

Semicontinuous

Exod. 33:12–23

Ps. 99

Complementary

Isa. 45:1–7

Ps. 96:1–9, (10–13)

1 Thess. 1:1–10

Matt. 22:15–22

Tugs of War

Goal for the Session

Adults will identify contemporary loyalties and powers that compete with faith's allegiances through exploring an encounter designed to entrap Jesus.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 22:15–22

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

Then comes the trick question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v. 17). The Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property, and determined by registration in the census. It was administered by Jewish authorities, but it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished residents of first-century Palestine. So if Jesus answers, “Yes,” to the question, he risks alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine; if he answers, “No,” he can be accused of fostering sedition. Brilliantly, Jesus refuses to do either, and in his answer he shows what is truly “lawful”—that is, what fulfills the law of God.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Andrew Purves

If Christianity remains the cult of the private, the community, or the institution, it sanctions civil religion and ratifies the religious sanctification of society as it is. While eschatology forces Christianity to refuse to identify the present structures of society with the kingdom of God, demythologizing civil religion, the cross of Christ forces Christians to become involved in concrete struggle for public freedom. In the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the coming kingdom of God, we set death and present social, political, and economic reality in a redemptive perspective; death and the deadly systems that kill and dehumanize people are criticized and mobilized against.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Richard E. Spalding

When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on the forehead, the image of all those children in the arms of their mothers. All those faces are a part of your face, when you begin to see the image that God sees, the God who, in Jesus, stands behind us with full faith and credit.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Marvin A. McMickle

Many issues speak to the places where this passage challenges the church today. There are devout Christians on both sides of all these issues. The question for the church is not whether we should or should not pay taxes. The greater question is, what do we expect from and demand from the government that is supported by our tax dollars? Not only that, but what does conscience demand of Christians when the actions of their government and the teachings of their faith appear to be in conflict? This has never been an easy issue, but Christians have never been excused from engaging it.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 22:15–22

Focus on Your Teaching

Most if not all of your participants will understand the feeling of being in caught a “tug of war” between competing priorities or allegiances. On one level, household budgeters regularly make choices between what will be funded and what will not. On another level, some adults struggle deeply when the country they love engages in actions that contradict one’s values. Today’s session reflects on the dynamics at work in “tugs of war” that involve competing allegiances. Older adults may be more uncomfortable expressing critical views of established authorities than young adults.

God, guide my intellect and imagination and spirit as I engage in these preparations. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 25, 2020

For Responding

- option 1: newsprint, markers
- option 2: Resource Sheet 1
- option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome the participants. Introduce any newcomers to the group.

Lead the following continuum exercise. Designate one end of the room as “completely agree,” the other end as “completely disagree,” and the area between as varying degrees of agreement or disagreement. Have participants position themselves according their views on statements you will read. Read the following statements one at a time. Pause to allow participants to move accordingly, before reading the next statement. After the exercise, gather the group. Invite reactions to the exercise.

- ✂ It is more important to get to bed early rather than to sleep in.
- ✂ It is more important to support what is right about your country than to critique what is wrong.
- ✂ It is more important to spend time with family than to spend time at church.

Note that today’s focus scripture is about a forced choice between allegiances imposed upon Jesus, and his response to it.

Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

God of all creation, hear our prayer for your direction as we feast upon your word. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Who Are Those Guys?) for adults to read silently. Discuss how this material about these groups in first century Judaism affects participants’ previous understandings regarding these groups. Encourage participants to keep this background in mind as they study the account in Matthew about an encounter between Jesus and a group of Pharisees and Herodians.

Ask for a volunteer to read Matthew 22:15–22 aloud to the group. Observe a moment of silent reflection following the reading. Invite general comments or questions raised by the narrative. Ask participants to hold on to those for the moment as, together, you delve more deeply into the text.

Have participants look more closely at verses 15 and 16. Discuss the importance of verse 15 for understanding and interpreting the next verse as well as the remainder of the narrative. Ask why it might be significant for Pharisees and Herodians to join together in this effort. What might each stand to gain—and what might each stand to lose—by doing so?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 22:15–22) and read the “What?” excerpt. Recall the background information on the four factions in Judaism. Form four small groups. Assign one group each to take on the role of Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and Zealots. Have each group discuss what values or allegiances are at stake for their factions in this “trick” question, and how each group might answer it for themselves. Gather the whole group, and have each small group report what their answer would have been to this question.

The language of the text makes it clear that both entities have a rightful claim to Christians’ allegiance.

Review Jesus’ response to his “examiners” in verses 18–21. Invite participants to offer their thoughts on the significance of the following details (or others they might identify) for interpreting this encounter:

- ✧ Jesus’ recognition of this as a test borne out of malice;
- ✧ Jesus’ request to show the coin used for the tax;
- ✧ Jesus’ question regarding the coin of “whose *head* is this” (“head” is translated from the Greek word *eikon*, which is also the word used for “image”—as in “image of God”);
- ✧ The ambiguous nature of “rendering” to both the emperor and God (relate the information in the sidebar).

