**Matthew 22:15-22**

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-22/matthew-2215-22/>

The Pharisees send spies to trap Jesus into saying something against Rome. They bring along some pro-Roman Herodians as conspirators in their plot. They ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay poll-taxes to Caesar or not. Jesus perceives their trap and calls them on it before answering their question. He asks for a coin and whose likeness it bears. When he is told the image belongs to Caesar, Jesus answers “to render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:20-26.

Since coming to Jerusalem a few days earlier, Jesus had allowed the people to proclaim Him to be the Messiah (Matthew 21:7-11); cleansed the temple of many changers (possibly twice) (Matthew 21:12-13); healed the blind and lame in the temple (Matthew 21:14); taught in the temple (Matthew 21:23); sparred with religious establishment and come out ahead (Matthew 21:15-16; 23-27; 42-46); and taught in parables 21:28-32; 33-41; 22:1-14).

Then, Matthew recorded, the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Jesus in what He said.

The Pharisees were the religious scribes who prided themselves for promoting God’s law. They taught in the local synagogues. They kept a stern watch on who was following their customs and traditions. But their rules were a perversion of God’s law to serve their own ends. And the Pharisees used their authority and rules to twist the goodness of God’s laws for their own advantage and to the detriment of those whom they were supposed to serve. The Pharisees were disturbed by Jesus’s teaching and miracles, because He did not follow their rules. But whenever the Pharisees had confronted Him about this, Jesus rebuked and humiliated them (Matthew 9:2-8; 9:11-13; 12:1-45; 15:1-11; 16:1-4).

The Pharisees hated Jesus for this, but they were also afraid of Him because the people “considered Him to be a prophet” (Matthew 21:46). This made it difficult for them to get rid of the increasingly popular Jesus while not losing the good opinion of the masses. The Pharisees were held in high regard by the people.

And so, they plotted together how they might trap Jesus in what He publicly said. They hoped to catch Him in saying something that they could use against Him so they could deliver Him over to Pilate, the Roman governor (Luke 20:20).

But they recognized that Jesus was difficult to trap. And they knew He would likely be on His guard if they were present. They may have even suspected that He might refuse to answer their question if He knew it was the Pharisees doing the asking, as He had done when they refused to answer His question about John the Baptist (Matthew 21:26-27). And so, they sent some of their disciples to trap Him. Luke recorded that the Pharisees sent “spies who pretended to be righteous” (Luke 20:20). This suggests that the disciples that the Pharisees sent were dressed as normal everyday Jews and not in their religiously affiliated attire. They may have even dressed as though they were poor to coax Jesus into saying something that would please the crowd and anger Rome.

Matthew and Markdetail that the Pharisees sent their spies along with the Herodians (Mark 12:13). The Herodians were members of Herod’s party. Herod was the half-Jew, puppet king who had ruled over Judea when Jesus was born. His power had depended upon Rome. After his death, several of his sons ruled over parts of Israel. Herod’s party had already arrested and killed John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12), whose message was very similar to Jesus’s (Matthew 3:2; Matthew 4:17). The Herodians were planted there also to keep a sharp ear to see if what Jesus said whiffed of anything anti-Roman or anti-Caesar. The Jews’ motive was clearly to find some way to get Jesus killed. But according to the Jewish historian Josephus, only Rome held the power of capital punishment because their high counsel could not officially meet without prior Roman approval (Antiquities 20.9.1).

The ultra-legalistic Pharisees and the licentiously pagan Herodians were on opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum in Judea, and generally were at odds. However, the one thing that appeared to unite them was opposition to Jesus. Their strange partnership to trap Jesus in what He said was sinister and full of malice.

The Pharisees’ spies said to Jesus, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any.

They began their trap by addressing Him with a title of respect, Teacher. It is likely that they used the Hebrew word for Teacher, “Rabbi.”

They continued their deceit with a flurry of compliments. We know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth. This was said to flatter Jesus and make Him think that He was speaking to an admirer and not an opponent.

Next came: You defer to no one and are not partial to any. The fact that Jesus deferred to no one might be an acknowledgement that He spoke from His own authority—“You have heard it said…, but I say to you…” (Matthew 5:27-28; 5:38). To the astonishment of His crowds, Jesus did not defer to the authority of other Rabbis as was common practice (Matthew 7:28-29).

Finally, they said: you are not partial to any. This was an admission that Jesus had developed a reputation for not favoring any particular party or group. It was an exhortation for Jesus to not hold back or be delicate in His response if He had something to say against Caesar or Rome. All these hypocritical compliments and exhortations were intended to coax Jesus into giving a substantive answer that they could use to nail Him.

