

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24) – October 18, 2026

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 put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

- Matthew 22:17-21 -

The Pharisees try to trap Jesus by asking him if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. This is a dilemma. If Jesus says “yes”, the Pharisees will paint him as a Roman sympathizer, and Jesus will lose his status as a teacher of Israel. On the other hand, if Jesus says “no”, the Romans might well arrest him for inciting a tax revolt. In response, Jesus avoids both of these false alternatives. Instead, he resolves the dilemma by implicitly distinguishing between God’s absolute authority and Caesar’s relative authority. It is within this implicit framework that Jesus tells the Pharisees to give Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to give God the things that are God’s. In other words, he tells them to pay taxes to Caesar but to reserve worship for God alone.

Some people interpret this passage as implying that we should render “spiritual” things to God and “material” things to Caesar. On this view taxation is a purely secular matter, not a spiritual concern. But this interpretation is false. After all, “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1).” Consequently, God owns Caesar himself and therefore owns all of Caesar’s stuff. So, we can’t say that taxation is of no concern to God.

I remember expressing my views on taxation at a clergy gathering once. I said that we should eliminate property and income taxes since they imply government ownership of our homes and our persons, respectively. In response, a pastor of a large evangelical church said, “But aren’t we supposed to give Caesar that which is Caesar’s?” Whether or not you agree with my views of taxation, I hope you find this pastor’s superficiality and ignorance appalling. (This could also be clerical cowardice at work, trying to derail a needed but controversial discussion.)

In response to this pastor’s bogus argument, we must first note the status of the voting citizen. In representative forms of government, voting citizens are both rulers and subjects. As subjects, they must pay their taxes, but as rulers, they have the right and the responsibility to advocate and vote for Biblically just policies of taxation. And this means that Christians should have vigorous and spirited discussions about the implications of Biblical law for taxation. After all, since God’s law protects private property, taxation is a spiritual matter too! What confidence we can have in our Lord. By his very nature he is righteous and fair. We can count on him to hear our pleas and answer us when we call on him. In fact, he wants us to do just that.