Have participants return to the previous four groups. Read verse 22 aloud. Ask all groups to discuss these questions:

- ✧ What will your group be talking about as you walk away from Jesus?
- ✧ What allegiances and/or loyalties of yours did Jesus confirm or undermine?
- ✧ If you could go back and ask Jesus one more question, what would it be—and why?

Ask each small group to present a brief summary of its discussion of these questions to the whole group. After all four summaries, focus on the allegiances and loyalties of these groups that Jesus undermined or confirmed by his final response of giving what is due to both emperor and God.

To transition to Responding, affirm that conflicts in loyalties and allegiances involving matters of faith are not limited to first-century Judaism. Challenge participants to see this episode as a metaphor for what following Jesus might mean today when competing loyalties and powers vie for our allegiance.

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Competing Loyalties** Identifying loyalties and powers vying for our attention helps us discern our ultimate allegiances. For example, if you listened to talk radio this week, what allegiances did you hear being appealed to? Post a sheet of newsprint. Have participants write on its left side any loyalties or powers that vie for their allegiance. Next, have participants write on its right side what they consider allegiances of faith. Discuss what competing loyalties participants see at work between items on the two sides. Urge participants to identify one example of competing loyalties they struggle with during the coming week. Prayerfully consider what it might mean to give God what is God's in this matter.
- 2. The Things That Are God's** The irony of Jesus' reply and the testimony of baptism provide a powerful affirmation of God's sovereign mark upon all creation. Invite participants to close their eyes and imagine themselves at their own baptism, or witnessing that of a beloved child. Observe a time of silence, then read aloud the "So What?" excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. At its end, invite participants to open their eyes—and in the coming week, to see in themselves and in every person they meet, the image of God affirmed in the "watery sign of a cross" made in baptism. Urge them to act accordingly.
- 3. God and Caesar** The question of political obligations framed by these Pharisees and Herodians remains a lively issue for the faith community. Read the "Now What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Engage participants in a discussion based on its question of what conscience demands of Christians when government actions and faith teachings conflict. Encourage participants to bring this question to bear on their actions in the coming week in one such question of conscience in the life of your community or nation today.

If your group deals well with conflict, focus the discussion on a matter that currently divides the community. If not, consider discussing the issue from a historical perspective: for example, the choices facing the German church in the 1930s.

CLOSING

Invite participants to listen again as you read verse 21b: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Ask for silent reflection: What do you hear Jesus addressing in your life with this verse? And what would you need to do or change to do so?

Encourage participants to carry that last thought with them through this week. Commission them with this prayer or one of your own choosing:

Sovereign God of all creation, whose image is borne by all your children, may we live with allegiance to you that is as joyful as it is firm, that is as loving as we are loved. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for October 25, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Matthew 22:15–22

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Then comes the trick question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v. 17). The Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property, and determined by registration in the census. It was administered by Jewish authorities, but it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished residents of first-century Palestine. So if Jesus answers, “Yes,” to the question, he risks alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine; if he answers, “No,” he can be accused of fostering sedition. Brilliantly, Jesus refuses to do either, and in his answer he shows what is truly “lawful”—that is, what fulfills the law of God.

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Who Are Those Guys?

In the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Butch and the Kid ask that question no fewer than four times about the band of pursuers who chase them throughout the movie.

In order to better understand today's passage, "Who are those guys?" is a good question to consider. Who are these groups that hound Jesus in this text—and who are two other groups that loom in the background?



Pharisees

Pharisees were a lay group (not priests) who believed that righteousness came through strict adherence to the Law, both written (Torah) and oral traditions. Their primary sphere of influence was in the synagogues, where teaching rather than ritual was central. It is ironic that Jesus has so many conflicts with the Pharisees, as they were the group most closely resembling his spirit of teaching (see, for example, Matthew 5:17–18).



Herodians

Herod the Great had been the last relatively independent king of the Jews. Though the Herodians are mentioned only twice in the Gospels, it is believed this group constituted a faction in Judaism that supported the reestablishment of a Herodian dynasty. One son of Herod, Antipas, ruled in Galilee (most famous for his execution of John the Baptizer). A nephew of Herod, Agrippa, would later come into power. Both Antipas and Agrippa relied on Roman favor to hold their positions. Thus, the Herodians would not have wanted to disturb this relationship.



Sadducees

Sadducees represented the priestly and scribal leaders who were in charge of the Jerusalem temple. While they, like the Pharisees, believed righteousness came through adherence to the Law, Sadducees accepted no other authority other than the Torah. Looming alongside the temple was the Roman fortress called the Antonia. To keep the Romans from further interfering with the temple (one tradition holds that Pontius Pilate even held the high priest's vestments in the Antonia, releasing them only for the Passover), Sadducees would have wanted to smooth relations with Rome to keep their own power and what independence they possessed intact.



Zealots

It is believed the Zealots originated in a group that rebelled against a Roman census in 6 CE in Galilee. Like the Pharisees, they believed righteousness came through observance of the Law. But the Zealots also had a fierce belief in liberty, and they believed that the Law could never be fully observed in the land until its Roman occupiers were cast out. The movement suffered a fatal blow when their revolt against Rome in 66 CE resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem. A recent book, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* by Reza Aslan, provocatively associates Jesus with the Zealot movement.