

Matthew 22:15-22

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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 Mark detail 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.