

“A Simple Answer but Perhaps Not Quite as Simple as It Seems”

Matthew 22:15–22

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

October 18, 2026

Those who know American history—which sadly is not many people these days—find something familiar in the reading from Matthew. The background of this brief exchange between Jesus and two groups of leaders is the oppressive reality of being taxed by a ruling power, and the added challenge of different opinions about whether to pay the taxes.

In our land, the call for independence coming from the colonies 250 years ago grew largely out the belief that Great Britain was taxing them excessively. We know something about the Boston Tea Party in 1773, the Stamp Act of 1775, and subsequent acts designed to punish those who refused to pay taxes or incited sedition. This was taxation without representation, many colonists said, and to make matters worse, some of the tax money was used to pay British troops to keep the colonists in line. Of course, some colonists were loyal to the crown, and thus there was intense debate about the taxes and independence itself.

African slaves and Indigenous Americans were also caught up in this matter whether they were required to pay taxes or not. Lord Dunmore, the last Governor of Colonial Virginia, offered to free any slaves who escaped and were willing to fight on behalf of Britain, while those choosing independence recruited slaves to fight for their cause. Indigenous Americans were manipulated even more by both sides.

In Jesus’ time, the Roman Empire occupied Palestine. They put in place a king of the Jews, Herod Antipas during Jesus’ ministry, and they taxed the Jewish people like all the people they conquered. As was the case in colonial America, some people objected to the taxes while others went along with them, and oddly enough, these diametrically opposed perspectives come together in our text.

Some representatives of the Pharisees and the Herodians join forces in this story. The Pharisees are opposed to paying the taxes not only because they

don't like Roman occupation but because the image of Caesar, who is considered divine, is on the coinage they have to use. The Herodians, who are allied with Herod, support the taxes. But these two groups, strange bedfellows that they are, come to Jesus together to ask a question about taxes — not a genuine one, mind you, not to resolve their debate. They are hoping to trap Jesus into impugning his own character.

They begin with a little flattery, saying they know Jesus is sincere, he teaches the way of God in accordance with truth, showing deference to no one and not regarding people with partiality. The latter part of this literally means, “you do not regard the face of anyone,” perhaps a little ironic foreshadowing of looking at Caesar's face on a coin, but Jesus knows he is being buttered up, being set up, by people out to get him.

“Tell us, then, what you think,” they say, getting to their agenda, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” It is a trap question. For one thing, of course, it is lawful to pay taxes. It is a violation of Roman law not to pay taxes! But if Jesus says yes, he will offend the Pharisees and many of the faithful. If he says no, he will be in trouble with the Herodians, Herod, and Rome. They think they have him!

But as they should have learned by now, Jesus is a tough debate adversary. He begins by calling the questioners hypocrites, asking why they are testing him. Then, he says, “Show me the coin used for the tax,” knowing they have one. They hand him a denarius. He looks at the coin and says, “Whose head is this and whose title?” “Caesar's,” they answer, Tiberias Caesar at this time, and Jesus replies with words most of us can recite from memory, in one translation or another. “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.” The Pharisees and Herodians are amazed, dumfounded really, all they can do is walk away, shaking their heads in astonishment.

On the surface, it is a startlingly simple solution, one that enables Jesus to avoid trouble at this point, and there is wisdom in making a clean separation between sacred and secular loyalties, as Jesus recommends. Again, for those who know American history there is something familiar here. Contrary to what Christian Nationalists proclaim, the founders did not want any religion to be established.

Many had experienced the downside of established religion or at least knew the recent history of Europe where you could be imprisoned or put to death not just for being something other than Christian but for being the wrong kind of Christian. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were also influenced by philosophers like John Locke who argued for religious toleration and the separation of church and state.

In the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which preceded the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, Madison went beyond Locke's concept of tolerance in saying, "all men are equally entitled to the full and free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience." The First Amendment, also written by Madison, went even further in saying, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." The establishment clause underscored the fact that there can be no freedom of religion if any one religion is established.

