

**Matthew 22:15-22**  
***“Our Mandate and Vocation”***

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I don't think it's a coincidence that so many of the stories in the gospels that involve Jesus and the Pharisees are stories that could just as easily involve Jesus and the U.S. Congress. For those who are likened to thinking of the United States as a country founded on religious principles, namely Christian principles, this is a thought that shouldn't offend you—Jesus on Capitol Hill. If we want to think of our country as one that is supposed to be Christian, then we're going to have to accept that Jesus might have a thing or two to say to us from time to time about whether we are living up to our name. We're going to have to contend with a Jesus who is going to write not just a few editorials for the newspaper about the candidates. But too often, those who want to say we are a Christian nation, also want to say that Jesus would never talk politics. That separation of church and state means Christians ought never to voice an opinion—positive or negative—or take a stand—in support of or in opposition to—an issue that might be deemed—implicitly or explicitly—to be “political.” Which brings us to the story from Matthew's gospel that Farrah just read for us, in which Jesus is asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's,” declares Jesus. Matthew says the Pharisees have come to Jesus not really interested in talking about taxes. This is not the IRS come knocking to collect back payment. Based on the answer Jesus gives them, we might actually assume that Jesus has paid all his taxes—local, state, and federal. It doesn't really matter, though, because the Pharisees haven't come to talk taxes. They have come plotting and scheming, hoping to catch Jesus up in his own words. Step one for them is to butter Jesus up. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and play favorites with no one.” These Pharisees are not serious in their compliment. Their words are dripping with sarcasm. It is true that with their own two ears they have just finished hearing Jesus tell a story about how the kingdom of God is like a king who threw a great banquet, and when all of the invited guests blew off the king's invitation, he sent his servants out into the streets to round up anyone who was just hanging around in need a

hot meal to come to the banquet instead. No screening test, no tickets required. Whosoever will let them come.

So the Pharisees know this is how Jesus plays, with no favorites. But with their line of questioning, they aim to show Jesus that he just thinks he's all that. Ultimately, they want to embarrass him, back him into a corner and make him feel like his sincerity is his pride, soon to be his fall. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and play favorites with no one. Tell us then, what do you think, is it lawful then to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The way we know the Pharisees are just trying to play Jesus is by knowing that they're work has nothing to do with taxes. They're Pharisees whose job it is to enforce the teachings of scripture and of the temple, including what scripture teaches about who comes into the temple. And they know what scripture teaches. Psalm 84:

*How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.  
Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,  
my King and my God.*

And from Isaiah: "Why do you spend your money on that which will not satisfy? This is the fast I choose, to bring the homeless poor into your house."

Whosoever will let them come. There is no screening test to come into the house of God, no tickets required, no taxes to be collected. Jesus knows this, and the Pharisees know this. So what are they doing asking Jesus a question about taxes?

Like it or not, taxes have always been used as a determining mark of belonging. If you want to know where someone lives, who their people are, you ask them, “Where do you pay your taxes?” More than this, taxes, and who we pay them to, shows where our loyalties lie. On a good day, our taxes go to support those things that belong to all of us as a public interest—our parks, roadways, postal service, and such. Built into any tax code, therefore, is also a code of ethics, an understanding that we will abide by that rule which says, “I will love my neighbor as I do myself.” I will not keep more for myself while my neighbor still has so little. Each of us will do our part to work for that day when we shall hold all things in common.

I have come to believe that deep within all of us is an innate desire to believe in a God whose love is totally boundless, and that whenever we bind the love we give—by not fully welcoming the stranger, or by not fully supporting the right to dignity for the LGBTQ community, or by questioning whether someone is hungry because they are hungry or because they are lazy, or by asking if black lives shot by police officers might have had a criminal record, or by protecting our own self-interests at the expense of our neighbor’s — whenever we bind the love we give, this inner truth tells us we are wrong to do so, because God’s love is totally boundless. It plays no favorites. If we’re honest about it, we have to believe this. Otherwise, we’re not sure *we* would be on the guest list for the banquet.

We know this. Jesus knows this. The Pharisees know this. So again, what are *they* doing asking Jesus a question about taxes, about who should pay what and get what? They have come to Jesus, says Matthew, in an effort to catch him in his words. They have also come not alone, but with the Herodians. In Jesus’s day, Palestine was nothing more than a little territory of land ruled by Rome, a massive foreign power. In so many ways, now ruled by the occupation of Israel, it still is. To ensure that her subjects in Palestine remained loyal to her, Rome put in place a governor named Herod who was known from time to time to

cozy up to the locals and form allegiances that might keep them from ever revolting against Rome. One of Herod's tactics was to create a temple tax. This tax—entrance fee to get into the temple—was not in keeping with the ethics of a temple where even the sparrow was to find a home, and I'm sure the Pharisees tried to tell Herod this. But he's Herod and they're Pharisees, and well, Herod told them, "I'll give you a cut of the money." And who could resist an offer like that?

Are you beginning to see the danger in what's happening here? When the Pharisees come to Jesus asking about taxes, with their dripping sarcasm of a question, they don't realize it, but they're loyalties are showing. In using the same tactic on Jesus that Herod probably used on them, these Pharisees have exposed themselves as traitors, as those who are called to be the meek of the earth, but who have gotten in bed with the powerful of the earth.

In a piece he wrote for *Sojourner's Magazine*, called "Jesus Acted Out the Alternative to Empire," Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes,

"My sense is that in the institutional church we are very quiet about [passing] judgment, because we and most of our parishioners are too deeply committed to totalism, [to the idea that it's okay for us to use every means possible to get as much as possible].

But if we understand totalism honestly and clearly, then we have to talk about how it contradicts the purpose of God. That a predatory system of economic extraction contradicts the purpose of God, that the extraction system in which we live, lives by cheap labor. And as we all know, this history of cheap labor by which we live in the United States is grounded in the institution of slavery. So many of our economic arrangements are simply tradeoffs to continue the practices of slavery.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sojo.net/articles/walter-brueggemann-jesus-acted-out-alternative-empire>

Such is the truth about the Pharisees today: they have become slave masters who are really nothing more than slaves, which is all any slave master is. Someone who is a slave to power, to fear, and to the fear of losing power.

So what do we do to free ourselves? Jesus tells the Pharisees to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the thing that are God's." In other words, God really isn't out to get our money. In fact, if all our money is to us is proof of our wealth, if we only give it to show off our generosity, if we have only earned it by taking advantage of cheap labor, then God doesn't want it anyway. Give it to the emperor and let him sleep on it. For what God wants is what cannot be bought. Truly, what God wants is what we can neither afford to buy nor afford to keep for ourselves, because it has been given to us: a seat at the banquet table.

Walter Brueggemann ends his piece by saying,

What's needed is for the church to live out of a place of prophetic imagination. But the institutional church is a very weak instrument for this, that is, nonetheless, the best instrument we got. It is the best instrument we got because when people come to church they expect us to talk funny. They expect us to talk about God. And I believe we are now at a point when the church has got to recover its nerve and its energy and its courage and its freedom. To be about our proper business, the church cannot engage in prophetic imagination as long as it lives in the cocoon of totalism. And that, of course, is where many clergy and the laity want the church to stay. Because you get rewards for that, and you get money, and you get payoffs, and you get success. But our mandate and our vocation is otherwise.

And we know what our mandate and vocation is.

Amen.