After their flattery came their trap. Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” The preliminary question, tell us then, what you think? was a way of putting Jesus on the record. The actual question was Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or is it not lawful to pay this tax? It was a politically charged and loaded ‘either-or’ question.

Tiberius Caesar was the emperor of Rome. He was the face of its empire. The Pharisees’ spies were using the name Caesar as a synonym for Rome. Roman rule was resented by many Jews throughout Judea. Their Gentile customs and pagan religion were blatant violations of God’s law. It was a humiliating situation that Rome occupied Judea; that Roman law was the governing law of the land; that Jews had to submit to their authority; and that they had to pay tribute to Rome in the form of taxes—including poll-taxes for safe travel along “Rome’s” roads.

Using the example of poll-tax was a sore reminder of Rome’s dominion for many of Jesus’s listeners and supporters. Many of them had likely paid a poll-tax days or weeks earlier on their way to Jerusalem when they came for Passover.

Much of the Messianic hope during Jesus’s day arose from the hope that God would send a Messiah to overthrow the hated yoke of Roman occupation. As was seen when He recently entered Jerusalem triumphantly and cleared the temple, many Jews were beginning to place these Messianic hopes upon Jesus.

On one side of the trap was for Jesus to say “yes” and affirm that Israelites should pay taxes. This would paint Jesus into a corner that would make Him appear anti-Jewish/pro-Roman. This would alienate Jesus from the people and make it easier for the religious rulers to deal with Him without fear of pushback from the people. In fact, it might allow them to plot his death by their own hands and get away with it.

If Jesus would not be pushed into this corner, then perhaps they could push Him into a pro-Jewish/anti-Roman corner. This would be even better for them, because then they could turn Him over to Rome as an insurrectionist, to deal with Jesus (as it did to John the Baptist). Rome could put Him to death. This seems to be their hoped for result, as Luke 20:20 states that their objective was to turn Jesus over to the power and authority of the Roman governor.

And if Rome arrested Him, the Pharisees could wave their hands and pretend to be blameless. In essence, they could say to the people, “Rome imprisoned Jesus. It wasn’t us. We had nothing to do with what happened to Him.”

Their phrasing is it lawful to give was carefully calibrated to mislead and trap Jesus. It was a perfect political framing; no matter how Jesus reacted to their framing, He would lose.

The phrase, is it lawful, immediately spring-loaded legal technicalities and ramifications into their question. Notice how they did not ask, “is it **right** to pay” or “is it **good** to pay.” And yet this seemed to be the sense in which they asked Jesus this question. But these were not the words they chose because Rome cared little about personal preferences and sentiments. However, Rome vigilantly guarded its laws.

The Pharisees’ spies were trying to trick Jesus into answering if He felt it was good or bad that Jews paid the Roman poll-tax to Caesar, but they phrased their question in such a way that if Jesus answered it as they hoped and expected Him to do, they would have the evidence they needed to charge Him with encouraging Jews to break Roman laws.

Jesus instantly perceived their malice and brilliantly swatted away their treacherous framing. The Pharisees were exceedingly astute politicians, but they were no match for Jesus.

Jesus could have perceived their wolf-like malice because He was naturally shrewd as a serpent while innocent as a dove (Matthew 10:16). He instructed His disciples to “Beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues” (Matthew 10:17). Or Jesus might have used supernatural insight to see through their deception. God is never fooled by appearances.

Or Jesus could have detected their malice by submitting His heart and mind to the will of His Father and followed the guidance of the Spirit during this dangerous moment, “For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matthew 10:20).

In any case, He said to them, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?” By refusing to engage directly with their framing, Jesus pivoted to reframe the issue. Jesus initially reframed their question by exposing its reality: it is a test by a group of hypocrites. Now instead of the crowd’s attention being focused on wondering how Jesus will answer the question, their attention is redirected to a confrontation between Jesus and His opponents whom He just addressed as hypocrites.

Jesus knew these spies were only pretending to be His followers. He called them, “hypocrites.” “Hypocrite” is the Greek word for “actor.” Jesus knew who sent these spies. And He knew what they were trying to do to Him. He called them out and asked them why they were trying to trap Him. Jesus used the Gentile phrase hypocrite as a negative brand. The popular Pharisees are known to subsequent generations primarily by this negative brand.

After this clever redirection, Jesus took the next step in His reframing:

He said, Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax. At this point the people in the crowd have likely forgotten about the original (disingenuous) question. They probably now wonder what Jesus was up to. Even as Jesus was reframing the interaction, He was still staying within the same general subject. He will also pose questions that will make the Pharisees look ridiculous if they don’t answer.