But in the formation of this nation, religious liberty was not just based on negative experience, history, and philosophical thought. It was also based on the best of Christian thinking. Various Christian leaders, many of them Baptist, championed the idea of religious liberty, insisting that authentic faith cannot be coerced and therefore no faith, not even Christian faith, should be in any way established.

In the early 1600's, Roger Williams, a Baptist for part of his life and Baptist in spirit even when he wasn't, over a hundred years before Jefferson and Madison, used the metaphor of a high wall between the garden of Christ (the church) and the wilderness of the world (the state). When three Baptists were arrested in the colony of Massachusetts in 1651, Williams wrote a letter on their behalf to Governor John Ednicott which included these words.

Sir, I must be humbly bold to say that 'tis impossible for any man or men to maintain their Christ by their sword and worship a true Christ, to fight against all consciences opposite to theirs, and not to fight against God in some of them and to hunt after the precious life of the true Lord Jesus Christ.

A century later, Baptist Minister Isaac Backus insisted that all connections between state and institutionalized religion must be broken for America to become a truly Christian country. In other words, the most Christian thing to do was not to require anyone to be a Christian. Baptists like Backus passionately believed not only that the nation would benefit from such freedom, but faith itself would be better off too.

How little some people today seem to know, understand, or appreciate our history, the sacrifices our forebears made and why they made them. Every time we look at the news, some well-meaning soul is talking about Christian Nationalism or at least recommending some endeavor that moves toward establishment. It goes against our founding principles, it ignores Jesus' teaching about distinguishing loyalties, and it just doesn't make sense in our richly diverse nation.

I have shared with some of you a story about a mother asking her daughter in elementary school if her class had scheduled a Christmas party yet. "We can't have a Christmas Party at school, Mom," the daughter said, "In my class alone there are Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Texans." God forbid... what has the world come to? But this is our nation, and we benefit from all this diversity, perhaps even the Texans...

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof... Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. It is a startlingly simple answer to a challenging question.

And yet, perhaps it is not quite as simple as it seems. As former BJC Director James Dunn used to say — give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's, but what does not belong to God? It is helpful to separate sacred and secular loyalties and thus not confuse the two, but this is not to say these loyalties are parallel, comparable, equal. For a Christian nothing compares to loyalty to God.

So, while Jesus may seem to sort things out very neatly and offer a simple solution, his simple words have complex meaning. Taking seriously all that belongs to God inevitably affects the way we look at what belongs to Caesar. Williams College Chaplain, Richard Spalding, put it this way in *Feasting on the Word* (Year A Volume 4, p.190).

(In this text) Jesus is testing, not tidying. He is not sketching parallel responsibilities, but a radical antithesis. Caesar can stamp his picture and pedigree far and wide, but he cannot come near the true commerce that animates us. So Caesar will get many or most of the coins – and be flattered by how well his likeness is rendered in the medium of cold, hard cash; but the coin of our realm of flesh and blood is the image of God. What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image. Every life is marked with that inscription, an icon of the One who is its source and destination.

Indeed, and what this means for us is that while we should express loyalty to God and nation, when the two are in conflict and push comes to shove, there can be no question as to where our first loyalty lies. Jesus would tell us to pay our taxes and love our country, but this does not mean we must always be supportive of what any leader does. This is not what patriotism is and it certainly isn't a Christian perspective.

First-century Jews could pay taxes to Rome and work to free themselves from Roman oppression at the very same time. In like manner, we can support our nation while also speaking and working against practices we believe to be unworthy of our national heritage and in conflict with the core teachings of Christian faith, like how we are treating immigrants and the poor, whether we are following our own laws and constitution, whether we are a force for good in the world.

This may sound political, but as Jurgen Moltmann argued in *Theology of Hope*, if the church only seeks to help people live in a culture without speaking to its flaws, it accommodates to social reality and has little to say other than what those in power want to hear. The church is called to do more than help people cope with reality. In light of Jesus, life, death, and resurrection, we are called to address reality as we live toward God's vision of the beloved community.

Moltmann's theology was shaped by the crucible of the Holocaust, but all theology has to hold up to the testing of its time. Giving to Caesar the things that are Caesar's may still be important, but it is nowhere near as important as giving to God the things that are God's.