

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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JUSTICE ISSUE: ECONOMIC JUSTICE, POWER & EMPIRE, CHRISTIAN WITNESS

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE/ LECTIONARY WEEK:

Matthew 22:15–22

SOCIAL PRINCIPLES/

BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS REFERENCES:

¶160 Preface, ¶161 Preface, ¶163

OBJECTIVE:

To help youth wrestle with questions of allegiance, money, and power by exploring what Jesus meant when he said, “*Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.*” This lesson encourages students to consider how God’s image in us challenges unjust systems and calls us to faithful resistance.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

Coins or paper money (enough for each participant or pair), printed image of a Roman denarius (optional), whiteboard or large paper + markers, Bibles (CEB or NRSV), bucket or basket for closing moment.

LESSON PLAN STRUCTURE (1 HOUR)

CENTERING MOMENT (5 MINUTES)

(Hold up the coin or bill)

Say: This may not look like much, but this small object has shaped history. Money has built kingdoms, influenced governments, and even divided people according to status and wealth. Today we’ll hear a story where Jesus takes a simple coin and completely changes the conversation, not just about money, but about identity and belonging.

(Invite students into a breath prayer)

Say: Let’s quiet ourselves before God.

(Guide them through the prayer three or four times.)

Breathe in: I belong to God

Breathe out: I resist what harms.

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(Pause briefly between each breath)

Say: As we study today, remember that your identity begins with God.

SCRIPTURE STUDY (25 MIN.)

Say: Today's story takes place during Jesus' final week in Jerusalem. Religious leaders and political leaders are looking for a way to trap him. Every conversation could become dangerous.

(Read Matthew 22:15-22. Invite a second reader if possible)

Ask: What stood out to you?

What surprised you?

Why do you think the leaders were trying to trap Jesus?

(Pause for discussion)

Say: The tax Jesus is asked about wasn't just about money. It was a tax collected by the Roman Empire, the government occupying Israel. Many people hated paying it because it reminded them they were living under foreign rule.

(Hold up the coin)

Say: The coin itself carried the image of the Roman emperor and declared him to be divine. For faithful Jewish people, carrying this coin was a daily reminder of both political oppression and idolatry.

The Pharisees and Herodians normally disagreed about almost everything. But they joined together because they both wanted Jesus gone.

Ask: If Jesus says, 'Pay the tax,' what happens?

(Pause for responses)

Ask: If he says, 'Don't pay it,' what happens?

NOTES

Historical and Cultural Context

- This encounter happens during Jesus' final week in Jerusalem, a period of intense public confrontation between Jesus and the political-religious establishment.
- The imperial tax (Greek: *kēnsos*) was a head tax imposed by the Roman Empire. Many Jews hated it because it symbolized not only economic oppression but also oppression from the occupying power.
- The coin (denarius) was more than currency, it carried the imperial image and inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus." For faithful Jews, this coin was both idolatrous and a daily reminder of violent domination.
- The Herodians were supporters of the puppet king Herod, a Roman collaborator. The Pharisees opposed Roman rule on religious grounds. These two groups hated each other, yet here they join forces to trap Jesus. That's how threatening he was to the status quo.

Jesus isn't giving a clever cop-out. He's forcing a deeper question: *Whose image is on the coin? Caesar's. But whose image is on you? God's.*

Jesus is saying: *You can give the empire its money, but your life, your loyalty, your values, they belong to God.*

Encourage honest, real conversation. Lean into tension. Invite students to name the systems they see around them

- school,
- government,
- even church

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(Pause for discussion)

Say: Jesus refuses to choose either option. Instead he asks a deeper question.

(Hold up the coin)

Ask: Whose image is on this coin?

(Allow students to respond, 'Caesar')

Say: Then Jesus says, 'Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar,' but here's the bigger question: Whose image is on you?

(Pause)

Read or summarize Genesis 1:27

Say: Every one of us is created in God's image. Jesus is reminding us that governments, money, popularity, and power may make claims on us but our deepest identity belongs to God.

This isn't really a lesson about money. It's a lesson about who shapes our lives and where our ultimate loyalty belongs.

Group Discussion Questions:

Identity

- What does it mean to say you are made in God's image?
- Where do you hear messages that your worth depends on something else, looks, money, success, grades, popularity?

Diversity

- What powers or "empires" today try to tell people what they're worth?
- How do these powers impact different people differently, especially those who are poor, Black or brown, LGBTQ+, or undocumented?

