

## Focus on Matthew 22:15–22

### **WHAT is important to know?** — From “Exegetical Perspective,” Susan Grove Eastman

Then comes the trick question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v. 17). The Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property, and determined by registration in the census. It was administered by Jewish authorities, but it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished residents of first-century Palestine. So if Jesus answers, “Yes,” to the question, he risks alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine; if he answers, “No,” he can be accused of fostering sedition. Brilliantly, Jesus refuses to do either, and in his answer he shows what is truly “lawful”—that is, what fulfills the law of God.

### **WHERE is God in these words?** — From “Theological Perspective,” Andrew Purves

If Christianity remains the cult of the private, the community, or the institution, it sanctions civil religion and ratifies the religious sanctification of society as it is. While eschatology forces Christianity to refuse to identify the present structures of society with the kingdom of God, demythologizing civil religion, the cross of Christ forces Christians to become involved in concrete struggle for public freedom. In the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the coming kingdom of God, we set death and present social, political, and economic reality in a redemptive perspective; death and the deadly systems that kill and dehumanize people are criticized and mobilized against.

### **SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?** — From “Pastoral Perspective,”

Richard E. Spalding

When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on the forehead, the image of all those children in the arms of their mothers. All those faces are a part of your face, when you begin to see the image that God sees, the God who, in Jesus, stands behind us with full faith and credit.

### **NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?** — From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Marvin A. McMickle

Many issues speak to the places where this passage challenges the church today. There are devout Christians on both sides of all these issues. The question for the church is not whether we should or should not pay taxes. The greater question is, what do we expect from and demand from the government that is supported by our tax dollars? Not only that, but what does conscience demand of Christians when the actions of their government and the teachings of their faith appear to be in conflict? This has never been an easy issue, but Christians have never been excused from engaging it.

## Who Are Those Guys?

In the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Butch and the Kid ask that question no fewer than four times about the band of pursuers who chase them throughout the movie.

In order to better understand today's passage, "Who are those guys?" is a good question to consider. Who are these groups that hound Jesus in this text—and who are two other groups that loom in the background?



### Pharisees

Pharisees were a lay group (not priests) who believed that righteousness came through strict adherence to the Law, both written (Torah) and oral traditions. Their primary sphere of influence was in the synagogues, where teaching rather than ritual was central. It is ironic that Jesus has so many conflicts with the Pharisees, as they were the group most closely resembling his spirit of teaching (see, for example, Matthew 5:17–18).



### Herodians

Herod the Great had been the last relatively independent king of the Jews. Though the Herodians are mentioned only twice in the Gospels, it is believed this group constituted a faction in Judaism that supported the reestablishment of a Herodian dynasty. One son of Herod, Antipas, ruled in Galilee (most famous for his execution of John the Baptizer). A nephew of Herod, Agrippa, would later come into power. Both Antipas and Agrippa relied on Roman favor to hold their positions. Thus, the Herodians would not have wanted to disturb this relationship.



### Sadducees

Sadducees represented the priestly and scribal leaders who were in charge of the Jerusalem temple. While they, like the Pharisees, believed righteousness came through adherence to the Law, Sadducees accepted no other authority other than the Torah. Looming alongside the temple was the Roman fortress called the Antonia. To keep the Romans from further interfering with the temple (one tradition holds that Pontius Pilate even held the high priest's vestments in the Antonia, releasing them only for the Passover), Sadducees would have wanted to smooth relations with Rome to keep their own power and what independence they possessed intact.



### Zealots

It is believed the Zealots originated in a group that rebelled against a Roman census in 6 CE in Galilee. Like the Pharisees, they believed righteousness came through observance of the Law. But the Zealots also had a fierce belief in liberty, and they believed that the Law could never be fully observed in the land until its Roman occupiers were cast out. The movement suffered a fatal blow when their revolt against Rome in 66 CE resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem. A recent book, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* by Reza Aslan, provocatively associates Jesus with the Zealot movement.