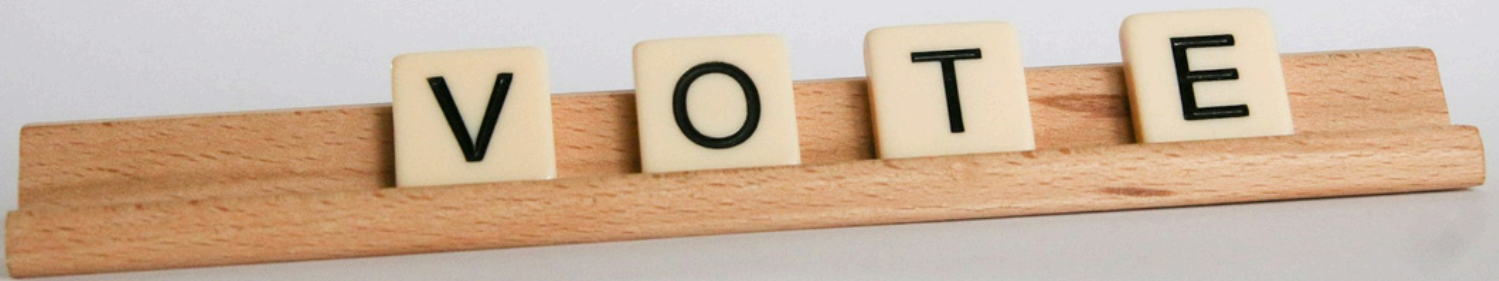


THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

October 18, 2026



SINCERE

and the dishonesty of buttering someone up

by Drew Downs

"Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think." This is how disciples of the Pharisees try to butter Jesus up before trapping him in a heresy. And some people seem to assume the tricksters feel the same obligation to sincerity. As if their trap needs to be taken as credible. Taking the question itself as something we could answer.

The question in question is entirely contextual. It has nothing to say about us and our taxes directly. But treating it this way is to fall into the same trap they set for Jesus. Because they aren't being sincere. They just want you to believe that you need to be. It's a trap, remember? And the point of the trap is to contain your response. Jesus sees through their trap and resets it for them. To expose the lie. To reveal what they are trying to do. And what this makes of them.

ORDINARY TIME

2026

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Christian and Citizen

Early voting started this week in Indiana. It is also the week when we read the most quoted political gospel story, when Jesus is asked about taxes and offers up a great sound bite. This is precisely the sort of moment when we should address the elephant (and donkey) in the middle of the room.

The most obvious challenge for Christians in the US is how to be both Christian and a US citizen. Jesus has taught frequently about the impossibility of splitting our loyalties when it comes to money and God. Why then do so many of us think that we can serve these two masters? (it'll work this time!) One of the tricks we offer is to say God always comes first, but when the flag or guns come out, we quickly pledge our allegiance.

Perhaps what I'm saying is that separate or not, people's moral imaginations can be deeply harmful. Or incredibly noble.

Two of the twentieth century's greatest moral minds had little trouble connecting their faith with their citizenship, promoting their Christian values in ways that served the greater good through civic action. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the exemplar of the civil rights movement's religious foundation and Frances Perkins reveals the religious foundation of the New Deal. Both were unabashed Christian witnesses. But their service was to God, to the welfare of all people, and to the common good. There need be no separation between our bedrock values of love and Shalom from our civic lives. In fact, it is everything else that would be incompatible to both.

With love,
Drew+

ORDINARY TIME

2026

FOR SUNDAY

Proper 24A

October 18, 2026

Collect

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Reflection

The Temple leaders were on the receiving end of three challenging parables from Jesus where he seemed to be calling them wicked and murderous and unfaithful. Their response to this has been to (unintentionally) prove Jesus right by seeking to silence Jesus and destroy his reputation. And their first move is to send others to do their dirty work.

ORDINARY TIME

The Pharisees send their disciples to Jesus and put him in front of followers of Herod, the king to ask a loaded, political question about taxes, which they obviously hope will put Jesus into a position to either undermine his own authority with the loyalists or reinforce it.

Rather than pick a side or demure from the question, Jesus eliminates the trap itself.

This teaching is often treated as a straightforward question about our relationship with the state (it isn't) and marshalled as support for the modern concept of separation between church and state. The idea of giving to God what is God's and the emperor the emperor's sounds like a process of separating the material of life, but for Jesus, as it was for the people, this is like Solomon's advice of splitting the baby: a strained impossibility. For all of creation is God's. This isn't a practical decision-matrix—it's an exposure of the loyalty test the Pharisees' disciples were trying to give him.

We ought to recognize a loyalty test when we see one because we ask the better question of ourselves as "is this of God or is this of humanity?" We ask this when we try to figure out whether to go along with demands that will cause harm to people, for example. When the state wants to execute a prisoner, perhaps. Livestream it, even.

The question at the root of Jesus's response flips the loyalty test they were giving on its head to expose them. To expose their split loyalties. And this made plain to the witnesses of this moment, who see a people carrying Roman currency who shouldn't be, revealing the coin with an idolatrous image of an emperor who proclaimed himself to be a god stamped into it. That's a challenge to Commandments #1 **and** 2!

Despite the way it's treated, this isn't a teaching about going along with the state because it is to be kept separate from God. It is about revealing the way we, for the sake of power, divide our loyalty between God and an idol.

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