



**breadfortheworld**  
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

## ***October 16, 2011: Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time*** ***Walter Wink***

RCL: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

LM: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96:1, 3,4-5, 7-8, 9-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b;  
Matthew 22:15-21

*[Note: Walter Wink's reflection for this week focuses exclusively on the Gospel passages]*

This passage from Matthew about paying taxes to Caesar is confusing. Does it mean that there are two realms of reality—one presided over by the prince (president, prime minister, magistrate, etc.), the other by the bishop (presbyter, pastor, preacher)? This is the all too familiar “two realms” theology of the period before World War II. That theology underwent devastating criticism due to the way the “German Christians” co-opted it, being willing to tolerate Nazism as long as it didn’t encroach on the realm of the church. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (v. 21) appears to say that payment of tribute is a secular matter, and that Jews must pay it because it belongs to “the emperor.” According to this interpretation, tax resistance such as the early American colonists or opponents of the Vietnam War engaged in would be a violation of the neat distinction between the two realms.

Most interpreters have rejected the idea that there could be any reality at all that is not subject to the sovereignty of God. Besides, Jesus is not talking in the abstract about political science; he is talking about the Roman emperor, and not about just any taxes, but the galling tribute extorted at sword point from a subjugated people. There were few Jews who would concede that the emperor was legitimately sovereign over anything. The Jews who no longer could stand Roman misrule of Palestine and who rebelled in 66 C.E. would not concede an ounce of Jewish soil. So Jesus comes dangerously close to betraying Jewish sentiments when he concedes anything at all to the emperor.

But we need to look more closely at the context. Jesus is not just any place; he is in the Temple of Jerusalem, the major employer in all Palestine, an institution so corrupt that the Essenes withdrew to the desert in protest against a high priesthood that the Romans sold to the highest bidder. Jesus is standing, then, in what he calls “a den of robbers,” Israel’s holiest institution, now sunk so low that the powerful clique of urban priests used gangs of thugs to bully rural priests out of their fair share of Temple proceeds, leaving them destitute.

It is people of that ilk who attempt to trip Jesus up. Their trap is cleverly set. If Jesus says pay the tribute, he risks alienating the very people on whom his success depends; if he says no, he risks his very life, since to speak thus would be treason.



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Jesus asks for a coin. They hand him a denarius. This is not the Tyrian coin used in the Temple, but a Roman coin used to pay the legions in the eastern part of the empire. It bore the image of the emperor on one side and a god on the other. The inscription read, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus." Every Jew had to pay Rome tribute, payable at one denarius per head. Simply to have such a coin in one's possession in the Temple was a shocking concession to Roman paganism. "Whose head is this, and whose title?" (v. 20). Caesar's. Well, then, since you yourselves have already conceded Roman authority over you, go on, pay tribute, since your souls already have Caesar's image stamped upon them. But if your souls had the image of God stamped upon them, you would not yield to idolatry and tolerate the image of Caesar in the Temple. After all, Caesar had already been granted the status of son of the god Augustus.

Jesus, in short, hands them not an explanation but a conundrum. His only chance is to answer so elliptically that no one can be sure where he stands. But his ruse doesn't work. We at least know how some of Jesus' opponents understood him. In Luke 23:2 one of the charges made against Jesus is "forbidding us to pay taxes [tribute] to The emperor," a charge too dangerous to have been invented by the Church.

As José Cárdenas Pallares puts it, if God is the absolute, and the emperor is not God, then we cannot put God and Caesar on the same level. "My obligations to Caesar, if any, must be judged by the yardstick of my commitment to God." Therefore, whatever infringes on God's sovereignty must be resisted by every means consistent with the new reality that Jesus reveals.

### ***Children's Time***

***Written by Larry Hollar***

Since a coin with Caesar's image on it plays such an important role in this story, it's probably a good idea to show one of our own U.S. coins and note that a president's head is on it (a quarter might be the most recognizable to children). Remind them that the Roman emperor had a very different status than the U.S. president: we admire but don't worship our presidents.

In the times when Jesus lived, many people saw the Roman emperor as a god, but that's not who the people who followed Jesus and the Jewish people in Israel worshiped. They worshiped the God we know in the Bible. In our daily lives, that is the God we worship too. We use our money to pay our bills and support the church's work, but we don't worship our money or the people whose pictures are on it. God is the one who hears our prayers, takes care of us, and loves us.



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***Musical Suggestions***  
***Prepared by Larry Hollar***

Take My Life-PH 391  
O Young and Fearless Prophet-UMH 444  
O God of Earth and Altar-NCH 582  
Take My Gifts-NCH 562

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