

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2024**  
**“GOD’S KINGDOM IS GREATER THAN ROME”**  
**REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

**15** Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. **16** They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. **17** Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax<sup>[a]</sup> to Caesar or not?”

**18** But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? **19** Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, **20** and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

**21** “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

**22** When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

**Sermon: God’s Kingdom is Greater Than Rome**

I read a survey this week about the stresses on American life right now. Can anyone guess what the most common source of stress was, affecting 80% of Americans?

It’s not family, it’s not finances, it’s not health.

It’s the election.

In this report, the vast majority of us stated that we’re worried about the future of our country as we observe things like divisive political rhetoric, inflammatory hate speech, and even violence like burning ballot boxes and death threats against politicians. With the southern border nearly bursting at the seams with unprecedented immigration, the cost of living becoming more and more unmanageable, two major world wars looming, and epidemics of gun violence, suicide, and addiction, there is a lot to be rightfully concerned about.

Now, I’ve said before and I’ll say again that I’ll never tell you how to vote. Not only would that be a violation of the ethics of my position, more importantly, I don’t think Jesus would tell you how to vote, either. After all, he said, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.”

The context of this passage is similar to the context we are living in now. The time in which Jesus lived also held a very heavy political atmosphere. As the occupying Roman forces seemed to be squeezing the native Jewish people of the land into a difficult corner with high taxes, threats of overthrow, and intense subjugation, prophets and warriors were rising up at every turn, calling the people to violent resistance against their Roman occupiers and repentance for the sins that caused the mess they were in. The land of Jesus’ time held the same tense political atmosphere with underlying and sometimes overt tones of violence and threat of total annihilation of the whole system that we’re experiencing now.

The ruling Jewish priestly tribes, most prominently the Sadducees and Pharisees that Jesus so often encountered in scripture, had vastly different opinions on how to deal with this situation.

The Sadducees opted to begrudgingly tolerate the Roman occupation and do their best to keep the Romans happy so that they could simply carry on with life or even assimilate into the dominant Roman society. Conversely, the Pharisees encouraged the resistance against the people's occupation and believed God would work with them to overpower the threat.

In this passage, the Pharisees are trying to determine if Jesus is a threat to their movement. If Jesus answered no, we should not pay the imperial tax, then he was a subversive rogue menace to the Pharisees' authority in the anti-Rome movement. If he answered yes, we should pay it to keep the peace with Rome, then he was cooperating with the pesky Sadducees and their heretical ways. It was a trap that Jesus himself identified as such, as Jesus had no right answer he could possibly give them to that question.

However, like most things, Jesus answered in a Third Way. He tells the Pharisees that yes, we should pay it, but not for the reasons that the Sadducees expected. For Jesus, paying the imperial tax wasn't about quelling the Romans so that the Jewish people could carry on living somewhat peaceably under imperialist rule. Instead, Jesus basically tells them that Rome *doesn't matter*.

This was shocking to his Pharisee audience because like us now, Rome and the whole precarious political world around it was *everything* to the people of that time. A survey taken among 1st century Jews in Palestine likely would have had a similar result of "80% extremely stressed about the future of the country." To say that such a huge threat, one that effectively divided the Jewish leaders of the time, *doesn't matter* was a far more troubling answer than what they expected him to say.

So why didn't Rome, and all its power and menace and looming destruction, matter to Jesus? One would think that the Messiah would care most fervently about such a heavy threat against God's people.

Jesus knew that Jerusalem was destined to fall to the Romans, whether they resisted or submitted. He knew that in just a short time, it wouldn't matter. The Pharisees and their constituents would be all dead. The Sadducees and their constituents would be all dead. *It didn't matter*.

I think Jesus would say the same about our current political chronicle of stress and chaos. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's." Empires rise and fall, ideologies change, power shifts. Yet, through it all, God is eternal and working His way toward calling the lost into belonging and building His Kingdom in us. No worldly power can stop Him. No manmade government can override His will. He will reign victorious no matter the outcome of Roman occupied Jerusalem in 30 AD or politically divided America in 2024 AD.

So if it *doesn't matter* what human governments do because God's power is stronger, does that mean we just don't vote?

Almost all the Jews were killed when Jerusalem was eventually overthrown by the Romans shortly after Jesus died. The remnant that survived the slaughter ran off into the hills to hide pieces of the Bible, which were found in 1947 and called the Dead Sea Scrolls.\*\* After a while, that small remnant of wounded and defeated Jews eventually went off to what is modern day Eurasia and Africa, never to return until only recently.

I bring this sad fact up in response to the question “well, do we Christians just not vote then, if worldly government problems don’t matter to Jesus?” because think of this: Jesus healed hundreds, if not thousands, of people, mostly Jews living in occupied Palestine during the time period. Probably most, if not all, the people that Jesus healed during his lifetime were killed violently during the Roman overthrow of Jerusalem only a few years later.

Despite knowing that all the people he was healing were going to die at the hands of Rome shortly, Jesus still healed, and healed, and healed. Jesus never said that you don’t take action to love, heal, and uplift other people just because they might die in the near future. Jesus never said you don’t make courageous decisions toward building empowerment and hope in others just because the system might fall apart soon. Rather, Jesus built up hope and empowerment in those he encountered because he knew the system *would* fall apart soon!

Jesus' example of healing, knowing the imminent fate of his people, teaches us that actions of life, hope, healing, and love aren't bound by immediate outcomes. Jesus acted in ways that resonated beyond his generation, knowing that the impact of his ministry would echo through centuries and transform countless lives. In that same spirit, voting is an opportunity to reflect our hope for a better world, guided by God's compassion and justice, even if we cannot fully control the immediate outcomes.

When we vote, we're making a declaration that we believe in a world where God's healing, justice, and love matter. We don't place our faith in human governments to bring salvation, but our votes can be an extension of our desire to see God's vision for life and peace in our communities. Our participation is a reflection of our wish to see God's work of hope, renewal, and meaning unfold in our world today.

And while we know that God's plans are ultimately more beautiful and enduring than anything we can imagine, our acts of faith—including voting—join with His larger purpose. Think about how, after the fall of Jerusalem, the message of Jesus only grew stronger, spreading far beyond the borders of that ancient city. His teachings outlasted empires and continue to bring new life to this day – even if all the people he directly healed himself died in a violent overthrow.

When we vote, we're making a declaration that we believe in a world where God's healing, justice, and love matter. Our participation reflects our hope to see life, hope, and all the fruits of God's Kingdom embodied in our communities. It's okay to care about what happens to our country; it's okay to invest in its future by voting. As Christians, we want to work toward healing, hope, and justice together, rooted in our faith.

At the same time, we can trust that God is in control no matter the outcome of this election. We are called to do our part, and then to rest in the assurance that God's Kingdom will be actualized in His perfect time. Empires may rise and fall, but His Kingdom is eternal, and His plans are ultimately stronger and more beautiful than anything we could envision. So let us cast our votes, trust in God's sovereignty, and look forward with hope, knowing that He holds all things in His hands.

Amen.

\*<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/americans-election-stress-survey-how-to-cope/>

\*\*<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dead-Sea-Scrolls>