

## Chapter 91: The Loyalties of a Pilgrim People

*Matthew 22:15–22*

In every society, politics and religion are notoriously complex and controversial topics. This was just as much true today as it was in Jesus' day, when the Jewish people took pride in the hope that a Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a white horse in order to expel the pagan Romans and reconstitute the nation of Israel under a new Davidic king. One of the points of tension fell upon whether it was lawful for the Romans to assess a poll tax on God's chosen people. In order to entrap Jesus, the Pharisees devised a plan to force Jesus into declaring loyalties with either Israel or Rome. Whatever he answered, he would surely offend some group of people sufficiently to be discredited or even put to death. Jesus, however, provides an entirely different paradigm for God's people: *conduct yourselves honorably as God's pilgrim people in a foreign land* (1 Pet. 2:11–12).

### **Lawful Loyalty (Matt. 22:15–17)**

Although this next story is clearly connected to the ongoing dialogue between the religious leaders and Jesus that began in Matthew 21:23, the present story suggests at least a short break after Jesus' parable of the wedding feast. The Pharisees knew that Jesus had been telling his parables about them (Matt. 22:45), so at this point, "the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words" (v. 15). The word "entangle" suggests the idea of setting up a trap that would snare Jesus, and the particular goal is to entangle him in his own words.

There are three major components to how the Pharisees set their trap. First, they do not go by themselves, but they send their disciples, "along with the Herodians" (v. 16a). It is unclear why exactly the Pharisees sent their own disciples, but the lavish praise that their disciples heap upon Jesus in v. 16b suggests that they were perhaps hoping to catch Jesus off-guard by veiling the trap under flattery. If they themselves went, Jesus would certainly know what they were up to, but if they sent their disciples, he might not recognize them.<sup>1</sup> The Herodians, however, not only supported the kingship of Herod, but also the Romans, since Herod was dependent upon the favor of the Romans to continue his reign.<sup>2</sup> These two groups, therefore, were diametrically opposed. Yet, they were perfectly united in a desire to oppose Jesus and his trouble-making, which opposed their own, worldly goals, albeit in different ways.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 861.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:41.

<sup>3</sup> "Did not his teaching imply a denunciation of the self-righteousness of the first group and of the worlimumindedness of the second? Besides the Herodians cannot have been happy with Jesus' royal entry into Jerusalem, nor the Pharisees with his entry as the 'Son of David,' the Messiah." (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 800–01.)

Second, the disciples of the Pharisees heap praise on Jesus. In part, this is probably an attempt to get Jesus to lower his guard; however, it also reveals an important aspect of their strategy. The specific praise they give to Jesus regards his truthfulness and fair-mindedness: “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances” (v. 16b). Indeed, Jesus had made his reputation by “teaching...as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:29). So, if Jesus declines to answer the question, then he undercuts the basis for his authority by proving that he could be bullied into silence in order to save himself.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the specific question posed to Jesus in v. 17 lays out the true dilemma, in which Jesus cannot easily respond in one way or another without endangering himself: “Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Literally, these disciples of the Pharisees ask whether it is lawful to *give* their taxes to Caesar, and Morris notes that this word reveals an important nuance of how the Pharisees themselves looked at the tax: “Their verb is not without its interest; they themselves are not allowing the possibility that the money was really due to Caesar. Anyone who paid this tax was in their view ‘giving’ money away, not paying a legitimate impost.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, if Jesus followed the logic of the Pharisees and rejected the right of Romans to impose taxes, the Herodians would certainly bring a complaint of insurrection to the Romans. On the other hand, if Jesus supported the right of the Romans to collect taxes, then the Pharisees themselves would have ammunition with which to discredit Jesus among his own people.

Ultimately, the Pharisees were asking Jesus whether it was lawful to be loyal to the Roman Empire. In this, they did not recognize their assumption that obedience to the laws of a country (or even an empire) constituted wholehearted loyalty and obedience to everything that country represented. From the perspective of Israel as a theocratic nation, this question makes sense, since their concept of a nation was inseparably political *and* religious. Jesus, however, begins to show that his people must live in a different way in the future—not as one Christian nation, but as pilgrim people living honorably in nations to which they can never give their full loyalty.

