



"WE HAVE A GREATER ALLEGIANCE"

Sermon based on Matthew 22:15-22

Delivered by Reverend Dr. Tim Moore

October 18, 2026 | Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

It was the last week of Jesus' life. Palm Sunday happened earlier in the week, and everyday Jesus was spending time in the Temple area, teaching, healing, and as we see in today's reading, confronting his adversaries. Matthew throws out a spoiler in the very first sentence of the story, "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said." We therefore know before the plot even begins to develop that the Pharisees approach Jesus with a hidden agenda, one that's meant to trip him up and undercut his leadership. We, the readers of the story, are immediately on the lookout for the attack upon Jesus.

It's like watching a suspense or horror movie. As the main characters move through a darkened house or walking down a street in the dark, we are waiting any moment for a monster or an attacker to jump out from a closet or from behind a tree. Jesus is about to get ambushed, and we wait to see what happens.

The Pharisees were teachers of the Mosaic Law in first century Judaism. The apostle Paul, before he became a follower of Jesus, was a Pharisee. The Pharisees thought that the way to God was found in following the Mosaic Law exactly as they taught it. Their problem with Jesus was that they thought he was too radical, too liberal in his interpretation of the Law.

They were joined in this story by a group of Herodians. This is significant because the Pharisees hated the Herodians. The Pharisees hated the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and the Herodians were Jewish people who supported the Empire, maybe they profited from the Empire's economy and valued money and power more than solidarity with their people.

As soon as Jesus saw a few Pharisees and Herodians heading his way, he would have known trouble was arriving—the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It would be like if Bernie Sanders and Marjorie Taylor Green were heading his way, or Robert Kennedy, Jr.

and Anthony Fauci, or AOC and speaker of the House, Michael Johnson. I offer these examples, because this **joining of Pharisees and Herodians was politics, pure and simple. The worst kind**, where somebody gets killed.

The first words out of their mouths drip with hypocrisy. "Rabbi, we know that you are sincere." They, who are not sincere, who have a hidden agenda, compliment Jesus on being sincere. They, who do not believe Jesus to be true, come to flatter him as being a person of truth. **Matthew is building the reader up for the gotcha moment.**

They ask, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful, according to God's law, for a Jewish person to pay taxes to Caesar, the one who occupies our country, or not?" **They think they are so clever.** If Jesus says, "Yes," it is lawful, he will raise the anger of Jews who are suffering under the Roman occupation. If Jesus says, "No, it is not what God wishes," then he is rebelling against the emperor and could be tried for treason. Yes or no, Jesus is trapped.

He asks them for a coin; they hand him a denarius. Think of it as a \$5 bill. He shows them the coin and asks, "Who's face is on it?" Caesar's, they reply. Then he says, "Pay to Caesar, what is Caesar's. And to God, what is God's"

Jesus evades his adversaries, but he leaves us with big questions. When it comes to you and me, what belongs to the government? And what belongs to God?

For over twenty years, Park Road Baptist Church, one of our sister-, like-minded churches in town, has had a partnership with the Resurrection Baptist Church in Carlos Rojas, Cuba. After a group from their church returned from a trip in Cuba, Amy Dean, one of their co-pastors, told me a story that has stuck with me the dozen or so years since she shared it. I called Amy this week to make sure I was remembering the story correctly. She was happy to refresh my memory.

During a visit to Resurrection Baptist, one of Park Road's members asked the pastor, Asdrubal Forte, "Where is Fidel and what is he doing this week?" **Asdrubal responded, "We don't know where Fidel is. Why would we?"** The Park Road person explained how the US President is on the news constantly, regardless of whomever the president is.

Pastor Forte found this fascinating. He didn't understand our US American obsession with where the president is every moment and what he is doing and saying. He explained that Cuban Christians didn't really care **what Fidel Casto was doing**

because he didn't dictate how they live their lives and more importantly how they live out their faith.