Justice

NOTES

Ask how God might be calling them to live differently.

Jesus' message is subtle but revolutionary,

"You may give Caesar his coins, but don't you dare give him your soul. That belongs to God alone."

This is a nonviolent act of resistance. Jesus exposes the idolatry of empire, where money, power, and politics claim ultimate allegiance, and calls people to remember that their truest identity is found in God, not in Rome.

Theological Framing

This passage invites youth to see Jesus not as a safe religious figure, but as a disruptor of false power, one who speaks truth in love, even under threat.

This is not a lesson about money.

It's about allegiance, identity, and what it means to belong to God in a world that constantly tells us to bow to power, profit, and popularity.

The deeper question is:

Who owns your image? Who tells you who you are?

Jesus says: God does.

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- In what ways are people today still being asked to “render to Caesar” or to give loyalty to systems that harm them?
- How does Jesus’ teaching call us to challenge those systems?

Say: The United Methodist Social Principles reminds us that every person has sacred worth because they belong to God and they call on Christians to challenge economic systems that deny human dignity. (Reference ¶160 and ¶161)

Ask:

- Where do you see human dignity honored?
- Where do you see it ignored?

Action:

- If God’s image is stamped on every person, how should that change the way we treat others?
- What would it look like to resist empire today? Not with violence, but with truth, compassion, and courage?

Say: Jesus isn’t asking us to withdraw from the world. He’s asking us to remember who we belong to.

GROUP ACTIVITY (25 MIN.)

(Provide a coin or bill to each student and ask them to examine it.)

Ask:

- Who or what is on this coin or bill?
- Why were these figures chosen? What values do they represent?
- What are modern equivalents of empire in our world (e.g. government, corporations, celebrities, tech, school systems)?
- Then ask:

NOTES

Provide each participant with a coin or dollar bill. Use a whiteboard or poster paper to collect responses. The goal is not to criticize the government or money but to help students recognize how different systems shape identity and values.

This activity translates the theological depth of Matthew 22:15-22 into embodied reflection and justice-oriented dialogue. Students move from observing symbols of power to discerning their own call to action.

Bring in examples of economic injustice that students might connect with:

- The gap between rich and poor schools
- Low wages for essential workers
- Racial wealth inequality
- Debt and financial stress that shapes young people’s futures
- Political systems where money often outweighs justice

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- o Where do we see God's image being honored—or erased—in our world?
- Write down on board or poster examples from youth:
 - o Where do people's worth get denied (e.g. racism, ableism, anti-LGBTQ+ policies, poverty shaming)?
 - o What kinds of power try to define who belongs and who doesn't?

Empire & Power Today:

Invite students to name modern equivalents of “Caesar” or places where we’re told to conform or compromise our faith values. These might include:

- School or social pressures
- Political parties or systems
- Media and advertising
- Economic inequality and consumerism

Social Principles Tie-In:

Share excerpts from:

- ¶163 Christians are called to responsible citizenship, but our first loyalty is to God.
- ¶161 Economic systems should reflect justice, compassion, and dignity for all.

Discussion Prompt:

- What does it mean to “render to God what is God’s”?
- What might this look like in your life, school, or community?
- How might giving to God what is God’s include our voice, our choices, our resistance?

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CLOSING MOMENT (5 MIN.)

Sacred Ritual: Return the Coin

Invite students to hold their coin.

Say: This belongs to Caesar. But your heart doesn't.
Your mind doesn't. Your body doesn't.
You belong to God, whose image you bear.

(Invite students to place their coin into the basket as a silent act of resistance, of rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, and offering themselves back to God.)

Closing Prayer:

God of every generation,
In a world that tells us our worth is what we earn,
You remind us our worth is unshakable.
In systems that demand our silence,
You call us to speak.
In places of fear,

You breathe courage into our lungs.
We return to you what is already yours,
our lives, our choices, our hearts.
Give us strength to walk your way,
To resist what harms,
And to love what you love.

We bear your image. Let us live like it. Amen.

NOTES

Make sure the group fully understands that our first allegiance is to God and Neighbor, and that our blind allegiances to political and economic systems can often be damaging.

Suggested reading/resources

Crossan, John Dominic. *Render unto Caesar: The Struggle over Christ and Culture in the New Testament*. New York: HarperOne, 2007.