The Word in the Windows: Paying Taxes to Caesar

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
February 1, 2026 – AM Sermon
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Matthew 22:15-22

Today we continue our sermon series based on Bible stories depicted in our church's windows. Today's story comes from a window on the east side of church. You can see it in the second to last set of windows on the east side. It's in the upper left corner of that window set. If you've got your bulletin handy take it out and look at the image because I want to say some things about it. Jesus is talking to a group of men and it looks like a spirited discussion.

This story is misidentified in our church's little book on the windows. Our church has a little book on the windows and in that book it tells you a little bit about every story depicted in the chapel and in the sanctuary. When it talks about this window it says, "Jesus is preaching about foreboding events" and gives Matthew 16 as the Bible reference. But now look closely at the image. What is Jesus holding in his hands? What is he showing to the other men? It's a coin. They are looking at a roman coin. This is not Matthew 16; this is the story in Matthew 22 when Jesus is questioned about paying taxes.

One more item in the window I want you to see. Right under Jesus and the men is an unusual symbol. It looks like an axe surrounded by a bundle of sticks. That's actually a famous Roman symbol. Do you know the name of it? It's called the fasces. The fasces was a symbol of imperial power. In Roman processionals, when the emperor would parade through the streets, the procession would be led by officials called Lictors who would carry the fasces as a symbol of imperial power and the right to inflict punishment. Lictors were like bodyguards – big burly dudes who could arrest people and administer punishment. If you look at it, the fasces is a collection of punishment tools. The axe is a symbol of capital punishment, and the rods can also be used to administer beatings to the wrongdoers. You can see why it was a fearful symbol. The word fascism comes from the word fasces.

The window artist was right to put that symbol on the window. Because in today's passage, Jesus is talking about authority and rule. In this passage Jesus is talking about the relationship between the kingdom of the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of God. Let's hear what he has to say. Read Matthew 22:15-22

The first thing we need to see here is the interesting political coalition that approaches Jesus on this fine Jerusalem morning. Jesus is enjoying the morning walking through the market with his disciples, when he is approached by a group of men, some of the men are Pharisees and some of the men are Herodians. You have to know a little about the religious politics of Jerusalem to know why it would have been very strange to see these gentlemen walking together.

The Herodians were a party of Jews sympathetic to the Roman rule. They supported Herod's right to call himself King, they felt like the Romans had done a lot of good for society while still allowing for the worship of the temple to continue. They thought it was OK to pay taxes. They were social conservatives.

The Pharisees were on the other end of the political spectrum. They opposed Roman rule. They weren't Zealots. The Zealots were even more extreme than the Pharisees. They openly advocated violent rebellion against the occupying troops, but they were sympathetic with the cause. They wanted the Romans out. They thought paying taxes was close to idolatry.

Given those basic political stances I think it's pretty obvious that these two groups were not generally in agreement. They were not known to share a common cause. Seeing them walk across the square together would be a little like seeing Kamala Harris and Donald Trump strolling down the national mall arm in arm. If you saw that, you would do a double take. And yet here they came, the Herodians and the Pharisees – These old political foes allied in common cause.

What could pose such a great threat as to bring these two foes together. What social force could be so pressing that it would cause these two people to end up on the same page. The answer? Jesus. This

carpenter's son with all his attention to the needy, all his preaching of hope, all his miracles of feeding and healing and mercy, all his speaking of the truth he was the cause. Somehow, he was a political threat to both of them.

I think we can have some idea why both these factions felt threatened. Not only had Jesus been gathering a lot of followers, but also the things he said would have made them nervous. He'd been using political language. He'd been preaching about the Kingdom of heaven. What kind of Kingdom was he talking about? Was he some sort of revolutionary? Was he planning to overthrow Rome? That would have unsettled the Herodians. Not so long ago, when he'd entered Jerusalem, crowds had greeted him and they'd cried out, "Hail to the son of David!" They greeted him like he was the promised messianic King. Was he going to overturn the religious order? That was a threat to the Pharisees. The Herodians and the Pharisees both feel threatened by Jesus' preaching.

So they try to trap him. They try to get Jesus to enter an existing debate over taxes. Let me give you some background on this because in asking this question, they are tapping into what would have been a hot button political issue of the day. Just 25 years before this story, there had been a Jewish revolt over taxes. The emperor had instituted a new poll tax. He demanded that all people pay money for the privilege of being governed by the Romans. The Jews didn't like this tax, and a man named Judas really didn't like it. He said that the tax wasn't just unfair; it was idolatry because the coins had a graven image on them. He gathered a bunch of revolutionaries, and they took over a Roman arsenal. He was going to found a radical Jewish republic independent of Rome. The Romans crushed the movement, but the intense feelings surrounding the tax were very much in the air. It was the kind of issue that if you brought it up at family dinner, people might get heated. The Herodians and the Pharisees were on the opposite sides of this issue. The Herodians thought Judas' revolt was ridiculous. The Pharisees liked Judas.

So, the Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus with this cynical question on a hot button issue. 'Rabbi is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' It seems like the perfect trap question: If Jesus sides with the Jews and says, this tax is unjust, Jesus looks like a revolutionary. If Jesus says "don't pay the tax" the Herodians trot off to the nearest Roman garrison and say, "Hey Centurion, you know that Galilean Rabbi that's got the people all worked up? Well, you'll never guess what he just said!"

If Jesus sides with Rome and says, just pay the tax, the Jewish people are outraged. If he says, 'pay the tax,' maybe the Pharisees trot off to the militant Zealots and say, "see that guy over there, he's a Roman sympathizer!" And maybe the zealots slip a knife between Jesus' ribs. It looks like Jesus is in a no-win situation.

