

## **The Claims on Us (Matthew 22:15-22)**

As the oldest of four kids, I did a lot of babysitting growing up.  
Responsible for three other human lives.

As a father of three children, I've had occasion to reflect on this bestowal of power. To be honest, I'm not sure what my parents were thinking.

I suppose I was, more or less, as responsible as most other teenagers, but still. I **know** me. I know how absent-minded I can be. As a parent, I'm not sure **I'd** cut myself the same slack. And, frankly, I don't remember my parents paying me for doing it either. So, you know, there's that.

Looking back on it—and I'm ashamed to admit it—I think I enjoyed the power too much. I liked getting to tell other people what to do. I expect that if my brothers and sister were here, they'd probably be "amening" about now.

“Go to bed.”

“Make sure you load the dishwasher.”

“No ice cream ... Because I said so; that’s why.”

Power’s a seductive thing. Who gets to be the boss? Who gets to call the shots? It’s a big deal.

It happens all the time. It happens at work. It happens between lovers. It happens between Republicans and Democrats. It even happens in the church.

Who has the upper hand? For whom or what do we drop everything and just go? Who has a claim on us? It happens.

In our Gospel for this morning, Jesus runs headlong into this whole power thing. If you remember, Jesus, after coming into

Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to the shouts of “Hosanna!” runs afoul of the local religious authorities by going to the temple and turning over the money tables, calling the religious leaders frauds, and saying that they’d turned his father’s house into a den of robbers. Remember that?

That’s a big one. Jesus turning over the money tables.

After he’d wreaked havoc on the temple economy, however, he did something even more impressive. Verse 14 in chapter 21 says, “The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.”

That’s a big deal since the blind and the lame were viewed as blemished—which is to say, broken, not worthy to be in the presence of the Holy God. In making the healing of the blind and the lame the first act after denouncing the religious authorities, Matthew lets us know that Jesus’ big beef with the folks in charge centers on their practice of gatekeeping for God.

In effect, the religious leaders said, “**We** get to say who’s good enough to come into God’s house.”

After his foray into temple politics, Jesus gets pulled aside by the big high muckity—mucks of the temple, who want him to explain himself: Just who told **him** he could start pushing the local mob bosses around, inviting everyone in. Once again, they’re checking I.D.s, making sure of everybody’s credentials—trying to keep out the riff-raff.

Jesus goes on to tell a series of parables, all of which have as their point that the people who’ve been left to guard the henhouse have suspiciously pointy teeth. The caretakers God gave responsibility to for administering God’s justice—in Jesus’ estimation—have fallen woefully short. They’ve worked hard to keep the “wrong” sorts of people out, all to maintain their hold on things.

After Jesus tells these parables, you can see the steam rising out from under the collars of the religious elites. Oh, how they'd love to get their hands on that Jesus, coming in here like he owns the joint, messing up their perfectly smooth, perfectly profitable religious arrangement. Jesus is really chapping some backsides.

So, in our Gospel lesson for this morning, the religious poohbahs come up with a trap.

"Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth (You can almost hear them choking on the words, but they're on a mission, so they plow on.), and show deference to no one (Hey, thanks for tearing up the temple, by the way.); for you do not regard people with partiality (Like **we** think you should, frankly, if you just want to know the truth.)"

And all the time, they've got these pasted-on, insincere smiles—like used car salespeople. You know what I'm talking about—the bank manager who tells you how terribly sorry she is

that the bank processed the largest transaction first so that you bounce five checks instead of one—all with a kind of “what-are-you-gonna-do” shrug—as if to say, “If it were up to me, I’d get rid of all these silly charges ... but rules are rules. So, sorry about the extra \$175 in overdraft fees.”

Yeah, **that** person.

Here’s where the religious leaders spring the trap: “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

This is a good one, too. There seems to be no good answer.

Jesus is familiar with this kind of verbal jiu-jitsu, though. Back in chapter 21, he pulled the same sort of thing on **them**. When the religious leaders came to ask him by what authority he turned over the money changers’ tables, he asked them a question similar to the one **they** ask here. In that exchange, Jesus said, “I will ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will

also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

In that exchange, Jesus fooled the chief priests and the elders. If they say John's baptism is from heaven, then Jesus will say, "Why didn't you listen to him?" If, on the other hand, they say, "John's baptism has human origins," the crowd—who thought John was a prophet—might turn on them. They wound up saying, "We don't know."

This time around, however, the tables have been turned, and it's **Jesus'** turn to face down the tough question.

"But why is it so tough?" you wonder.

The religious leaders have him between a rock and a hard place. They ask him if it's lawful to pay taxes to the emperor.

"Not such a big deal," you say. "Everybody pays taxes."

But here's the problem: Rome existed in Israel as an occupation government. The average Jew in Jerusalem wants the Romans out. So, if Jesus says, "Yes. It's fine to pay taxes to Caesar," he's a sell-out to the very folks who are oppressing his people.

On the other hand, if Jesus says, "No. It is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," then he will call down the wrath of the folks in charge. When faced with a threat to its power, Rome was brutally efficient in putting down rebellion.