That struck me because it was counterintuitive. From a US perspective we imagine that Cubans living under a repressive communist, Castro-created government, with our own government's 60-year economic sanctions suffocating them as well and therefore assume that they must be consumed by news about Castro, then, and how they could resist him. But Pastor Forte said they didn't give Castro much thought on a day-to-day basis. And he chastised this American group from Park Road for making the US President such a big part of their mindset. "Why do you care so much what your president says and does? **No matter what, we are to follow Jesus Christ.**"

As we approach the mid-term elections, Pastor Forte's perspective is in the back of my mind. Politics constantly covers the airwaves and algorithms of traditional and social media. Yet, our day-to-day lives march on regardless and most of the time without being drastically impacted by politics. Most of the things that impact our lives have more to do with our faith and relationships and vocation. Usually societal movements influence politics, not the other way around. **How we live out and live into our values is the source where we will find hope—not in the results of elections.**

There was no question that the Roman emperor—Caesar, Rome's dictator, for the Roman Republic died with the loss of power of the Senate by Jesus' day—impacted the lives of ordinary Jewish persons living in Jerusalem. The soldiers in their streets reminded them every day that they did not rule themselves.

When Jesus' adversaries bring him a coin, asking him if they should pay taxes to this oppressive government, Jesus responds with an answer about allegiances. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's is a statement about allegiance. What is God's? And what is the government's? What do we owe each?

I fear many of us give too much of our emotional well-being to the outcome of elections, especially federal elections. When many of the justice issues we care about so deeply are impacted more directly by global corporations than the federal government, or by local elected officials than by the president or Congress. Look, I get it. It's **hard some days to calm your anger when for instance our narcissistic president cowardly declares that the US government will purchase Russian diesel fuel**—betraying a law he just signed a month ago, to put money in Putin's pocket who will not only use it to bomb Ukrainian apartment buildings, but also funnel money to Iran to kill our own troops—or when he crassly seeks to rename an aircraft carrier after

himself, a draft dodger, **instead of Doris Miller, a Pearl Harbor hero**, who was slated to be the first African-American and the first enlisted sailor to have a carrier named after him, or when you read about the tens of millions of dollars the president and his family and friends are corruptly making in private deals under the veil of official acts of the federal government. It's enough to make you scream.

But when we focus on justice issues—things that the Bible commands us as people of faith to address: feeding the hungry, paying workers fair wages, affordable housing, treating poor persons and immigrants fairly, justice for all people regardless of gender, ethnicity, or race—many of these things are best addressed by local government and major corporations in our city. And yet from city council, county commission, to the school board, **these elected officials are nearly all Democrats**. Anger at a partisan political label isn't solving our nation's problems nor addressing issues of justice named in the Bible.

When Jesus asks whose image is on the face of the coin, he's asking a question about us. Caesar's image is on the face of the coin. It recalls the first story in the Bible—Genesis 1—which says that we are made in the image of God. To give to Caesar what is Caesar's is about our allegiances as citizens—to pay our taxes, to vote and protect the right to vote, to defend our constitution, including our Bill of Rights. All those are represented on the images of the coins and dollar bills we use every day.

To give to God what is God's is about our ultimate allegiance—**for we are stamped with the image of God upon us. It's as if Jesus was saying give the coin back to Caesar and give yourself back to God.** Giving to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's should be a reminder to us that—as people of faith—we have a greater allegiance than our political parties, or our government. The coin that was handed to Jesus said that Caesar was a god. Jesus' response clearly declared, "No! Only God is God." Don't confuse God with Caesar, or with a president, or a political party.

Whatever happens this election it will not foil nor complete our call as followers of Jesus in this city. However Congress is reshaped, and how that impacts the last two years of this administration, we as the congregation of Myers Park Covenant Church and as people of faith will essentially have the same work to do towards economic, educational, and environmental justice and to be a voice of inclusion—open to all, closed to none—in this community. Regardless of whether we cheer or cry over the mid-terms, may God find us faithful to our tasks. AMEN.