

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost—October 18, 2026

Prayer of the Day

Sovereign God, raise your throne in our hearts. Created by you, let us live in your image; created for you, let us act for your glory; redeemed by you, let us give you what is yours, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

15 The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, “Whose head is this and whose title?” 21 They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” 22 When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

“Towards a sermon—commentary and reflections”

Matthew is clear what the debate is not about. Also what it is about. Two factions, (the pro-government-when it suits us Herodians and the anti-empire-make deals to keep-the-wolves-at-bay Pharisees) usually at odds find common cause conspiring to publicly discredit Jesus by setting up a double bind, designed to trap him in his own words. Spoiler, the critics shuffle away, nonplussed because Jesus not only ‘threads the needle’ he reframes the entire conversation.

Flipping the ‘presenting question’ brings us closer to the core issues Jesus wants to talk about. Is it legal to NOT pay taxes? Mind you, an empire that never takes no for an answer wouldn’t take lightly any delinquency on paying taxes and tribute.

In effect, Jesus asks his interlocutors, “What’s in your wallet?”. The denarius coin bears the emperor’s likeness and his title. For the religiously inclined whose tradition forbids graven images and titles ascribing god-qualities to a conquering emperor, having Roman coins jingling in the change purse might create a tad of dissonance.

How long do you suppose Jesus paused while his critics inspected the coins they carried before he asked them to describe the denarius? In the same position, we might let the moment soak in a bit, right?

“So it’s Caesar’s likeness and title on this coin you carry?” The coin represents more than the metal from which it’s forged. To one degree or another, the coin’s message is that the empire owns its subjects.

Our own money buys us our daily food and shelter...money is like the passport that helps us participate in society. The currency we hold affords a bit of freedom; at least freedom to make some little choices like selecting Kraft Dinner over the generic store brand. If you have enough toonies to rub together you get to choose the neighbourhood you live in, the vehicle you drive, and in some cases to elect to have medical care overseas because of the lack of availability here.

Tempted as we might be to throw popcorn at Jesus’ opponents and to boo from the cheap seats, we might want to check our wallets and our gut at the same time.... Carrying the Roman coin, whether or not you like the empire is how you survive. Distasteful as the regime is, we can’t escape getting some of its stink on us. In short, you gotta pay to play.

Paying to play means we more or less accept the legitimacy of those who’ve set up the game. Our participation plunges us into some deeper questions like legality versus moral legitimacy. In some places slavery is legal. Racial Segregation, Sharia law, honour killings, public executions, and toting around your private arsenal of assault weapons is legal in places too. Pretty sure most of us would say any of these government sanctioned activities is morally bankrupt.

‘What’s in the wallet’ brings uncomfortable questions—to what degree do we participate in the empire and still keep our own moral integrity and live the tenets of our faith? How are we complicit with the empire because we go along to get along? How often do we comply because resisting bears too high a price tag?

Matthew’s community, like Jesus’ disciples and critics, had to wrestle with these questions. Jesus words about rendering to Caesar aren’t just a ploy. Nor does Jesus say that the emperor gets his cut and Jesus takes his—even Steven.

We don’t get off scot-free either. Maybe it’s good for trade that the waters near the arctic are becoming more navigable as ice melts. At what cost to the planet? Maybe the price of fossil fuel will decrease again. How does creation pay the tab?

When resources dry up, how does that affect those who are already barely getting by?

What is the rendering to Caesar all about then? Maybe its the recognition that we're in the world, but we don't have to be of it, as Jesus says. Rendering to God means that the empire doesn't get to dictate the tune we dance to in our moral, religious and ethical lives. God does. And Jesus spells out the tune and tempo where those who mourn are comforted, those who show mercy find mercy, those who wage peace are dubbed God's children. Jesus' final parable, which we will consider in a month or so also drives home the point that how we care for the 'least of these' reflects how we as community buy into to all Jesus is about.

How do Jesus' mandates to love inform how we live in a day to day world where Caesar mints the coins and calls the shots? Maybe the Herodians and the Pharisees have something to teach us—we can take a minute on a regular basis and look at the denarius coin (or its equivalent) and reflect on who we are and whose we are.

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