

October 18, 2026 • The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)

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Exodus 33:12-23 • Psalm 99 • 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 • Matthew 22:15-22

The Things that Are God's

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" It's kind of a weird question, isn't it? I mean, law-abiding citizens pay their taxes, right? It would be unlawful to withhold taxes from Caesar—if it's Roman law we're talking about. And to be clear, the Roman law imposing this tax was a tool the Romans used to make sure that the conquered and annexed provinces of the Roman Empire beyond Italy knew whom they belonged to. They were a mark of subjugation, what the early Christian writer Tertullian called "a badge of slavery," marking the people of the provinces as subjects, *subjected* to the Emperor's rule without any say in the conduct of Roman government. So yes, under Roman law, it's not just lawful to pay taxes, it's unlawful not to—in fact, it would be downright rebellious. Tax revolts, as we Americans know well, are the kind of things that revolutions are built on.

But the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians aren't asking Jesus for his opinion on *Roman* law. They're asking for his opinion on *God's* law—is it acceptable under God's law to pay taxes to Rome? I think they're hoping that he'll say something rebellious, something that they can report to the Roman authorities to get Jesus out of their hair. Because according to God's law, God's people have only one ruler, who is God, and of course only one God—so this Caesar who calls himself a god has no claim to their loyalty or obedience or money. God's people owe those things only to God.

But God's law was written down when God's people were free—God had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery, and was giving them a land of their own. God's law was written for a time of freedom, not for a time of conquest, when a foreign power like Rome came in with its own gods and its own kings and its own taxes. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? No, of course not. But you can't exactly say that, especially in front of a bunch of supporters of King Herod, a client king of Rome who held his throne, ruling over Galilee and Perea, only as long as Rome allowed it.

So the answer Jesus gives them is clever. He asks to see a Roman coin, which is what you use to pay a Roman tax. And back in those days, you see, emperors used to have coins minted with their own face on them, as some kings and would-be emperors still do. So Jesus looks at this coin and Caesar's picture on it and says, "Looks like this belongs to Caesar, so go ahead and give it to Caesar. But give to God what belongs to God." Oh, that's a good answer.

Because friends, what belongs to God? Everything. Everything! A couple of weeks ago I quoted Psalm 24: "The earth is God's, and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein." Everything is God's, so when Jesus says, "Give to God the things that are God's," well, it doesn't seem like there's going to be very much left over for Caesar, does it?

Cuban-American theologian Kat Armas, in her book *Liturgies for Resisting Empire*, writes about this passage: "It may sound like Jesus is endorsing compliance and obedience to empire, but what if it's actually a subtle, profound resistance—a reminder of where our truest belonging lies?" She goes on, "Perhaps ... in that moment, Jesus wasn't just speaking of tax payments but undermining Rome's entire claim over [people's] lives, showing them that no empire—neither Rome nor any machine of domination—had ultimate authority over who they were. Caesar could claim coins, but he couldn't claim them. Belonging to God, we are a people no empire can possess." (pp. 180-181)

We belong to God, along with everything we have, everything we are, everything we do. But unlike Caesar, God is not a tyrant. Belonging to God doesn't make us subjects or property, it doesn't make us slaves—no, we are beloved children. "We are a people no empire can possess." That means our worth, our value as human beings has nothing to do with our productivity, nothing to do with our money-making ability or what we provide for our families, it has nothing to do with our usefulness to society or to corporations or to the government or

even to the church. Our value as human beings comes from the fact that we are human beings, made in the image of God, and God's beloved children. We are valuable because God values us, not because of the profits we can bring in for our employers and the other "machine[s] of domination" that try to make a claim on our lives.

So, my invitation to you is to think about the way you use all of your resources—including your money, yes, but also your time and your skills and your talents and your energy. If those all come from God and all belong to God and have all been entrusted to you for you to use wisely, then the way you use them matters. The way we allocate our resources has spiritual weight—it reflects our values, our priorities, and our dreams for the world we want to live in.

"Give to God the things that are God's"—I think that means putting a priority on ways of doing things that reflect God's desire for the world. When we give money to the church, we're giving to God the things that are God's, by supporting this community and sustaining its hope, and also by providing food and shelter and showers and laundry and rest to God's beloved children in need. When we give money to organizations that are doing important work fighting for justice and equity and freedom—we're giving to God the things that are God's, helping the world bring forth the fruit of justice and righteousness that God desires. And here's a weird one, in light of our Gospel text—when we vote for a school or emergency services bond, when we voluntarily pay more taxes for the benefit of our community, we might be giving to George Washington the dollars that are George Washington's—but I think we're also giving to God the things that are God's, by pooling our resources to serve the common good. Because while the Roman taxes were a mark of subjugation, I think our taxes are a badge of participation, part of the covenant we've made as a society to work together to "promote the general Welfare," in the words of the Constitution. And most importantly of all, when we give of ourselves—our time, our energy, our skills and capabilities, to serve our neighbors, to build up our community, to protest the erosion of our rights and freedoms, to make the world, or our corner of it, just a little better, a little more beautiful, we are giving to God the things that are God's and helping God's beloved kin-dom blossom and flourish in our midst.

We belong to God, not to Caesar, not to machines of domination, not to corporations and time clocks and wages. We belong to God, as beloved children of God, tending and tilling God's creation and bit by bit, nurturing God's kin-dom into a harvest of righteousness no empire can exploit or possess. Thanks be to God.