

October 22, 2023: Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Main Idea: True authority is wrapped in and defined by the mystery of God.

Have you ever heard the saying that a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle isn't a square? That's a good way to frame the gospel text with regard to how it talks about authority.

A handful of Pharisees and Herodians plot to trip Jesus up and wound his credibility. They ask him if it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, citing what modern scholars assume to be an oppressive poll tax that was wildly unpopular among everyday Jewish citizens living under Roman rule at the time. If Jesus says yes, he will lose favor with the public, and if he says no, he'll get himself into trouble with Roman government.

Jesus answers their question without answering their question. By using a prop (a coin that would have been used to pay the poll tax) he weaves moral undertones into the set legal framework, saying all at once that the law is important but that it might not always encapsulate what is best for everyone.

This is because Jesus acknowledges two, separate types of authority: authority of and by God, and authority of and by humankind. Here is our square/rectangle situation. Authority of and by God infuses truth into authority of and by humankind. Authority of and by God can fully contextualize authority of and by humankind—it is creative. However, the same can't be said the other way around. Authority of and by humankind can only receive and reflect God's truth, not contribute to it. It is not creative—it is derivative. God's power is also human power, but human power is not God's power.

Said differently, true power belongs to God and God, alone, which means that we cannot fully understand it or put it to the test in one, flat, ill-intentioned question. As people of faith, we will spend our entire lives reconciling spiritual authority and temporal authority in the day-to-day sense. What this text tells us is that the questions we ask should be genuine and centered in the vision of shalom, or wholeness, that we know can only come from God.

Scripture Summary

The Pharisees sought to trap Jesus in an argument about taxes. Jesus responded in the only way he could: by putting the onus back on them.



GOD'S WORD for Today

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First Reading: Exodus 33:12-23

¹²Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'" ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." ¹⁴He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." ¹⁷The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." ¹⁸Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." ¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." ²¹And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Psalm: Psalm 99

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.