Those who asked Him about the poll-tax brought Him a denarius. A denarius was a coin that was worth an average workers’ daily wages.

When Jesus received the coin, He looked at it. Minted into the coin was a likeness or image of someone. Jesus asked, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” In a previous test, the Pharisees asked Jesus the source of His authority. Jesus asked them in return the source of John the Baptist’s authority, which they answered with “We don’t know” (Luke 20:1-8). Now if they answer “We don’t know” to the question “Whose likeness and inscription” is on the coin, they will look like idiots. So, Jesus imposed upon them to engage with His framing.

They responded “Caesar’s.” Caesar was the emperor, the top ruler, of the entire Roman Empire.

Instead of saying “pay the poll tax” or “don’t pay the pool tax,” Jesus said, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.”

His reply brilliantly and directly answered the Pharisees’ question without falling into their trap. It pleased the Jewish crowd but gave the Pharisees and Herodians nothing they could twist and use against Him.

On one hand, Jesus functionally said to pay the poll tax. Therefore, they couldn’t go to Herod or Pilate, the Roman governor, with this statement and successfully charge Jesus with teaching insurrection. But at the same time Jesus also said even as Jews pay Caesar what belongs to him, they are also to give God what belongs to Him. In doing this, Jesus asserted that God is over all, including Caesar. But He did so in a manner that the Jews would understand this to be the claim. At the same time, there would be no words the Herodians or Pharisees could use to twist against Him in front of Caesar.

Jesus avoided their either/or trap with a both/and response. He refused to engage with their lose-lose framing. Jesus reframed the question, and made the Jews engage with His framing, which was lose-lose for the Jews. Importantly, His phrasing did not put God and Caesar on the same level, but also avoided giving any grounds for the Jews to use against Him.

Matthew added, and hearing His incredible answer, they were amazed. This indicates that even Jesus’s enemies were impressed by His response. They didn’t think Jesus would be able to successfully answer their clever question without offending at least one side. But He did. So, they left Him and went away.

Jesus’s response gives place for human government, and it gives honor to God. As John the Baptist instructed governing officers like tax collectors and soldiers to be just in their interactions with those beneath them (Luke 3:12-14), so too does Jesus instruct people to pay their taxes to the proper governing authorities over them. In a general sense both John the Baptist’s and Jesus’s statements legitimize human government. But Jesus’s statement about Caesar and his poll tax is not an exhaustive treatise on God and human government.

Romans 13 is a more thorough statement for how the Christian should understand God’s purpose for government. Paul instructs the Roman believers to obey our governing authorities because they are established by God (Romans 13:1). Even in their pagan (the Roman Empire) or secular forms (most modern nation-states), governments (often unwittingly) function as a minister of God for our good if we do good and are His avenger of wrath upon wicked lawbreakers (Romans 13:4). In short, governments, imperfect as they are, generally promote justice and good order on earth so that human beings can flourish. Therefore, we should be subject to their authority, pay taxes (Romans 13:6), obey custom, and respect (Romans 13:7), and love our neighbors (Romans 13:8).

Government’s authority is from God. Its officers are accountable to God for how they stewarded the authority He grants them. The Apostle Paul wrote Romans 13, and was unjustly condemned and killed by Rome. This makes it clear that allegiance to God comes above that to human government, in another both/and application. The Apostles Peter and John applied this same approach when ordered by Jewish authorities to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. They answered: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge” (Acts 4:19).

There is always a hierarchy of authority, but scripture never allows us to claim ourselves as the authority; that was the source of Satan’s fall (Isaiah 14:12-13).

Jesus did not come to replace Rome or to compete with Caesar for his temporary throne which can easily be toppled. Jesus came to establish an everlasting kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 11:28). His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Caesar, or any human government, has an important function to fulfill in this world by establishing order and promoting justice in the meantime. Jesus grants Caesar’s authority and taught His followers to respect it. But Caesar cannot compete with Jesus. Everything ultimately belongs to Christ. That is why we are to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.

We are to obey our government, pay our taxes, but save our worship and devotion to God. Of interesting note, the ultimate human authority established in the United States is “We the People.” Which this, according to Romans 13, means every U.S. citizen has a divine responsibility to seek justice and establish a government that serves its proper purposes.

**Biblical Text**

**15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. 16 And they \*sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. 17 Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” 18 But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? 19 Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought Him a denarius. 20 And He \*said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” 21 They \*said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then He \*said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” 22 And hearing this, they were amazed, and leaving Him, they went away.**