

# Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.  
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

## Matthew 22:15-22

*How can a Jew be faithful and observant and also stay alive under Roman rule? Yikes. But it is precisely this position of being caught in a bind of irreconcilable, conflicting obligations and duties that make real life so interesting. The desire to make the tension go away, to solve it, is the enemy of true faithfulness.*

### Year A

### Pentecost 18

### October 16, 2011

*Sunday Between October 16 and October 22 Inclusive*

*Proper 24, Ordinary Time 29*

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Matthew 22:15-22, The Message](#) or [Matthew 22:15-22, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click here, [Matthew 22:15-22](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "[Two Empires](#)."

Once again we have another story of a challenge and confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders and elites. In this case, the Pharisees and those who supported Herod as King (that is, as vassal King of the real rulers - the Romans).

Their opening remarks to Jesus are pure slime. They set Jesus up with exaggerated praise with the intention he will fall flat on his face from the high pedestal they have just placed him on.

"Is it lawful," is not a question about Roman law. Roman law was well known to require paying taxes to the Romans. Roman taxes on Jews were onerous and resented.

"Is it lawful," is a question about Torah law. Does the Torah permit a faithful, observant Jew - like the Pharisees for example - to pay Roman taxes? That is the question.

Bruce Malina suggests that this question parallels the first of the four questions that are asked at the Passover meal:

1. The first son, the "wise son," asks the "Is it lawful" question. (Matthew 22:17 - Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?)
2. The second son, the "wicked son," asks the mocking question. (Matthew 22:24-28 - In the resurrection whose wife of the seven [brothers] will she be?)
3. The third son, the "perfect or well-rounded son," asks the question concerning general moral principles. (Matthew 22:36 - What is the greatest commandment?)

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4. The fourth son, is a child too young to ask a question, and so the question concerning Israelite history is asked by the presiding father (in this case, Jesus).  
(Matthew 22:45 - If David thus calls him Lord, how can he [the Messiah] be his son?)  
*Malina, pages 112-114.*

You might suppose, from reading through the Torah yourself, that the answer would be, "There is no prohibition against paying taxes to the Romans." But there is a trick.

When Jesus asks to be shown the coin used for paying the tax, note that there **IS** a specific coin that is required to be used to pay the Roman tax. It is a Roman coin. And on that coin is the image of the Roman Emperor. Such coins have been found by archaeologists, and printed on the coin would be the title, "Tiberius, Emperor, son of God." Thus the coin violates the commandments to have no other Gods except the Lord, and the commandment to not make any images of God. Possessing such a coin was extremely problematic for faithful, observant Jews because not having it meant running afoul of the Romans, and having it was a violation of core Torah law.

Jesus traps his adversaries by asking for the coin used to pay taxes. When one of them produces it - likely one the Herodians - it demonstrates their hypocrisy. How could an observant Jew - and a leader at that - have such a coin on their person?

Jesus further complicates their situation in his response, "Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

This sounds simple enough, and to Roman ears would sound like Jesus is saying, "Pay your taxes," because for them the "Emperor" is "God." Jesus is just repeating himself when he says: Give to the Emperor (who is God) the things are the Emperor's (who is God) and to God (who is the Emperor) the things that are God's (who is the Emperor).

But to a faithful, observant Jew everything is God's; nothing is the Emperor's. And calling the Emperor "God" is blasphemy. How can a Jew be faithful and observant and also stay alive under Roman rule? Yikes.

It is precisely this position of being caught in a bind of irreconcilable, conflicting obligations and duties that make real life so interesting. The desire to make the tension go away, to solve it, is the enemy of true faithfulness. Living in the bind, in the impossible possibility, is how we stay alive and alert to the possibility for "hypocrisy" to be the way to be faithful.

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Did Jesus and his followers ever pay a tax? Pay a toll? The Bible doesn't say. Though to be alive in a Roman occupied land would almost certainly have meant that indeed they paid taxes and tolls, and had Roman coins in their money bag.

David Ewart,  
[www.holytextures.com](http://www.holytextures.com)

Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, page 112.

\* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

## Matthew 22:15-22 (NRSV)

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

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## Matthew 22:15-22 (The Message)

<sup>15</sup> That's when the Pharisees plotted a way to trap him into saying something damaging. <sup>16</sup> They sent their disciples, with a few of Herod's followers mixed in, to ask, "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students. <sup>17</sup> So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

<sup>18</sup> Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said, "Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? <sup>19</sup> Do you have a coin? Let me see it." They handed him a silver piece.

<sup>20</sup> "This engraving—who does it look like? And whose name is on it?"

<sup>21</sup> They said, "Caesar."

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"Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his."

<sup>22</sup> The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.

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