In fact, they had this little practice meant to dissuade **anyone** from getting any bright ideas about revolution. They called it crucifixion. Nasty stuff that.

They nailed you to a piece of wood and then let you stand out in the middle of everything, just so if anybody else had any ideas about challenging Caesar, they'd get a glimpse of what's in store.



So, what's Jesus going to say? He can either make his own people mad or make the occupation forces angry. Either way, depending on how he answers this question, his future is about to get extremely prickly.

But like some ancient Palestinian Houdini, Jesus miraculously maneuvers out of an inevitable trap—and in the process, he makes fools of his questioners. He says, "You got one of those coins?"

Now, on its face, that doesn't look like a particularly clever move. But here's the thing: Those coins (denarii) had a picture of Tiberius Caesar on one side and on the other Pontifex Maximus (that is, "High Priest"). And for Jews to carry them was not only tantamount to political treason against Israel, it was also dangerously close to idolatry. So, the fact that the religious leaders produced one so quickly is Matthew's way of showing that Jesus reveals their hypocrisy without them even knowing it.

Jesus' answer is remarkably subtle. You could read it one way: as a warning to give Caesar all the honor owed to Caesar because he is God's divinely appointed ruler. On the other hand, you could read it as Jesus' way of relativizing the claims of Caesar—since ... well ... **everything** belongs to God.

Think about it. About what is possible to say, "This is God's. But **this** belongs to Caesar; God has no claim on it?"

And that's what this whole long argument has been about, hasn't it? Who's got dibs on us? Who has legitimate claims on our loyalties? Who do we sell out to—God or our political bosses?

Put that way, we know the answer, don't we? We know that God is **supposed** to have a claim on us—but living that one out is tough. We see people all the time selling their souls to stay on the good side of much less interesting political gods.

We see people who claim vigorously that they serve God. Still, when it comes right down to it, instead of making a choice, they let themselves off the hook by telling themselves that Caesar is God's tool, that God is just fine with anything Caesar does—even if it goes against everything Jesus says God cares about.

It's too easy to want to be in control—to want a veto on who gets through the doors and who has to stand on the outside looking in. It's nice to be the gatekeepers.

Unfortunately, though, if Jesus is to be believed, we who've been in charge for so long haven't done a very good job at keeping the gates. We've too often spurned the gifts brought to us by those who didn't measure up to our qualifications, wanting to ensure that they meet our exacting standards before God could ever love them.

But it's not right.

A few years ago, while I was in Mexico, I went downtown with some kids from the children's home for the San Luis book fair.

After the festivities and we were headed back to the van, I noticed an old woman in a shawl with a torn plastic cup approaching us. I was walking beside Carlos, a nine-year-old kid from the home. The old woman stuck the cup out, peering at us with wet eyes.

Carlos shifted his bottle of apple soda to his other hand and began rooting in his pocket for money. Of course, I saw this and said to myself, "There is no way I'm going to let this little kid, who owns almost nothing in this world, give his money away when I've got more than enough money in my own pocket."

As he started to pull coins from his pocket to give to a lady, who appeared to have even less in this world than he did, I put my hand on his arm and shook my head as if to say, "No. Put your

money away. I'm a minister. I work in a church. This is what we do. This is **my** job."

But then he looked at me, the hurt in his eyes, and shook his head even more determinedly. You could just see it. It's like I said to him, "Your gifts aren't good enough. Only rich folks, folks who were born with advantages, are qualified to do this kind of work."

That's what he heard, and I don't blame him.

I was wrong. I could see that immediately. So, I just stopped, pulled my hand back, and nodded.

And it was amazing. You could see him gather himself up, his dignity intact. And he plunked two pesos into the cup.

And it struck me: This isn't **my** work. This isn't even the **church's** work. This is **God's** work. I don't have any right to say

who's got what it takes to do God's work, to give what they have to God.

And that's just it, isn't it? People have long brought the gifts of their lives to the church—and the church, for a variety of reasons—has often said, "No. That's OK. You keep it."

Those who've stood outside with their noses pressed against the window, just trying to get a glimpse. They've come to the church on countless occasions. And how often have they been turned away or made to feel as though the gifts they bring are inferior—not up to our high standards, not worthy to be in the presence of the Holy God?

Caesar's always going to want what Caesar wants. Wall Street. Madison Avenue. They vie for our attention like it's their birthright. There are so many claims placed upon our loyalties ... from every direction.

And, sometimes, that which pursues us most relentlessly is our **own** desire to be in control, to be ourselves, gatekeepers of God's mercy. We in the church have been guilty of spurning the gifts people bring to God. But Jesus isn't having it.

Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar; give to God what belongs to God. But here's the thing: It **all** belongs to God."

Those doors aren't gates to keep people **out**—the lame, the blind, the poor, the immigrant, the marginalized, the forgotten, the folks society says aren't "natural" or "like us."

**Those** doors are an entryway that allows us to welcome people **in**.

After all, the claims on our loyalties made by Jesus offer us not the chance to be in charge but the chance to serve.

Serving is how he lived. And serving is how he died.

Why do we, who claim to be his followers, think our loyalties will cost us anything less?

-Amen.