

Historic Commentary

(20th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 22](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Ambrose](#): When they questioned him about the penny, he asks about the image, because there is one image of God and another image of the world. The apostle also admonishes us, "As we have borne the image of the earthly, let us bear also the image of the heavenly." Christ does not have the image of Caesar, because he is the image of God. Peter does not have the image of Caesar, because he said, "We have left all things, and have followed you." The image of Caesar is not found in James and John, because they are the Sons of Thunder. It is found in the sea, where there are dragons with crushed heads upon the water. The large dragon itself, with its head broken, is given there as food to the Ethiopian people. If he did not have the image of Caesar, why did he pay the tax? He did not give from his own but gave back to the world what was of the world. If you would not be indebted to Caesar, do not possess what belongs to the world. You have wealth; therefore you are indebted to Caesar. If you want to owe nothing to an earthly king, leave all that you have and follow Christ.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): Those who have the office to govern impose a tribute of money on their subjects. God does not require of us anything corruptible and temporary. He rather requires willing obedience, submission, faith, love and the sweet fragrance of good works.

[Justin Martyr](#): Since he has instructed us, we, before all others, try everywhere to pay your appointed officials the ordinary and special taxes. In his time some people came to him and asked if it were necessary to pay tribute to Caesar, and he replied, "Tell me, whose likeness does this coin bear?" They said, "Caesar's." He again replied, "Give

therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." We worship only God, but in other things, we joyfully obey you. We acknowledge you as the kings and rulers of men. We also pray that you may have good judgment besides royal power. If you do not listen to us although we beg you and clearly explain our position, it will by no means harm us. We believe (rather, we are sure) that everyone will pay the penalty of his misdeeds in the everlasting fire. Everyone will give an account in proportion to the powers that he received from God. Christ made this known to us when he said, "To whom God has given more, of him more shall be required."

Severus: Jesus' opponents expect that one of two outcomes must result for them from Jesus' response. They think they can show clearly that Jesus was acting wrongly against the law of Moses or against the power of the Romans. "Indeed, if he responds that it is necessary for us to pay the tribute," the Pharisees will necessarily slander him alongside those who obey the Romans, saying, "He is guiding us outside the law of Moses away from the service of God. He is leading us to a foreign power and a foreign race." That is indeed why Luke says, "They could not catch him at fault in his teaching before the people." For it is publicly, that is to say, in the midst of the people, that they are questioning him, in order to set the people against him. And if he does not permit the tax to be paid, the Herodians will immediately lay their hands on him as on one who does not submit to the Roman authorities. Observe what is the passion of hypocrisy, how it has hidden all the hostility and the homicidal thought of the Jews beneath flattery's vile veil, and how those who hate involuntarily honor as they attempt to cause a death. Indeed, those who were saying, "We are the disciples of Moses, but we don't know where that one is from" call him "Master." Those who were calling him a "deceiver" and "seducer" say, "We know that you are truthful." Those who were doing their best to resist with jealousy and with ignorance, saying, "This man does not come from God, because he does not observe the Sabbath" and "he has a demon"⁹ witness that he teaches the way of God in all truth.

Severus: What then does the Wisdom and the Word of God do? Jesus allows all their passion to appear for all to see, without them taking back the words they were speaking to no purpose. And like a skillful physician, he then lances their passion with a deep incision, when he cut with the first word. "Why are you testing me, hypocrites?" And after having shown by a reproach that the skin of deceitful hypocrisy was dead, it is gently, and to speak this way, insensibly and tranquilly that he nipped like the web of a spider their inescapable question. Indeed, he said, "Show me a denarius for the tax." And they

presented a coin. And he said to them, “This image and this inscription concern whom?” They said to him, “Caesar.” Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” “If the coin is Caesar’s,” Jesus says, “because that is what you have said—it is necessary to give it to Caesar himself.”

“What then! You permit us to serve a man, and not god? And how is this not a violation of the law?” It will amount to nothing. Indeed, the act of giving tax to Caesar does not prevent the service of God, although you would like to think so. This is why it is necessary for you to give to God equally what is God’s, in such a manner that if what is Caesar’s is kept for the service of God, it is necessary that God be preferred to him. If you remain a tributary of Caesar, you should attribute this to your sins, not to God. In the same way, Paul similarly applies himself to the same distinction. In sending a letter to the Romans he wrote, “Pay to the world, therefore, what is due to the world; to those you owe taxes, taxes; to those you owe tribute, tribute.”

Incomplete Work on Matthew:

The image of God is not depicted on gold but is imaged in humanity. The coin of Caesar is gold; that of God, humanity. Caesar is seen in his currency; God, however, is known through human beings. And so give your wealth to Caesar but reserve for God the sole innocence of your conscience, where God is beheld. For the hand of Caesar has crafted an image by likenesses and lives each year by renewable decree. However, the divine hand of God has shown his image in ten points.

What ten points? From five carnal ones and five spiritual ones through which we see and understand what things are useful under God’s image. So let us always reflect the image of God in these ways:

I do not swell up with the arrogance of pride;
nor do I droop with the blush of anger;
nor do I succumb to the passion of avarice;
nor do I surrender myself to the ravishes of gluttony;
nor do I infect myself with the duplicity of hypocrisy;
nor do I contaminate myself with the filth of rioting;
nor do I grow flippant with the pretension of conceit;
nor do I grow enamored of the burden of heavy drinking;
nor do I alienate by the dissension of mutual admiration;
nor do I infect others with the biting of detraction;

nor do I grow conceited with the vanity of gossip.

