

Your Ultimate Allegiance Is to Christ
Sermon Series: Eight Encouraging Words
Matthew 22:15-22
Sunday – 10-20-24
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Jesus is the new kid on the block. He's been causing quite a stir. When he comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowds hail him as messiah, their long-awaited king. As is often the case, desperate people are hungry for someone to lead them to freedom.

Jesus attracts the attention of the religious leaders, who also happen to be the political leaders of the day. No separation of church and state in ancient Israel. They were one and the same.

Because news about Jesus spreads quickly, the officials have a pressing concern about this new rabbi. They demand to know: "By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus will face interrogation again and again in the events leading up to Friday. The powers-that-be will put him to the test, both to undermine his popularity with the crowds, and to cast doubt on his legitimacy.

We know something about qualifying tests. Want to become an attorney? Pass the bar exam. Want to become a nurse or a doctor? Pass the medical boards. Want to operate a motor vehicle? Pass the driver's test. Want to be the messiah? Prove to us that God has sent you.

The leaders have their doubts. Today's test comes from an unlikely alliance of the Herodians and the Pharisees. The Herodians are a priestly group and often do Rome's bidding. The Pharisees are a lay group and are committed to keeping the law of Moses. The only thing binding these two groups together is a mutual distrust of Jesus.

The Herodians and Pharisees pick a topic that's bound to attract attention: taxes. Israel was occupied by Rome, so it's not hard to imagine trouble over taxes. In fact, in 6 A.D. there was an armed revolt over those taxes.

The officials start with flattery: "Rabbi, we know you teach the ways of God. Tell us, then, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" Believe me, this is no idle chitchat. And they've got the crowd's attention.

I mean, how many of you like paying taxes? Do you ever complain about it? In Jesus' case, of course, it's a trap. They intend to publicly expose him. If Jesus answers, "No, it's *not lawful* to pay taxes to the emperor," then Rome will come and squash him like a bug. But if he says, "Yes, it *is lawful*," then he will lose the support of the crowds." This is one of those questions that politicians – both then and now – avoid like the plague.

What's Jesus supposed to say? At first glance, it sounds like he's avoiding the question too. Instead of saying yes or no, he answers one question with another: "Why are putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"

In Jesus' defense, this wasn't exactly political double-speak. It was common at the time to get to the bottom of issues by following up one hard question with another. The rabbis did it all the time. It was a way to dig deeper into tough topics.

Jesus might not answer their question directly, but he does give them an answer. He asks for the coin used to pay the taxes. He holds it up. It's a denarius, worth about a day's pay. On the coin is an image of the emperor. There's also an inscription: "Caesar Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus." For law-abiding Jews, images themselves were bad; they went against the first commandment. But combine that with swearing allegiance to a god other than Yahweh, and it was more than most Jews could stomach.

Let's make a simple comparison. Our coins say: "In God we trust." Imagine if an occupying power were to change it to: "In this god-like occupying power we trust"? Do you suppose that might trigger a reaction from us? Sure, it would.

So, what are we to make of Jesus' response? I hear a couple of possibilities. First, a mild response, along the lines of: "Look, the tax isn't the real issue. You pay your taxes with Roman coins, and they bear the emperor's image and belong to the emperor. So, give back to the emperor his little coins and get on with the weightier business of devoting your lives to God."

Again, that's the milder version. A more radical – and perhaps more likely – version is this: Jesus turns the tables on their hypocrisy. When he asks if someone has a coin, imagine them reaching into their pockets. What do they pull out? A denarius. And what's on that coin? An image of Caesar. *Gotcha!* They're the ones carrying around Caesar's money; not him. They're the ones

who've bought into this idolatrous system. Jesus is challenging them: "Choose this day whom you will serve: God or Caesar! Because you cannot serve both."

Jesus has deftly avoided their trap, not so much out of personal worry but rather to make a larger point. He's saying: "Although you may have to live under this Caesar or that, and you may be forced to pay this tax or that, you never belong to Caesar. You belong, body and soul, to the living God, and you are to give to God what is God's."

So, my friends, let me ask: where are you placing your allegiance these days – with God or Caesar? During a tumultuous election season, it can be a little hard to know. Is it with one political party or another – no matter what? Is it with one candidate or another – no matter what?

There are many things for which I'm grateful in our country. I'm grateful for certain inalienable rights: for the freedom to be able to speak out on issues about which we care deeply; for the freedom to worship in ways that are dear to our hearts; for the freedom to vote in elections, though I struggle with how polarizing they often become.

As I reflect on Jesus' answer to the Herodians and the Pharisees about taxes, Jesus doesn't seem willing to conflate God and country. In fact, in the case of Rome and Judaism, he seems to be leaning in the opposite direction: "*God or country?* You cannot serve two masters. Choose this day whom you will serve!"

This is a stretch for many of us. As American Christians, we regularly hear that God is on our side, which means, of course, that God is not on the side of our enemies. But is that the Jesus you know?

It's frighteningly easy to wedge Jesus into our political views. We must be very careful about that. As far as we know, Jesus never ran for office. He never stumped for a political candidate. He never pledged allegiance to a country or a flag. That's not to say these things are unimportant. But to what level do we raise them? For some, it seems, they can become the object of one's ultimate allegiance.

As I see it, Jesus' focus was not solely on country but on the kingdom of God. A few chapters after his run-in with the Herodians and Pharisees, he explores another hard question, this time with his disciples: "When the nations someday

stand before God's throne, how will they be judged, and more specifically, how will you be judged?" Jesus answers his own question: "When I was hungry, did you give me something to eat? When I was thirsty, did you give me something to drink? When I was sick, did you care for me? When I was a stranger, did you welcome me?" Jesus puts it clearly: "As you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

How are we to live as Christians? Plain and simple, not by grabbing and holding onto power at all costs. Above all else, we are to imitate Jesus and walk in his ways.

Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest, wrote an article for *Christianity Today* on the sheer divisiveness of our political elections. She urged: "[As followers of Jesus], we have to take up the slow work of repair, of re-forming our faith and our churches around the deep and unchanging truths of Christ. We must reconstruct communities where we can know and speak truth, serve the needy and the poor, love our neighbors, learn to be poor in spirit, rejoice in suffering, and witness to the light of Christ amid the darkness."

Warren goes on: "This work will be frustratingly small and local, under the radar, and away from the headlines. It will be long, risky, and uncertain. But in that meek and humble place, we can again find [our way to Christ], the true Light of the World."

Friends, I'm challenged by Warren's thoughts. They make us wonder: Can we follow Jesus, even as we head to the ballot box? If we're committed first to Jesus and his teachings, can we hold our political allegiances a little less tightly? As I see it, God doesn't so much want Republican-followers or Democratic-followers. Ultimately, God wants Jesus-followers.

Sometimes Christians have to choose between God and Caesar. And when that time comes, let's pray that our ultimate allegiance will be to Christ. Amen.