

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 18, 2020

(Matthew 22:15-22)

I'm fairly confident that everyone listening to my sermon this morning knows the old saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." That of course is a modernized version of something dating back far earlier, a statement traced back to an old Sanskrit document written roughly 400 years before the birth of Jesus. In that version we read, "A king whose territory has a common boundary with that of an antagonist ... is an ally."<sup>1</sup> Still another version that you may have heard is the famous line, "Politics makes strange bedfellows."

Regardless of the version we hear, however, the underlying message of each saying is enacted in today's reading from Matthew's Gospel. In this moment of confrontation we find two groups with little in common allying themselves with one another for little reason other than a mutual dislike of Jesus. This alliance of convenience is attempting something at which others we have heard about in the Gospels also tried and at which they failed: trapping and exposing Jesus by using his own words against him.

The first group is the Pharisees and their disciples, experts in the law and in the legal traditions of their ancestors whose goal was the restoration of a monarch from the historic line of David. The others were the Herodians, a sort of political party or sect seeking to restore the throne to someone from the line that began with Herod the Great and finding collaboration with the Romans the most expedient way to achieve that aim. Two groups who differed on objectives and even on their views of the occupier, but unified in their shared view of Jesus. He must go. From both sides in this tentative alliance we can seemingly hear a collective whispering of the words with which I began: *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*

It is into this crossfire that Jesus steps when confronted with what on the surface seems to be a rather innocuous question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"<sup>2</sup> Consider if you will what he was facing. If he answered "yes," he would have put himself in opposition with the Pharisees and Jewish law and thus appear to abandon the very people he was sent to serve and to save. If on the other hand he answered "no," he would have allied himself with the people of Israel but in so doing placed himself in direct conflict with the laws of an occupying power. "Collaboration or treason: these are the horns of the dilemma, and the Pharisees and the Herodians hope to stick Jesus with one or the other."<sup>3</sup>

For obedient Jews of the time, the question of paying this tax was problematic enough – and even more problematic when considering that this "tributa" or poll tax was only owed by those living in Roman provinces, while Roman citizens were exempt.<sup>4</sup> Instituted just a few years before the birth of Jesus when Judea was annexed into the Roman Empire, the tax had to be paid – as we learn in this passage – with coins bearing the likeness of the emperor. It was the image of someone considered by Romans to be a god, and as such

<sup>1</sup> Deepshikha Shahi. *Kautilya and Non-Western IR Theory*, p. 18. Online Google Books version (<https://tinyurl.com/y4w9ov8s>)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:17 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Floyd, "Matthew 22:15-22 – Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 2* (Kindle edition).

<sup>4</sup> Sven Günther, "Politics of Taxation in the Roman Empire." Tax and Transfer Policy Institute, February 28, 2019. <https://www.austaxpolicy.com/politics-taxation-roman-empire/>

anything bearing his image would have been considered by those in Judea to be an idol. For the Pharisees and with their strict observance of the law, this would have hearkened back to the moment in history when the earliest law was given to Moses from God. Likely these words would have come to mind:

*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*<sup>5</sup>

But is this really *just* about taxes? I invite you to consider that this entire episode is in fact about far more than a government financial obligation or the face on a coin. It is about *us* – and Jesus is challenging us to consider to whom *we* belong. “Matthew’s Jesus is not demanding payment or nonpayment of the tax. Jesus is calling us to do all things with an understanding of who is truly sovereign.”<sup>6</sup>

For those devout Jews standing and listening to Jesus in his exchange with the Pharisees and Herodians, one answer to the question may have stirred deeply within them. It would have been an answer found in words attributed to the greatest of their kings and contained in their treasured songbook – an answer found in a familiar tune that perhaps hadn’t been heard in a while. This one answer may have slowly illuminated like a match struck in the darkness, a light emanating from the Psalms.

Perhaps it was these words that would have come to life within their minds and hearts: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”<sup>7</sup> The words may have formed on their lips, and they would have moved slowly through each verse – remembering their truest obligation and allegiance as they said

*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from the God of their salvation. Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*<sup>8</sup>

Where are our allegiances to be found? Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we live in a moment when so much about our consumer culture and our politics seemingly monopolizes our focus and our time. Those who have joined in the adult forum series on the Book of Lamentations have considered and discussed how little wealth, possession or status seemed to matter to God in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem almost 3,000 years ago.

As outside observers, survivors and even the city itself lamented the causes of its destruction, they began to realize that they were putting too much emphasis on things that at the end of the day were of no significance to God. They gave too much to the world and

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 20:4-6 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> Douglas T. King, “Matthew 22:15-22 – Exegetical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 2* (Kindle edition).

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 24:1 (NRSV).

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 24:4-6 (NRSV).

not enough to God, a loss of focus that caused in that time significant damage to their covenant relationship.

What about us? How much of our time, attention and allegiance do we give to our world, and how much do we give to God?