

## “The Teaching: Risking Challenge”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden  
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, March 23, 2025

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ  
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/>

Scripture for the day: Matthew 22:15-22 [NLT]  
(\*// Mark 12:13-17 // Luke 20:20-26\*)

### Other references:

Borg, Marcus J. & John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

Levine, Amy-Jill. *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018).

McFee, Marcia. *Worship Design Studio* (<https://www.worshipdesignstudio.com/>). Materials for the worship series, “Entering the Passion of Jesus: Picturing Ourselves in the Story”.

### OPENING

- We continue on our journey through Lent as we step inside the story of a teacher who turned the world upside down.

We put ourselves in the picture of Holy Week so that we might take a closer look and let the ancient story open us to deeper conviction for the call to follow Jesus, that Teacher.



- In His last week, Jesus doesn't “lay low.” He puts himself “out there”: Susceptible to those who want to trap him, twist his words, get him to say something damning. He cannot turn from his vocation—he is not only a master teacher, but also a prophet and voice of the Divine. It is his ability to draw the people with his teachings that makes Him a threat, a challenge, to the authorities.

We place ourselves in the crowd this week, to be moved and motivated by Jesus – to get a faithful perspective. What would we have seen, heard, and felt? What do we do now?

### TO THE SCRIPTURE LESSON for TODAY

- Like last week's lesson on the “cleansing of the Temple” – or what we re-termed the “symbolic destruction of the Temple” – this week's lesson has to do with an event we think we know a lot about. But there's much more to discover. It has to do with “giving unto Caesar what is Caesar's and giving unto God what is God's”. Depicted in art form, it could've looked something like this:



## SERMON THOUGHTS – Zooming in on Our “Character of the Week”



Jesus kept showing up at the Temple that week, even after the skirmish in the Temple market. You’d think he would back off, [you know?]: Lay low, stay out

of the way. His name was on the watch list for sure. Had been for some time. I hear that even when he was born, he was perceived as a threat. That’s what I hear...before my time here, though.

My allegiance is to Herod, and I’ve been placed here to help oversee the Jews this week. This Passover... [festival] here in this city makes me so nervous. The

place is packed. We were instructed to see if we could get this Jesus to say something that would prove he means harm to the state, that he will encourage people to disobey the Roman laws, or that he will create a rebellion that will get ugly.

So, we were instructed to catch this guy saying something we can charge him with. They teamed us up with some Pharisees, Jewish priests that oversee the rules for their own people. These particular priests are no more than spies, I would say. They want him shut down as much as Herod does. But they lay it on thick, I tell you. Cozying up, telling him that he’s such an amazing teacher. I decided to stay out of the way. It actually makes my stomach turn, all this deceitful stuff. I’m sure this guy will go off the rails [sometime] and end up in prison or worse. I just hope it is over quick.

What? What did he just say? Well, this is something! He’s got the Pharisees reaching into their pockets to get a denarius. Ha! This guy is good! Nothing wrong with that answer! They won’t be able to get him today.

## TO THE SCRIPTURES

Let’s unpack some of the richness of the Scriptural setting, so we can appreciate what Jesus has done here.

1. Jesus sets His own trap for the Pharisees and the Herodians, both groups being supportive of the Roman oppressors for their own reasons. Jesus calls them “hypocrites”. Is it only because they have betrayed their own people with their allegiance to Empire instead of to their own nation as God’s chosen people? No, there’s more to their hypocrisy. What might the Roman coin used to pay the taxes have looked like?



For a Jew to be in possession of such a Roman coin would have been a violation of Jewish Law which forbade the use of the graven images which appeared on that coin. Not to mention the blasphemy of the engraved titles: “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine [or Deified] Augustus”, in other words, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of God” on one side and “High Priest” on the other side, accompanying not an image of Caesar Augustus Tiberius, but of a woman, perhaps Tiberius’ wife, Julia [Levine, 71].

So, these two groups are exposed as being part of the politics of collaboration, and Jesus wins the encounter before he even utters his famous statement associated with this passage [Borg & Crossan, 64].

2. The two parts of the statement:
  - a. Give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar
  - b. Give unto God what belongs to God

It’s a brilliant response. As to the first part, “Give unto Caesar...”, Jesus sloughs off their hoped-for entrapment by saying, not in so many words but essentially, “You just told me it’s Caesar’s

coin...then give it back to him.” The Pharisees and Herodians know they have not been successful in forcing Jesus to speak against Roman law. And the people listening know Jesus has just mocked the Pharisees and Herodians and beaten them at their own game.

As to the second part, “Give unto God”, the Jewish followers of Jesus know what their Scriptures say: The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1). So, what belongs to God? Everything. What belongs to Caesar? Nothing [Ibid., 64-5].

Instead of discrediting Jesus in front of the crowd – something the Pharisees and Herodians banked on happening by their setting Jesus up in this trap – Jesus’ interaction with his interrogators actually elevated his status in the people’s eyes, increasing their confidence, trust, admiration, and devotion to him.

## WRAP-UP

- In His powerful teaching, Jesus takes the risk of being challenged, trapped, and discredited in front of the crowds. Yet, He holds fast to His convictions and deftly responds to those who seek to humiliate Him. More than that, He inspires strength, confidence, and trust in those who long for something beyond the despicable values of Empire – not unlike His effect on the truly faithful today.

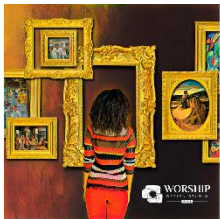
His teachings in this last week of His life go far beyond this one encounter with those who wish to



put a grisly end to His life – and His threat to their power, wealth, and position in society.

But, as we continue our Lenten journey, this particular passage involving the paying of taxes prompts a few questions for us in connection with our relationship with money [Levine, 75]:

1. What do we do with our money? And what do we think of what is done, by others, with our money?
  2. Do we think about what our politicians stand for, since the question of “taxes to...[Caesar]” cannot be divorced from the question of politics?
  3. What do we make of the relationship between Church and State in our time? For what is each responsible? To which does the one answer and to which is the other accountable?
- In other words, how do we picture ourselves in this third scene of our *Entering the Passion of Jesus*?



And...how do  
YOU picture  
YOURself in the  
passion of Jesus?



(\*Referring back to the character in the monologue to set up the Choir REPRISE...\*)

Actually, I'd have to say I'm curious. There's something about him...I wouldn't mind hearing more. [Maybe] I'll volunteer to keep an eye on him. Although, what I really want to do is be around him and hear what else he has to say. There's [just] something about him....

♪ REPRISE of Choral anthem, “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”