Rather, instead, I will reflect the image of God in that I feed on love;

grow certain on faith and hope;

strengthen myself on the virtue of patience;

grow tranquil by humility;

grow beautiful by chastity;

am sober by abstention;

am made happy by tranquility;

and am ready for death by practicing hospitality.

It is with such inscriptions that God imprints his coins with an impression made neither by hammer nor by chisel but has formed them with his primary divine intention. For Caesar required his image on every coin, but God has chosen man, whom he has created, to reflect his glory.

John Calvin: This trick of taking Christ by surprise is therefore continued by the Pharisees, that, in whatever way he reply as to the tribute money, they may lay snares for him. If he affirm that they ought not to pay, he will be convicted of sedition. If, on the contrary, he acknowledge it to be justly due, he will be held to be an enemy of his nation, and a betrayer of the liberty of his country. Their principal object is, to lead the people to dislike him. This is the entrapping to which the Evangelists refer; for they suppose that Christ is surrounded on all sides by nets, so that he can no longer escape. Having avowed themselves to be his enemies, and knowing that they would, on that account, be suspected, they put forward – as Matthew states – some of their disciples. Luke, again, calls them spies, who pretended to be righteous men; that is, persons who deceitfully professed an honest and proper desire to learn: for the pretense of righteousness is not here used in a general sense, but is limited to the present occasion, because they would not have been received, had they not made a pretense of docility and of genuine zeal.

They take along with them the Herodians, because they were more favorable to the Roman government, and therefore would be more disposed to raise an accusation. It is worthy of attention that, though those sects had fierce contentions with each other, so bitter was their hatred against Christ, that they conspired to destroy him. What the sect of the Herodians was, we have formerly explained for, Herod being only half a Jew, or a spurious and corrupt professor of the Law, those who desired that the Law should be kept with exactness and in every part, condemned him and his impure worship; but he had his flatterers, who gave plausible excuses for his false doctrine. In addition to the other sects,

therefore, there sprung up at that time a religion of the Court.

Vs 19. Show me the tribute-money.

When Christ orders them to bring forward a coin, though at first sight it appears to be of no great importance, yet it is sufficient for breaking their snares. In this way they had already made an acknowledgment of subjection, so that Christ did not find it necessary to enjoin upon them anything new. The coin was stamped with Caesar's likeness; and thus the authority of the Roman government had been approved and admitted by the general practice. Hence it was evident that the Jews themselves had voluntarily come under obligation to pay tribute for they had given up to the Romans the power of the sword; and there was no propriety in making a separate dispute about the tribute-money, for that question depended on the general arrangements of the government.

Vs 21. Render therefore to Caesar those things which are Caesar's.

Christ reminds them that, as the subjection of their nation was attested by the coin, there ought to be no debate on that subject; as if he had said, "If you think it strange to pay tribute, be not subjects of the Roman Empire. But the money (which men employ as the pledge of mutual exchanges) attests that Caesar rules over you; so that, by your own silent consent, the liberty to which you lay claim is lost and gone." Christ's reply does not leave the matter open, but contains full instruction on the question which had been proposed. It lays down a clear distinction between spiritual and civil government, in order to inform us that outward subjection does not prevent us from having within us a conscience free in the sight of God. For Christ intended to refute the error of those who did not think that they would be the people of God, unless they were free from every yoke of human authority. In like manner, Paul earnestly insists on this point, that they ought not the less to look upon themselves as serving God alone, if they obey human laws, if they pay tribute, and bend the neck to bear other burdens, (Romans 13:7.) In short, Christ declares that it is no violation of the authority of God, or any injury done to his service, if, in respect of outward government, the Jews obey the Romans.

He appears also to glance at their hypocrisy, because, while they carelessly permitted the service of God to be corrupted in many respects, and even wickedly deprived God of his authority, they displayed such ardent zeal about a matter of no importance; as if he had said, "You are exceedingly afraid, lest, if tribute be paid to the Romans, the honor of God may be infringed; but you ought rather to take care to yield to God that service which he

demands from you, and, at the same time to render to men what is their due.” We might be apt to think, no doubt, that the distinction does not apply; for, strictly speaking, when we perform our duty towards men, we thereby render obedience to God. But Christ, accommodating his discourse to the common people, reckoned it enough to draw a distinction between the spiritual kingdom of God, on the one hand, and political order and the condition of the present life, on the other. We must therefore attend to this distinction, that, while the Lord wishes to be the only Lawgiver for governing souls, the rule for worshipping Him must not be sought from any other source than from His own word, and that we ought to abide by the only and pure worship which is there enjoined; but that the power of the sword, the laws, and the decisions of tribunals, do not hinder the worship of God from remaining entire amongst us.

But this doctrine extends still farther, that every man, according to his calling, ought to perform the duty which he owes to men; that children ought willingly to submit to their parents, and servants to their masters; that they ought to be courteous and obliging towards each other, according to the law of charity, provided that God always retain the highest authority, to which every thing that can be due to men is, as we say, subordinate. The amount of it therefore is, that those who destroy political order are rebellious against God, and therefore, that obedience to princes and magistrates is always joined to the worship and fear of God; but that, on the other hand, if princes claim any part of the authority of God, we ought not to obey them any farther than can be done without offending God.

Vs 22 They wondered at him.

Here, too, it appears how God turns to a different purpose the wicked attempts of His enemies, and not only disappoints their expectation, but even drives them back with disgrace. It will sometimes happen, no doubt, that wicked men, though vanquished, do not cease to growl; but, though their insolence be not subdued, however numerous may be their assaults on the Word of God, there is an equal number of victories which God has in his hand, to triumph over them and Satan their head. But in this reply, Christ intended to give a peculiar display of his glory, by compelling those men to depart crowned with shame.