

Matthew 22:15-22

- 15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.
- 16 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.
- 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”
- 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?
- 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.
- 20 Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?”
- 21 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.”
- 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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- 15 *Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.*
- 16 *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.*

- The authorities didn't dare confront Jesus directly in public because of his great popularity with the crowds.
- Why did the Pharisees send representatives in their place? Conventional wisdom is that they had been battered and had lost face during their encounters with Jesus and were loathe to risk further damage.

- How often compliments are wielded as swords to set up a withering critique or a cruel judgment! Here, these clever words are an attempt to set Jesus up for a fall!
- Attempts to discredit Jesus had failed, so now they set a trap: Will Jesus disavow all earthly authority? Will he bow to Roman rule? Either way, Jesus would be ensnared.
- Ordinarily the Herodians and the Pharisees would be adversaries, but they have common purpose in seeking to silence Jesus. Imagine! They'd rather embrace enemies than the Son of Man!

17 *Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”*

- The typical tax was a denarius per person.
- The dilemma for Jesus here is obvious.
- Around 8 AD, Judas the Gaulonite defied Quirinius and refused to pay this tax on the grounds that Israel had no king but God. He encouraged Jews not to register and those that did had their houses burnt and their cattle stolen by his followers.
- Do you think the Pharisees would have been willing to answer this question publicly? Yet they will certainly expect a clear and specific answer from Jesus!

18 *But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?*

19 *Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.*

- I find some small humor in verse 18, when it says that Jesus was “aware of their malice.” Yes, he was!
- Jesus did not fear other voices, because he was always able to listen for the voice of the Father in the midst of the noise.

- Their sin was not only that they sought to ensnare Jesus, but that they presented themselves in the guise of just men who were sincerely perplexed about a complex issue.
- The appearance of the denarius renders the discussion rather moot, because, even with God as the ultimate king, it shows that Caesar holds political sway over the nation. The fact that they produced a denarius is proof that those opposing Jesus have already accepted Caesar's authority.
- The temple tax was paid with Jewish shekels.

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21 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.”

22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

- Jesus does not evade the question, but steps out of the trap and springs it on his accusers.
- In a sense, Jesus is answering in the affirmative, and recognizing worldly authority; but he takes the discussion to a new and spiritual level: What shall be our relationship and our responsibilities to our God?
- Even when we are subject to civil authority we are free in faith and spirit!
- Scholars debate what Jesus meant. Did he mean that paying taxes to Caesar did not relieve Jews of their responsibility to pay the annual temple tax, or, more probably, that they should give their all—mind, body, and spirit—to God?!

- Robert E. Luccock in “Preaching Through Matthew” writes, *“Of these things we may be sure: on some days to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s will be to render to God the things that are God’s, for God has a stake in the things that are Caesar’s. On other days to render to God the things that are God’s will be to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, for Caesar has a stake in the things that are God’s. And yet on other days to render to God the things that are God’s will be to deny what Caesar demands. And on our darkest days we may render to Caesar the things that are God’s unwittingly or by choice. But God’s grace is sufficient for all seasons in the valley of decision.”*

- What does it mean to “give to God the things that are God’s?”
- In his novel, “Saint Francis,” Nikos Kazantzakis tells of the time when Francis Bernadone and his companion Brother Leo suddenly hear bells jangling ahead on the road where they are walking. It is the warning signal that a leper approaches. Brother Leo tries to persuade Francis to take another road. Says Francis, *“There will be a leper on every road we take. You’ll see, the streets will become filled with them. They will not disappear until we have fallen into their arms.”* Francis runs toward the leper with outstretched arms, embraces him, and kisses his putrifying lips. It is as if to confirm what Francis has said to Brother Leo: *“God asks us what we don’t want and then says, ‘That’s what I want.’ He asks us what we hate and then says, ‘That’s what I love. Do what displeases you because that is what pleases me.”*