But Jesus escapes their trap with a brilliant answer. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's." What kind of an answer is this? On the one hand it seems like a conservative answer. He's giving Caesar his due. He's saying pay the tax, don't fight it. That's not what the Pharisees want to hear. Jesus is acknowledging that the state has power, that it has the right to taxation, and the power it has is given to it by God. Civil government is a God-created institution. Paul echoes Jesus in Romans 13 when he urges Christians to submit to the government because "there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." The first part of Jesus' statement makes it sound like he's siding with the Herodians.

But with the second part of his statement, it sounds like he's siding with the Pharisees. 'Give to God what is God's.' Roman coins, just like ours, had words printed on them. Around the circumference of the Roman coins were printed these words: "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the divine Augustus." When Jesus says, 'give to God what is God's,' He's challenging this inscription. 'Give Caesar the coin, sure. Pay your taxes, fine. But don't give him the divinity that properly belongs only to God.' Jesus is rebuking the Herodians for getting too cozy with an Emperor who claims to be a god.

And then there's this: "Give to God what is God's." It sounds like an innocent division. Caesar gets a little bit and God gets a little bit. But it begs the question, what belongs to God? Everything, right? Psalm 24. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Every blade of grass, every mountain, every hair on Caesar's

head and every penny in his treasury. The Civil authorities have their place: they are authorized by God to keep order and govern, but the Kingdom, the power, and the glory belong to God.

With this answer, Jesus is putting political power in its proper place. Government is a God-created institution. When it does what it's supposed to do within its appointed sphere, we should respect this institution. But God is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Caesar has his role. He has been appointed by God to keep the peace, but that power is delegated to him. He is answerable to the Lord of the universe. So, the government – whether that's Caesar or whoever is in authority over us – deserves respect and deference because God has ordained civil government. But as Micah Watson said in his presentation last week: politics is a second thing. Our obedience to government is not absolute. Our ultimate allegiance is to king Jesus.

So here's a practical way in which to think of this. As Americans we say the pledge of allegiance, we pledge allegiance to our country. That's fine and good. But as Christians, when we say that pledge, we should always remember that our pledge to this country or any country is limited and subject to our allegiance to God. A Christian's pledge to their country is always contingent. A Christians pledge to our Lord is absolute. Most of those times those two pledges aren't in conflict with one another. But they could be, and at different points in history they have been, and when they conflict our duty, our ultimate allegiance is to the kingdom of God.

Other parts of the Bible confirm this arrangement. Romans 13 and I Peter 2 both call us to submit to the governing authorities. But that submission is not absolute. In Revelation 13, the governing authority is portrayed as a beast that must be resisted. When early Christians refused to make offerings at the shrines of the emperor and when they refused to say, 'Caesar is Lord,' they were not submitting to the civil authorities, they were resisting them, and they were right to do so. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down and worship the idol to Babylonian power, they were disobeying civil authority and it was not a sin. We are citizens of earthly countries. That citizenship is important and we can be proud of it. We can wave the flag. But that citizenship is secondary to our citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Here's another practical implication of this. Because we are citizens of the Kingdom first the way we feel about issues in our society should not be determined by one political party or the other. That's so often what happens in our society. We identify ourselves as a Republican or a Democrat at some point. We pick a team and we start hanging out with our teammates. We soon find ourselves in the information stream based on our party affiliation. The tech algorithms quickly figure out which party we are and they send us more information that reinforces our party affiliation, and pretty soon, our opinion on every issue down the line agrees with our party. Environment, fiscal policy, capital punishment, immigration, abortion, racial politics, renewable energy, welfare policy – all our opinions on all of these issues fall into line with a political party.

That's not good. Why can't there be more Christians who are very concerned with abortion (a traditionally conservative position) AND who advocate for strong government policies that care for the poor (traditionally a progressive issue). When our political opinions fit neatly in a party line, we are making politics a first thing rather than a second thing. We are letting it order our values and our loves. And if we do that, we are rendering unto Caesar (the ordering of our values and our loves) what properly belongs to God.

Because when you follow Jesus, your values change. Your values change because he's such a different King. This king isn't like the other kings. In the beginning of this sermon I mentioned that when the imperial powers had a parade, a processional, the Lictors, big burly dudes, marched in front carrying the fasces at the front of the parade as a symbol of their authority. The fasces said: We have the power to shed the blood of the wrongdoer. In its processionals, Roman power lifted high the fasces as a symbol of its authority.

That's not what we lift in our processional. We lift the cross. The cross is such a different symbol. The fasces is a symbol of punishment for the wrongdoer; the cross is a symbol of punishment that saves the wrongdoer. The fasces is a symbol of law and order. The cross includes law and order - Jesus goes to the cross to fulfill the demands of the law, to do justice - but there is so much more in the cross than law and order. There is mercy and grace and the offer of hope. A wrongdoer flees from the fasces in fear, but when a

wrongdoer sees and understands what Jesus did for him on the cross, he does not flee; he runs to the cross and holds onto it like a drowning man clinging to a life raft.

Jesus was not a political revolutionary, but make no mistake, the cross is a revolution but a revolution unlike any that the world has ever seen. Every other revolution involves the shedding of the blood of your political enemies, but in this revolution, Jesus sheds his blood for his enemies. Romans 5: “While we were still sinners Christ died for us.” “While we were God’s enemies, we we’re reconciled!” Do you see how revolutionary this is?! Do you see how beautiful this is?!

So we recognize the necessity of civil government and its right to wield the sword, but we lift high the cross, and we give to the man on the cross what properly belongs to him – which is to say – we give him our heart, our soul, our all.