

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 22:15-22

Year A - Proper 24, Text: Matthew 22:15-22

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In these verses, Matthew resumes the series of controversies between Jesus and the representatives of Judaism.

Verses 22:15–16: The Pharisees are mentioned in verse 15. The Herodians are added to the list in verse 16; they are supporters of the Herod family and allies of Rome. The Pharisees objected to having to pay taxes to the Romans; The Herodians did not.

The question that the Pharisees pose is intended to force Jesus to take a position contrary to that held by the majority of Jewish people, or one that will bring Him into conflict with the Roman authorities. The term “plotted” in verse 22:15 recalls the plan to kill Jesus referred to in Matthew 12:14. Opposition to Jesus is on the increase!

The statement of the Pharisees in verse 16 is saturated in sarcasm. They deny that Jesus is sincere and that He teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth. These are empty words.

Verse 22:17: The question the Pharisees pose is designed to trap Jesus. If Jesus says, “Pay the tax to the Romans,” they will accuse Him of unfaithfulness to the Jewish people and their cause. If He says, “Do not pay the tax,” they will report Him to the Romans in the hope of getting Him into serious trouble.

“Is it lawful?” The law to which they refer here is the law of God as they understand it. Payment of taxes signified submission to Rome and provided the Roman elite with great wealth. Roman coins were handheld billboards or tokens of imperial propaganda, with busts of imperial figures and inscriptions.

Verse 22:18: Naturally, Jesus sees through the trap that the Pharisees are setting for Him and addresses them as “hypocrites.”

Verses 22:19–20: The coin that the Pharisees show Jesus is a denarius with the head of the emperor on one side. Law-abiding Jews are not supposed to have such

coins in their possession; they have an image on them! However, it seems that the accusing Pharisees used such coins and are complicit with the Roman administration in Palestine!

Verse 22:21: The emperor depicted on the coin is Tiberius Caesar, who ruled AD 14 to 37. Jesus acknowledges that those who willingly use a coin that is Caesar’s should repay him in kind. Jesus’ answer avoids taking sides in the lawfulness of the tax. Instead, He raises the debate to a new level. Those who have hypocritically asked about tax in relation to the law of God should be concerned rather with repaying God with the good deeds that are His due (21:41, 43).

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees avoids the “either-or” answer that His opponents were seeking. The two clauses in Jesus’ response are not equal. Those who pay taxes to the Romans do not necessarily approve of Rome and the imperial system. Jesus’ disciples are to be loyal to God above all else and are to be committed to God’s empire — an empire that will eventually destroy Rome.

But in the meantime, Jesus’ followers are to live an alternative servant lifestyle marked by faithful, non-violent resistance. We may also seek to transform it into something good through non-violent cultural engagement, acted out in the left hand kingdom through faithful citizenship and service to our community and country.

Verse 22:22: When Jesus’ audience hears His response, they are amazed — and leave Him. However, Jesus proves to be the winner in that verbal exchange.