

Season of Pentecost – Proper 24
(Commemoration of the USA at 250 years)
July 5, 2026
Pastor Jasper Sellnow



Theme: Citizens of the greatest nation make the greatest citizens of this nation.
Text: **Matthew 22:15-22**

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶They 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. ¹⁷Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for paying the tax.**” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰and 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.**” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.**

The Word of God we’ll consider today is the Gospel from Matthew chapter 22. Let’s begin with prayer:

*Lord, with glowing heart I’d praise thee
For the bliss Thy love bestows,
For the pardoning grace that saves me,
And the peace that from it flows. Amen.
(Francis Scott Key)*

Back in September of 1814 a young but well-respected lawyer from Baltimore was asked to help an old man. This old man was a well-loved doctor who had been captured by the British forces which had just burned Washington D.C. and were heading to Baltimore to attack Fort McHenry and the city of about 40,000 people. This young lawyer who had been asked to help the beloved man was named Francis Scott Key. He went to the British under a flag of truce to secure the release of this elderly doctor. The British commander though decided not to make any decision on this until after the battle was over. So, he refused to release the doctor or Key, who was now forced to watch from a ship in the Chesapeake Bay while the British bombarded Fort McHenry.

The attack began at 7am on September 13th and lasted for about 24 hours. As Key watched the battle rage, he saw the giant American flag with 15 stars and 15 stripes waving in the light of the exploding rockets. But as night went on the flag disappeared from view. Then as dawn approached silence replaced the noise of battle and Key wasn’t sure if the Americans had stood their ground. But in the first light of morning Key saw the American flag waving. The British had abandoned the fight. The Americans had endured. The hope that this brought him as morning dawned inspired Key to write a poem on the back of a letter he was carrying... the opening verse of this poem we know as the “Star Spangled Banner” – which has become our national anthem. In the day of disaster, Francis Scott Key found hope when he saw the American flag.

In times of national tragedy our country still has looked to the flag for hope. When Pearl Harbor was attacked... on 9/11... the flag was a reminder that our nation still stood despite the attacks... And on days like this, when we mark 250 years as a nation, the flag can become a banner for citizens to rally around and to find unity in as we seek to overcome challenges, and differences, and remain strong and free United States of America.

But I don’t share this story with you today to simply to stir up patriotic feelings or even to call us to unite around our nation’s flag as if that alone could bring the peace and freedom we desire. I share this story because of the man who wrote those words about our flag. He happens to be the same man who wrote the words of our hymn of the day that we just sang, as well as the prayer we prayed to open this sermon. Francis Scott Key was an American patriot to be sure, but he was first and foremost a Christian. He understood that the freedoms we

enjoyed as a nation, the multitude of blessings that fall on us living in this land, they are all gifts from the hand of a gracious God.

As we commemorate 250 years as a nation, we remember the truth today that we live as citizens in two kingdoms – yes, we live in the United States – but our primary citizenship is in the kingdom of God. Remember what St. Peter once wrote in the New Testament: **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9**

God sent his Son Jesus Christ into this world to be our Savior from sin. We would have been lost in the darkness of sin, death, and hell forever – but Jesus paid the price for our rebellion and evil and gave forgiveness, life, and eternal blessing to us through faith in his saving name. Yes, we are a holy nation as believers in Jesus – made holy by his blood. Because of this we say with confidence what St. Paul wrote to the Philippians: **our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. Philippians 3:20**

But since we are citizens of this eternal kingdom does that mean we shouldn't care about or just think very little about our citizenship in the nations of this world? Absolutely not. In fact, St. Peter who spoke about our membership in this **holy nation** as God's people, would go in the following verses to say that even while living like aliens, foreigners, here in the world we should fulfill the duties of a Christian. He wrote:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. 1 Peter 2:13-17

God reminds us here of a truth that we'll consider today as we look at Jesus' words in the Gospel reading. The truth is that Christians do not idolize their earthly nation, nor do they neglect to give to it what God says we owe. Instead, we find that: *Citizens of the greatest nation make the greatest citizens of this nation.* And let's go back to our Gospel reading to see Jesus' advice on how best to do this.

This sermon text takes us to holy week, just days before Jesus' death, and we find his enemies hard at work to trap him. Matthew tells us: **Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 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. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"**

There is an old saying that politics makes strange bedfellows. Remember the Pharisees were not just religious leaders in Jesus' day, they were also a part of the patchwork government that the Romans allowed to help govern Judea in local matters. But this was also true of King Herod and his family. While certainly no more than puppet "kings" – the Herod family had partnered with the Romans to secure a spot in local governance for many years. Generally speaking, though the Pharisees and the supporters of Herod were not on good terms. The Pharisees were nationalists who opposed Roman rule and they despised the Herodians for their cooperation with the Roman government that allowed them to retain some small measure of power.

But just like today we might see Democrats and Republicans working together if they have a common cause, so here we see these opposing political groups willing to work together for the cause of getting Jesus in trouble. They hoped by asking a question about paying taxes Jesus would be in a no-win situation. If he said, "Yes, pay the tax." then he would be disparaged by the Pharisees among the people who hated the Romans. And if he said, "No, don't pay the tax." then he could be reported by the Herodians to the Romans who could have him punished, even executed, for treason. Seems like the perfect political trap, doesn't it?

