great during the infancy narratives, and you heard about Herod Antipas when John the Baptist was put to death and during Jesus' own trial. These are the puppet rulers whose authority to govern came directly from Rome and who were no more than lap dogs for the Cesars. Yet, these enemies join forces to entrap Jesus. Having these two groups together is like having Jim Jordan and Nancy Pelosi going on a long walk on the beach, holding hands lovingly. It is fitting then that the question they pose Jesus is one on which they disagree. Is it lawful, proper, righteous to pay taxes to Cesar?

Now, we know this is a trap because Jesus realizes their malice from their first sentence. They say, "We know you are sincere; you teach about God in accordance with the truth, you show deference for no one other than God, you treat everyone the same" and on and on. Their lips are dripping with sarcasm and empty praises, thinking Jesus is gullible enough to fall for their traps. If Jesus says that it is proper to pay taxes, the righteous Pharisees would have reasons to turn the people against him. If he says it is not proper to pay taxes to Rome, they would then turn the empire against him. They believe this question is a lose-lose situation for Jesus. The way Jesus answers them is brilliant. He calls them "hypocrites" and asks them to show him a denarius. The irony here, which everyone who is witnessing the event would have noticed, is the fact that the Pharisees who pride themselves in avoiding any idolatry at all, especially in God's Temple, produce a Denarius coin immediately. On the face of these coins, there is an image (an icon) of the emperor with the inscription, "Son of the living God." These men are carrying images of idols in their own pockets, in the Temple of their God, while pretending to be truly righteous. Jesus, on the other hand, did not carry any of these coins, which is why he asked that one be given to him for an illustration.

Jesus then asks a question that goes much deeper than the issue regarding taxes, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Jesus tells them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." This is an incredible response because he did not place the emperor and God as opposed to each other. He in fact said that both the emperor and God deserve that we give them what belongs to them. The coins have the "Icon" or the "image" of the emperor, but they themselves, and humanity everywhere, bear a different image, they bear the image of God. This answer pointed the listeners to Genesis 1:27 where we are told that God created humanity in his image, "In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Jesus reminds his listeners that they belong completely to God. Their bodies belong to God. Their possessions belong to God. Their very lives belong to God. In a way, what he is saying is, "Give the emperor his taxes, but give to God the totality of your lives: Your thoughts, your faith, your actions, your obedience, your devotion, your complete respect." This is another way of reminding them of their precious Shema, the greatest rule for all Jews, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

The passage tells us that “When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.” They could not argue with his logic. He in fact preached about God in truth, using Holy Scripture. There are many people, my friends, who want to create barriers between God and civil government, but Jesus makes it very clear that all civil governments have rights we must obey, but these rights are limited to our obedience of civil law and our taxes. God’s rights on the other hand, demand the totality of our lives. God doesn’t just want good Christians on Sunday mornings. He wants loving and faithful Christians every second of every day. God doesn’t just want your money; he wants a generous spirit and a generous heart that honors and blesses him with whatever he gives us. God doesn’t just want your obedience, perhaps out of fear, he wants a relationship with you, one that is based on love. God doesn’t want us for an hour every Sunday, he wants to walk with us and to lead us in the way we should go every day of our lives. His demands go deeper than any demands of any civil government.

But here I want to remind all of us that the law we follow goes beyond Shema. As Christians we follow a new law that combines Deuteronomy and Leviticus. We are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. The two halves are part of the same reality. And to give ourselves completely to God requires that we serve our brothers and sisters with all our hearts and all our minds. As Christians, we know that the best way to love God is by loving the people God places in our lives in a practical way that cares, serves, and respects others.

God is not content to have just a part of us, he wants the whole of us, because he has redeemed the whole of us, and because we bare his image in the totality of our humanity. We are his and his alone. To him be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen!