

Citizens of the Kingdom

Matthew 22:15-22

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My fellow Americans . . . When confronted with those words, what just flashed through your mind? What stirred in you? What emotions? What thoughts? Maybe you cringed a little or a lot. Perhaps that statement even affected you with a twinge of anxiety.

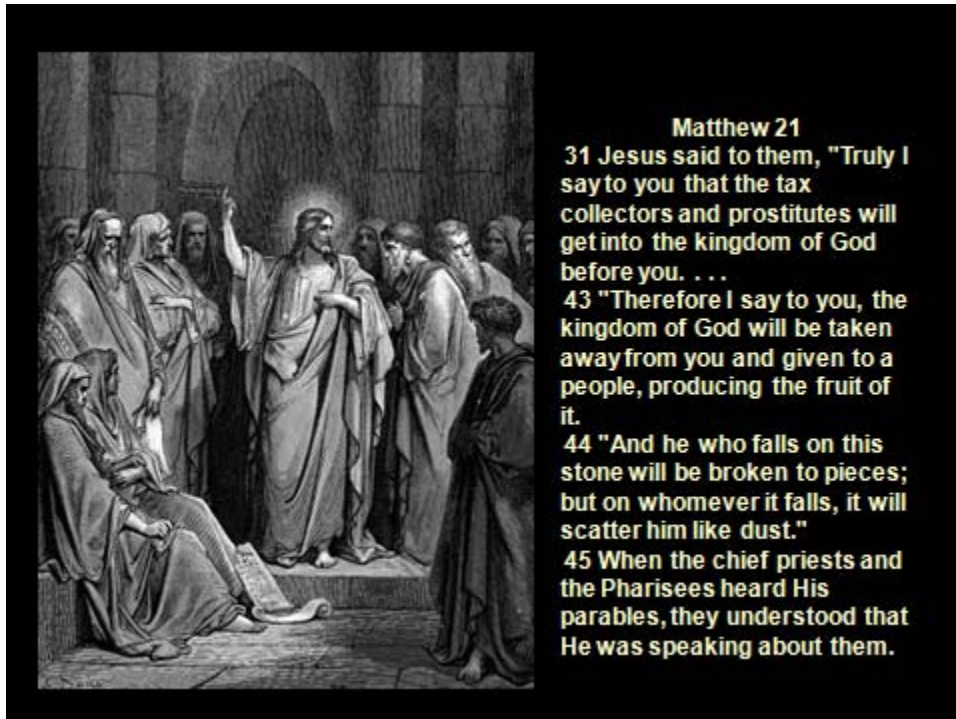
Almost thirty years ago, I made a silent promise to God and His people that I would always protect the pulpit from politics. I have been faithful to that promise, and I intend to die faithful to that promise. So, there is nothing in this lesson this morning that is in any way political. In fact, I hope that you will recognize it as distinctly apolitical.

My fellow citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven . . . When confronted with those words, what just flashed through your mind? What stirred in you? What emotions? What thoughts? Maybe it confuses you to think of both the U.S.A. and the kingdom of God at the same time. Or perhaps you feel relieved and comforted by the reminder that ultimately your true allegiance belongs to God.

Lord willing, by or on Tuesday, Americans (including kingdom people who live in the U.S.) will vote in national elections. What I share with you this morning will stand as truth—and apply to our lives unequivocally—regardless of who is elected and who is not. For, as citizens of God's kingdom, God expects us to live and relate and walk and talk as people who are ruled by Him . . . regardless of who is governing the nation.

Context and Text (Matthew 21-22)

As we noted in a recent study, in Matthew 21, Jesus makes it crystal clear to the Jewish chief priests, elders and Pharisees that their world was about to change. They were *losing it*, because God was about to snatch it away from them. And their whole world was about to be turned upside-down.



Nationally, sociologically, and religiously, the chief priests and Pharisees were losing everything they held near and dear—because they abused the privileges God had given them, exalted themselves, nullified the commands of God for the sake of their own traditions, and oppressed God’s people. Not only would the kingdom be taken away from them, tax collectors and prostitutes would be more likely to get into the kingdom than them. And if Jesus’ parables seem mysterious to us, they were not a mystery to the chief priests and Pharisees. They understood that Jesus was speaking about them.

They want to seize Jesus on the spot, but they cannot because of the crowds who, at the very least, regard Jesus to be a prophet. So Jesus keeps telling parables that illustrate his prophecies against the chief priests and Pharisees—including the parable of the wedding feast.

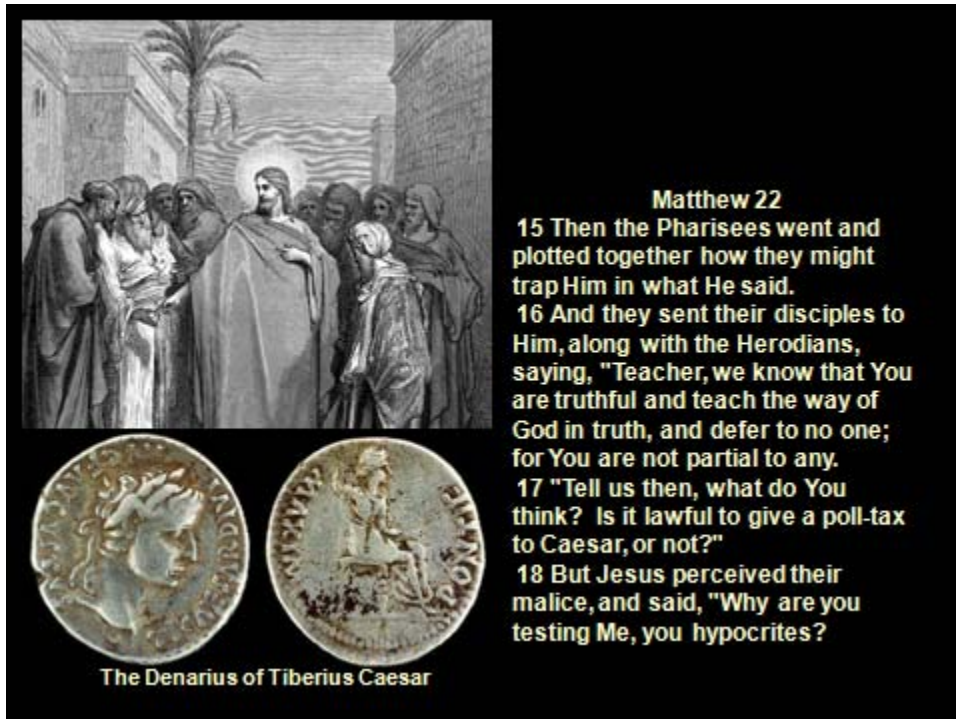
In that parable, we find three groups of people:

There are grace refusers—the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees—who are invited to participate in the kingdom of God but refuse, thinking they have no need for the king’s generosity.

There are grace receivers—the tax collectors, prostitutes, the unwashed, dirty and defiled—who humbly and gratefully accept the king’s invitation to be re-clothed and share in His kingdom feast.

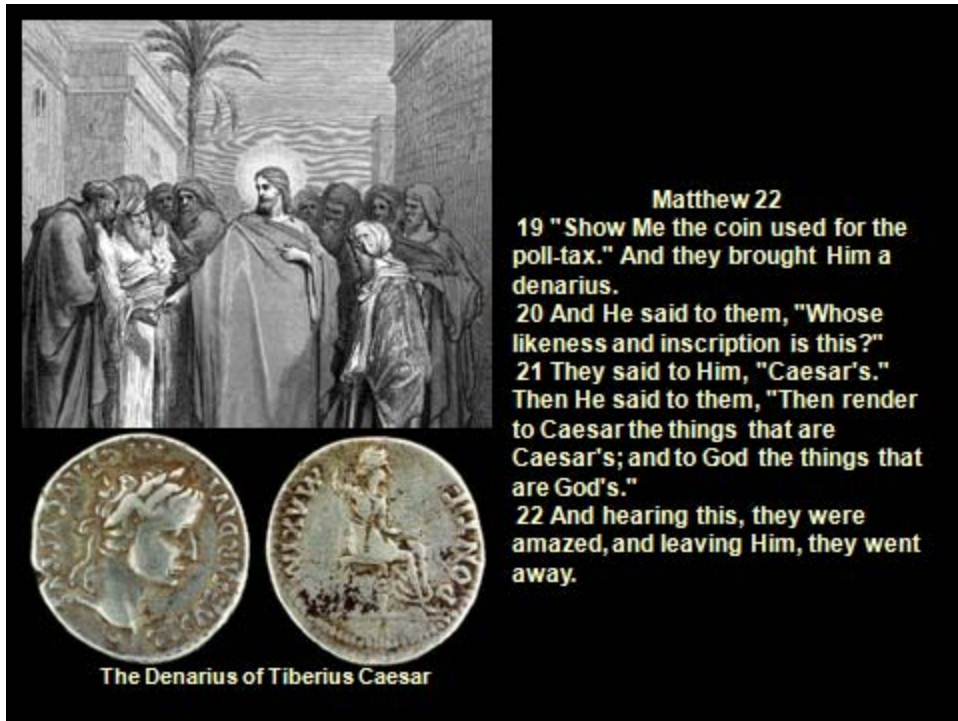
And there are grace abusers—party crashers who want to pig out on the scrumptious benefits of the kingdom without being *changed*.

Our text for this lesson begins immediately after that parable. The Pharisees know that, in the parable, they have just taken another hard hit. Thus, the cycle of conspiracies and conflicts continues.



Matthew 22
15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said.
16 And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any.
17 "Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?"
18 But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?"

The Denarius of Tiberius Caesar



Things That are Caesar's and Things That are God's

A. Herodians?

There is an easily overlooked bit of cultural context in verse 16. The Pharisees sent their disciples, *along with the Herodians*, to test Jesus. Who are the Herodians? Well, Herod, the human king of Judea, was a political appointee of the Roman Empire.

Herod was loyal to Rome and the emperor. And the Herodians were Jews who were loyal to Herod and to Rome. Unlike the zealots who were Jewish nationalists, the Herodians were Roman imperialists.

So, even among the Jews of Jesus' day, there were plenty of people who valued their nation or empire above the kingdom (rule) of God. And, in this scene, the Herodians are present as spur-of-the-moment, makeshift representatives of Rome. If the Pharisees can catch Jesus in this trap, the Herodians will serve as witnesses, to testify that Jesus is guilty of treason against the Empire. But both the Pharisees' disciples and the Herodians are rendered dumbstruck by Jesus' answer.

B. Jesus' Answer

1. *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's.* Being who we are, in this time and space . . . *render to the United States government the things that are the United States government's; and to God the things that are God's.* If we lived in a different nation, under a different government (or under a different form of government), the same would still be just as true—just change the titles.

2. Rome was not the kingdom of heaven. No one in Jesus' day thought the Roman Empire was the kingdom of God. In fact, the opposite was true. Rome was in the process of developing an intolerant hatred for people who were ruled by God. The kingdom of God was a threat to the Empire, which expected Jews (and eventually Christians) to rise up in revolt against the emperor. That's why Pontius Pilate, Rome's prefect over Judea, asked Jesus if he was a king. To which Jesus replied, *My kingdom is not of this world.*

The kingdom of heaven is not a nation with geographic borders. The kingdom of heaven is not a human government. The kingdom of heaven is not a political movement. The kingdom of heaven is not a military machine or an economy.

In Jesus' day, the kingdom been manifested for centuries (to some extent) through Israel. But that was about to end. The kingdom of God would become universal and spiritual—no longer associated with any form of nationalism. So, Israel was not the kingdom of God. Rome was not the kingdom of God. And (note well) today, the United States of America is not the kingdom of God.

We support a mission church in Varazdin, Croatia and it's native Croat minister Mladen Dominic. Our brothers and sisters in Croatia (both Croats and Gypsies) are as much citizens of the kingdom as we are.

Members of this congregation have traveled abroad to serve in mission projects around the world—on every continent—in so many different locations that I have no clue about how many. And our brothers and sisters there (in any of those places) are as much citizens of the kingdom as we are.

Just a month ago, Philip Ghanta, who lives in Dubai, stood before us and talked about his ministry in the Middle East. Philip is the kingdom. He showed us a photos of two masked Muslim terrorists, brandishing AK-47's in one picture and then in another picture presented them as preachers of the gospel holding their Bibles. They are the kingdom.

So, please understand that we need to distinguish between earthly nations and the kingdom of God. In the history of this world, there has never been a nation that adequately manifested the rule of God—no, not even Israel (read the Old Testament). And there will never be a nation that adequately manifests kingdom values and kingdom priorities. Those belong in your heart, your mind, your soul and your life, as a citizen of God's kingdom—no matter where you live on this planet.

3. Taking Inventory

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

Render to the governing authority the things that belong to that governing authority. That challenges us to take inventory of what belongs to the government, doesn't it. In what ways are we obligated (before God) to our government and those who govern? And, perhaps, more importantly, it challenges us to take inventory of what does **not** belong to the government . . . for those things belong to God.

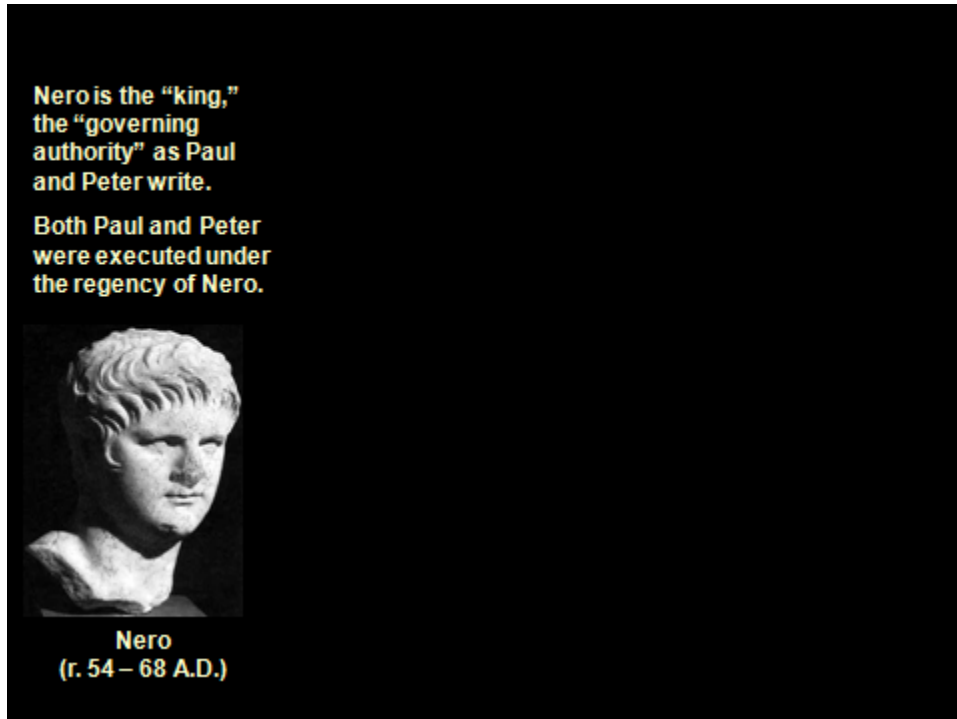
Render to God the things that are God's. What belongs to God? We do. If we are citizens of God's kingdom, we belong to God. Heart, soul, mind and strength . . . we belong to God.

Based on Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and the kingdom parables—all our attitudes, words, actions, reactions and interactions belong to God. For to be a kingdom person is to be ruled by God. We are citizens of heaven's regency or reign over our lives.

Throughout the New Testament, we find passages that elaborate on what we (as citizens of God's kingdom) owe to the governing authorities of whatever empire or nation in which we live—including how citizens of God's kingdom should (and should not) relate to and talk about governing authorities. So, it is fitting that we read these—and note well what God expects of us—before anyone is elected to office this Tuesday.

As Americans we may think that we have a right to whine, gripe, complain, malign or even rebel against governing authorities. After all, we are Americans. And that seems to have become *the American way*. But if we are citizens of God's kingdom we must be ruled by God in this regard. And the New Testament makes it clear that, in this respect, the typical *American way* is not the way of God's people. So what does our King Jesus expect of us today, tomorrow, Tuesday, and every day afterward?

Ruled by God



Before we read these passages, a little piece of context that pertains to all these scriptures. The Roman Empire is ruling the world. Christians are among the most despised of all people in the eyes of Rome.

The mad emperor Nero is the earthly king, the governing human authority, who holds sway over their physical well-being and their very lives. The Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter to pen these passages. And, according to external histories, both Peter and Paul were executed in Rome under the regency of Nero.

So, if you think these scriptures are challenging or difficult for you, consider what it was like for early Christians in the Empire to read these words and then live them—knowing that both Paul and Peter lived these words and died these words.

Nero is the "king," the "governing authority" as Paul and Peter write.

Both Paul and Peter were executed under the regency of Nero.



Nero
(r. 54 – 68 A.D.)

Romans 13

1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;

4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.

7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

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Nero
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I Timothy 2

1 First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men,

2 for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.

3 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,

4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

6 who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

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Nero
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Titus 3

1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to
authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for
every good deed,
2 to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle,
showing every consideration for all men.
3 For we also once were foolish ourselves,
disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various
lusts and pleasures, spending our life in
malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.
4 But when the kindness of God our Savior
and His love for mankind appeared,
5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds
which we have done in righteousness, but
according to His mercy, by the washing of
regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,
6 whom He poured out upon us richly
through Jesus Christ our Savior,
7 so that being justified by His grace we
would be made heirs according to the hope
of eternal life.

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I Peter 2

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to
every human institution, whether to a king as
the one in authority,
14 or to governors as sent by him for the
punishment of evildoers and the praise of
those who do right.
15 For such is the will of God that by doing
right you may silence the ignorance of foolish
men.
16 Act as free men, and do not use your
freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as
bondslaves of God.
17 Honor all people, love the brotherhood,
fear God, honor the king.

Many may be competent to govern a nation. But only One is worthy to rule our lives.

So, regardless of whether or not you vote, or how you vote, on Tuesday—and regardless of who is elected to govern or who is not—as a citizen of God's kingdom, vote for Jesus every day. Vote for Jesus by submitting to Jesus' rule over your life. Vote for Jesus by letting the people around you see that Jesus rules your life, your actions, your words, your attitudes, your destiny, and your eternity.

For as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we owe our allegiance to the rule of God over any and every human government or institution—no matter where we live on this planet.

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Jesus' rule over your life.

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institution—no matter where we live on this
planet.

God rules! Jesus is our king! And his is an everlasting kingdom, which shall never be shaken or come to an end.

Kingdom Prayer

Join me in the kingdom prayer.



Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.

And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven
our debtors.

And do not lead us into
temptation, but deliver us
from evil.

For Yours is the kingdom
and the power
and the glory
forever. Amen.