But our Savior wasn't going to fall for it. Matthew goes on: **But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him**

a denarius, and he asked them, **“Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”** **“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.”**

Jesus saw through their political games and instead of answering their foolish question he gave them a clear response regarding what we owe God and government. A denarius was a common coin used to pay a day’s wage for a general laborer in those days. On one side of the coin, you would find a picture of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar. And on the other side was an inscription as well that said “pontifex maximus” which was a reference to Caesar being not just head of state, but the head of worship.

Should believers pay taxes? Of course. We owe that to the government. **Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s** as Jesus said. St. Paul in our second reading today expanded on this thought and rightly said: **Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established... Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Romans 13:1, 7**

But believers should never give to the government what belongs to God alone. Only God deserves our worship, our full trust and confidence, our eternal hope and salvation. No government deserves homage for such things. And while patriotism can be a good thing, we should be careful not to turn it into an idol.

God established government to preserve general peace and order in society, and he expects his people to live their lives aware of this truth and respecting the rule he has placed them under in the nations of this world. It doesn’t matter if we like the government or not. Or even if it is godly or not. In fact, when Jesus spoke his words, when Paul wrote his words, when Daniel spoke in our first reading... these nations – Babylon, Rome – they were run by pagan rulers who often did evil and oppressed the people of God. Remember Daniel and his three friends would later face a lion’s den and a fiery furnace when government persecution came. Paul would be beheaded by the Roman government. And Jesus of course after speaking these words in our sermon text would be crucified that same week at the direction of the Roman government.

God uses governments to bless his people. He has certainly done that in our nation these past 250 years. We could have debates over the founding of our nation and whether it was right to rebel against Britain and fight a war for independence, but regardless of the motives of the men who founded this nation, God has used this country to serve the good of his people in an imperfect and sinful world.

There are some people that say this nation and the form of democracy we use is the best kind of government on earth. Christians in America have often spoken in favor of this form of government not because it is perfect or because it has some specific mandate from the Bible, but because in this form of government the selfishness of one sinner tends to keep in check the selfishness of another sinner as each competes for his own advantage. In this way, at least relative freedom is preserved for the majority. Winston Churchill once said, *“Democracy is the worst form of government that has been invented by man, except for every other form that has been tried.”* This may be true, it may not be... but regardless it is not the reason we live as good citizens and thank God for America.

We do that because we are citizens of the kingdom of God and trust what his Word says about our citizenship in his kingdom and our duty as citizens in this world. This is why we say without any boast on our part that *Citizens of the greatest nation make the greatest citizens of this nation.*

Just think about it! Who can serve the government better than a Christian? Only a Christian can have truly unselfish motivation, for he realizes that true happiness is not a life cluttered with possessions and hors, but a life filled by Christ. A Christian citizen, who already possesses all things through Christ, does not have to grasp and claw for his own advantage. He can risk himself and his own possessions. He can let go of self-interest because he knows that Christ is his solid possession. Because he has a sober, realistic view of early life, a Christian can serve without desperation or fanaticism. As Christian citizens we should work hard to help create an atmosphere in which the gospel can have free course and in which people can live in peace with justice, yet we will trust all our hope for the future to God alone.

So be good citizens, brothers and sisters. Obey, support, honor, and pray for those in authority. Don't mock and ridicule the president or others in authority. Don't look to them as savior either. Pray for them, pray for their work, and trust that God alone will bless you through or despite them.

Pay your taxes. Not begrudgingly, not because you'll face legal consequences if you don't, but because God tells you to give them to your government so they can provide for the general good of the nation. If they misuse those taxes, they will answer to God.

Be wise and godly when you vote. Don't just vote for candidates and issues that will serve your own interests. Be a Christian citizen – selfless, loving, and concerned about preserving peace for the sake of the gospel. Know what God's Word says so that you can be clear where you stand on the issues, even if you are forced to vote at times for people who are not perfectly in line with what you believe. Remember, you can't assume you will find one person or one political party that can deliver on godly government all the time. You're dealing with sinners making compromises in a fallen world. You should seek the best possible solutions when you vote but understand it will not be perfect this side of heaven.

Often the key to a Christian view of citizenship is moderation and a balance between the extremes of placing too much trust and energy into human efforts to improve the world and the opposite error of sitting back and doing nothing because we feel that the situation is hopeless.

Edward Everett Hale was a grandnephew of Nathan Hale, a founding father who served as an American spy during the Revolutionary war. He offered practical advice that a Christian might consider as a citizen when he said, *"I am only one man. I can't do everything. Yes, but I am one man, and I can do something. And what I can do, I should do. And what I should do, with the grace and help of God, I will do."*

With the grace and help of God give to the government what belongs to it, but as Jesus said, **"Give to God what is God's."** May the Savior who loved us and gave himself for our sins by his death on the cross, motivate us to live as citizens of the greatest nation – the kingdom of God – while also living as in this life as the greatest citizens of this nation, eager to do God's will and to serve this country that he has placed us in. Until the day we join the vision St. John saw in Revelation... when we stand together with **a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb... wearing white robes and... holding palm branches...** and saying: **"Salvation belongs to our God."** Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters, as St. Paul once said: **I urge that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.** Amen. **1 Timothy 2:1-4**