

Walter Stewart, Lay Preacher

For the last three Sundays and no continuing today, we have been slowly making our way through the 21st and 22nd Chapter of Matthew's Gospel. 3 weeks ago I preached about the chief priests and the elders of the people questioning Jesus' authority. 2 weeks ago, Jacqueline preached on the parable of the wicked tenants, last week Mike preached on the parable of the wedding banquet, and today I am back preaching on the Pharisees' question about paying taxes. All of these passages flow from Jesus triumphal journey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his cleansing the Temple of the those buying, selling, and changing money. *My house shall be called a house of prayer; you are making it a den of robbers.* The passages also flow from Jesus knowledge that after Palm Sunday he has only three clear days until his Passion will begin on what we now know as Maundy Thursday.

As I noted three weeks ago, the attention Jesus received from the crowds who spread their cloaks on the ground before him and cried loud hosannas proclaiming Jesus as the son of David and shouting out *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* caused great consternation among the Priests and the Pharisees. They were only able to hang on to their posts and their privilege provided civic order was maintained with no threat to Roman authority. Jesus presented a major challenge to them. All of our gospel readings for the last 4 weeks have been about the Priests and the Pharisees' attempts to curb Jesus, or they have been parables from Jesus in response to those attempts.

In our reading this morning, the Pharisees have been collaborating with supporters of Herod Antipas, the Ethnarc of Galilee, the puppet

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king. They first try to disarm Jesus with flattery: *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.* They think they've got him with the question about taxes. Note the exact wording of their question *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?* "Lawful" most certainly doesn't mean following Roman law. It means the Law of God. Can the people of Judea acknowledge the authority of a pagan emperor especially one who claims that he is divine? After all God said to Moses on the mountain: *I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other Gods before me.* But, If he says don't pay the taxes, then he is guilty of sedition and could be condemned. If he says pay the taxes, he opens himself to a charge of hypocrisy, and he will alienate all the common people, the very people who greeted him with hosannas, who suffer greatly under the Roman occupation. Once again, Jesus is smarter than them; he asks to see the coin. Asks whose head is pictured upon it, and then replies in a line that most of us know from the King James version because we learned it so long ago: *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.*

Jesus leaves a point unsaid, but it would not have been missed by many who heard his answer. Genesis 1 verse 26: *Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....* The coin may belong to the emperor, but all humankind belongs to God. Rendering to God what is God's means rendering ourselves without reservation, without division. If I am not all for God; then I am none for God.

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Let us be clear, however, being all for God does not mean doing nothing for anyone else. In fact later in the chapter from which our reading comes, Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment he repeats the Shema which we shall say shortly. The Shema comes from Deuteronomy. There are also love your neighbour statements several times in Leviticus. Leviticus also commands that we should love the stranger in our midst because we were strangers once in the land of Egypt. Leviticus clearly extends the ethical duty past those who are familiar to us to encompass everyone. We can simply not be all for God and not be all for God's creation. Remember from Matthew 25 verse 40 *'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'*

As we share creation with each other, we have structures to ensure a just and equitable life for all. Heaven knows these structures are flawed, but it remains our duty to God to work on those structures to make them more able to provide justice. Those structures of course include government at all levels. So as part of our duty to God we must participate for good in supporting government and better government. In the 1st letter of Peter: *Fear God. Honour the emperor.* Remember, fearing God means having deep reverence, awe, and respect for God's holiness and power rather than cowering in terror or dread. God is first without equal.

An equally important line in our reading this morning is verse 18: *But Jesus, aware of their malice, said "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"* The hypocrisy of the religious authorities is the theme in all of the parables in Chapters 21 and 22. Jesus finally nails them at the beginning of Chapter 23: *Then Jesus said to the crowds*

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and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi.

Jesus reserved his sharpest, most confrontational language not for societal outcasts, tax collectors, or public sinners, but for religious leaders who marshalled religion for status, power, and a false show of holiness. In the next chapter of Matthew there is the section often entitled the “Woe To” section. Jesus says among other woe to statements: ***Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.***

Woe to any of us who proclaim we are all for God and do nothing for God or God’s people. I remind you of the parable of the Two Sons that was part of Gospel reading three weeks ago. When the two sons are asked by their father to work in vineyard, the first son refuses and then repents and works for the day in the vineyard. The second son agrees immediately, but does not go. The outward show counts for nothing against the inward intention.

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After our intercessions, we will shortly make our confession. The language is interesting: *We confess that we have sinned against you by thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.* I am prepared to bet that most of us have greater need of repentance for what we have left undone. The prayer goes on *We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.* The sentence has two main clauses, but the way it is structured seems to suggest the clauses are independent, but let us be clear, we could not have loved God with our whole heart if we hadn't loved our neighbour as ourselves.

Chapters 23, 24, 25, are full of Jesus' teaching including the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids and the parable of the Talents and the separation of the sheep and the goats. His teaching becomes more direct, confrontational, and urgent. It is an incredibly loaded period of time given that it began on Palm Sunday and will end on Wednesday as the Passion begins on Thursday. Jesus knows his time is nearly up and he is doing everything possible to get his message across. The shadow of the cross is becoming ever darker.

We will continue with readings from these last chapters of Matthew before the Passion begins from now until the last Sunday before Advent with the exception of All Saints Day. Read them and hear them through the lens of what Jesus knows and what you know is coming. What you will hear and read over the next weeks are among the strongest statements from Jesus in all the Gospels. Above all they ask us to bring our inward and our outward selves into alignment in the service of God and neighbour.

HOMILY FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2026 /MATTHEW 22: 15 – 22

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Let us pray. Gracious God help us to keep your service active in our hearts and minds in all we do, and all we say, and all we think through Jesus the Christ. Amen