### **Pilgrim People (Matt. 22:18–22)**

In spite of their attempts to disguise the true purpose of the questions, Jesus knows the evil intentions of the questioners (v. 18a). John Calvin observes that, in this, Jesus “exhibited a proof of his Divinity,” but then suggests this application for us, since we do not, by nature, share the same

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<sup>4</sup> “Nothing has a more powerful tendency to withdraw teachers from a faithful and upright dispensation of the word than to pay respect to men; for it is impossible that any one who desires to please men (Galatians 1:10) should truly devote himself to God. Some attention, no doubt, is due to men, but not so as to obtain their favor by flattery. In short, in order to walk uprightly, we must necessarily put away *respect of persons*, which *obscures the light and perverts right judgment*, as God frequently inculcates in the Law, (Deuteronomy 1:16; 16:19,) and as experience also points out.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:42–43.) See also Morris: “And if he refused to answer, that, too, would give them a satisfying victory, for they would be able to accuse him of avoiding difficult issues that they had to face.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 558.)

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 556.

access to Divine wisdom and knowledge:

Now since wicked men every day employ snares of the same kind, while their inward malice is concealed from us, we ought to pray to Christ to bestow upon us the spirit of discernment, and that what he had by nature and by his own right he may grant to us by a free gift. How much we need this prudence, is evident from the consideration that, if we do not guard against the snares of the wicked, we shall constantly expose the doctrine of God to their calumnies.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Jesus asks, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?” (v. 18b). This word for “put to the test” (πειράζετε; *peirazete*) is the word that appeared first in the Gospel of Matthew to describe the temptations of the devil (Matt. 4:1), who is himself called “the tempter” (ὁ πειράζων; *ho peirazōn*), and then twice previously to describe how the Pharisees and Sadducees tested Jesus on other occasions (Matt. 16:1; 19:3). Jesus uses the word “hypocrites” often throughout the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 24:51). By this initial response, Jesus demonstrates that this is not a straightforward question, and, therefore, that he cannot offer a straightforward answer.

Yet, Jesus does not refuse to answer the question either. Instead, he asks for them to show him “the coin for the tax”—that is, a “denarius” (v. 19). On this coin was an image of the Roman emperor, Tiberius, with the inscriptions declaring him to be “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus” and the “high priest.”<sup>7</sup> two blasphemous titles that “together could hardly be more calculated to offend Jewish piety.”<sup>8</sup> France writes this, then, about the significance of this coin:

Jesus’ request for a denarius was more than just the provision of a visual aid. Pious Jews objected to the “idolatrous” coin...Roman imperial policy, aware of this sensitivity, allowed the Jews to coin their own nonidolatrous copper money, which sufficed for normal everyday business; there was therefore no need for them to carry the silver denarius, a coin of higher value. And Jesus apparently did not have one—but they did, and in the holy precincts of the temple at that! Well then, if they were using the emperor’s (idolatrous) coinage, they could hardly object to paying his tax. The verb in v. 21, “give *back* to the emperor,” neatly presses the point, and underlines Jesus’ description of them as “hypocrites” (v. 18).<sup>9</sup>

So, Jesus asks them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” (v. 20). Martin Luther observes the simplicity of this question, suggesting that Jesus may have led his interlocutors to overconfidence: “Jesus begins in a childish and foolish way as though he did not know the image and the inscription and could not read, so that they quickly thought, surely, here we have him, he is afraid and intends

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:43.

<sup>7</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 803.

<sup>8</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 833.

<sup>9</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 830.

to dissimulate about the emperor and dares not speak against him.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet, when these enemies answer “Caesar’s” (v. 21a), Jesus responds brilliantly: “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (v. 21b). Since, as France observed earlier, the word translated “render” means to “give back” (or, “pay back” or “repay”), then Jesus is answering their dangerous question about taxes by making a point about unclean idolatry. If this is, indeed, Caesar’s blasphemous and idolatrous coin, then why shouldn’t pious Jews rid themselves of it? This was an astonishing answer, so that Jesus’ enemies could only marvel and leave him (v. 22): “They had evidently come to this interview with high hopes. They had a good question, and they saw no way that Jesus could answer it without alienating somebody.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus escapes their trap effortlessly.

This answer of Jesus, however, suggests more about the obligations of believers in how we should live in the world. First, by connecting *image* and *possession* (so that the coin with Caesar’s image belongs to Caesar), he asserts the total possession of God over his people, who were created in *his* image: “are we not led to think of a corresponding connection of this obligation with an image, namely the image of God in which he created us and which his Son now restores in us? To say the least, the thought is captivating. And in fact, only as we truly attain God’s image in us shall we truly render to him what is his due.”<sup>12</sup> The trap was to force Jesus to declare *either* (1) that the Jews were under the authority of Rome, or (2) the authority of Rome illegitimate, so that the Jews were *not* under the authority of Rome. Jesus, however, asserts that that the denarius (by which taxes were paid) belonged to the emperor of Rome, since it is made in *his* image, and that the Jews belong to God because they are made in *his* image. As Nolland writes, “Jesus turns a question designed to trap him into a fresh opportunity to assert God’s claim on the whole person of those who for the present must pay taxes to Caesar.”<sup>13</sup>

Especially, this teaches us that we may obey our civil leaders without violating our allegiance to God. As Calvin writes, “outward subjection does not prevent us from having within us a conscience free in the sight of God.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Jesus also hints here at the idea that obedience to the civil laws are a part of our obedience to God: “God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under him, over the people, for his own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evildoers.”<sup>15</sup> As Paul put this more clearly, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1).

Additionally, this sets a clear limit on the role of the church regarding civil affairs: “Synods and councils [of the church] are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be

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<sup>10</sup> Cited in Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 864.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 558.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 867.

<sup>13</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 893.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:44.

<sup>15</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 23.1.

thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”<sup>16</sup> That is, the church is given charge over the “things of God.” Individual believers are called to participate *as individual believers* in the political processes of where they hold their citizenship. Nevertheless, the church *as the church* has been given authority only over the “things of God.” This reality should make believers active citizens in both the things of Caesar in the civil realm, and of the things of God in the ecclesiastical realm.

Peter expresses this idea well when he writes, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:11–12). This world is not our home. Like the patriarchs in the Old Testament, we see the realities of a new heaven and a new earth “from afar,” as we acknowledge that we are “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Heb. 11:13). So, we live *even in our countries of birth and/or citizenship* as though we were pilgrims in foreign country. We seek to conduct ourselves honorably, to work hard, and to devote ourselves to good deeds. We will be misunderstood, hated, despised, and rejected; however, our task is not to create heaven on earth, but to bear witness to the day when heaven will come to earth in the future, after Christ’s return.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does the inquiry of the disciples of the Pharisees connect with the dialogue that Jesus has had with religious leaders since Matthew 21:23? What were the Pharisees hoping to accomplish (v. 15)? Why do you think the Pharisees sent their disciples (v. 16a)? Who were the Herodians, and why did they accompany the Pharisees’ disciples (v. 16b)? Why does the emphasis on Jesus’ truthfulness in v. 16c force Jesus to answer in some way? What was the trap (v. 17)?
2. How did politics and religion combine in the minds of the Jews in the way that they assessed whether loyalty to Rome was lawful? How did politics and religion combine in the minds of the pagan Romans, who worshiped the emperor? How do politics and religion combine in modern times in places like communist China, Hindu nationalist India, or Sharia-governed Islamic states? In how many ways do politics and religion combine in the United States?
3. What kind of “malice” might we face in our dealings with the world (v. 18a)? How do we gain the kind of discernment that Jesus exercises here? What did the inscription on the denarius say about Caesar (v. 20)? What did Jesus mean when he instructed the Pharisees to give Caesar’s coin back to Caesar (v. 21)? How did this successfully avoid the trap set for him? What does this principle teach believers about how to live within a hostile world?
4. What does the New Testament mean when it teaches that we are a pilgrim people (Phil. 3:20; 1 Pet. 2:11–12; Heb. 11:13–16)? What does being a pilgrim/exile suggest about our loyalties within this world? How are we to live honorably in the present world? Why does the world still hate us, even when we devote ourselves to good works? What hope do we have, if we cannot have hope in this world?

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<sup>16</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31.4.