

## Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. <sup>16</sup> They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. <sup>17</sup> Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax<sup>Ⓐ</sup> to Caesar or not?"

<sup>18</sup> But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, <sup>20</sup> and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

<sup>21</sup> "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

<sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

### Giving taxes to Caesar

Before we can understand the challenge presented to Jesus in the latest game of trying to catch Jesus out, we need to understand a little history. You may remember that Alexander the Great was the Greek leader who swept all before him in the 320s and 330s BC, conquering everything and everyone, including the Persian empire, and their client state, Israel. The Greeks then ruled for something like 200 years under first the Ptolemaic and then the Seleucid dynasties. One of these Seleucid kings was called Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and he sparked big problems because of his extraordinary crassness. He walked straight into the Jerusalem temple, expecting to meet the Jewish God face to face. He didn't. He then desecrated the temple by replacing their regular worship with worship of a pagan deity called Baal Shamim 'Lord of heaven'. This provoked a popular uprising by Judas Maccabaeus and his family — who were so successful that they gained control and became a ruling family. The Maccabean revolt is told in the book 1 Maccabees in the apocrypha. Two things are particularly relevant to us today — firstly the Maccabean revolt still loomed large in the popular imagination in Jesus's time (and we know this not least because of the number of people who were named after the big players in that revolt). Secondly, Daddy Maccabaeus, before dying says: "*Pay back the Gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law.*" Now, does that sound at all familiar?

Matthew (named after Daddy Maccabaeus, as it happens), lumps together the challenges Jesus faces from different parties. Having been tested by chief priests and elders, Matthew now shows us Jesus being tested by Pharisees — a modernising, zealous, semi-political religious group. And what they ask is of course a trap — can they discredit Jesus's popularity by getting him to side with the Romans, or can they dispose of him through the Romans if he says something not to their liking? It's a nasty cleft stick they have Jesus in. But Jesus has this covered.

"Look at you," they flatter. "You're sincere, faithful to the truth, fearless and no respecter of rank. Now, should we give the poll tax to Caesar?"

The poll tax was a denarius, the equivalent of a day's wages. And a denarius was a Roman coin, with Caesar's profile on it, and an inscription that implied that he was son of a god. For zealous, orthodox Jews the coin was blasphemous, a thing they hated, and arguably use of it was in breach of a command in Deuteronomy.

“You hypocrites,” replies Jesus. “Why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They bring him a coin. Why are they hypocrites? Because they’ve argued about how much they dislike this coin. But they *can* produce one, when asked, and they *did just hand it to him*. Is their disgust an act?

“Whose image is this, and whose inscription?” asks Jesus. “Well, that’s Caesar’s” they reply. There’s subtle language games going on here. Their initial question is if they should *give* the tax to Caesar, as if it were a gift in their control, rather than a duty. Jesus replies that they should *give back* to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.

Jesus manages to say everything and yet... nothing at all. Hear the overtones in how you translate this line:

- “Pay him back in his own coin.”
- “Give him back what he deserves”
- “pay him back in full.” Or even, simply,
- “pay Caesar the poll tax”

Was it a revolutionary statement? Yes. Was it telling them to pay the tax? Yes. Was he unmistakably referencing 1 Maccabees? Oh yes. And his second line was completes the reference, where “obey the commands of the Torah” has been altered to “give to God what is God’s”. It’s a better line, and a better thing to think upon.

Jesus reminds them, and us, that God is above all the worldly political rulers. Who is in charge? Who is really in charge? What do you owe to God? Isn’t it more than any political allegiance?

You’ll remember that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul, and mind and strength. So we give back to God with all our **heart** — that’s using the depth of our faithfulness, and loving prayer — also by opening up these hearts of ours to the wants and needs of others. Giving attention to God and to the people God directs us to.

We give back to God with all our **soul** — all of that deep essence of you. Don’t keep it to yourself, but open it back up to God, inviting God into your inner soul, to be lit, swept, sweetened, warmed and filled with God’s Spirit.

Give with all your **mind** — putting your thought both into the Bible and all that tells you who God is, but also, putting your mind into why that matters, and what you do with that — how you love your neighbour in response, in ‘payback’ for God’s love? That takes imagination and thought, as well as intuition, instinct and heart.

And with all your strength. Actually, the original Hebrew is more obscure — you are to love God with all your ‘muchness’. That could be your strength, but also anything that is a strength of yours. Got lots of money? Don’t keep it from God. Got lots of talent? Don’t keep it from God. Got the capacity to work? Don’t keep it from God. Paul asks us in Romans 12 to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Isn’t that giving back to God what is God’s?

Speaking of Paul, Jesus’s neat maxim does not end the dilemma or difficulty for the Christians that followed. Paul’s letters contain undertones of the difficulty of Christian faith in a Roman world. ‘Jesus is Lord’ is a remarkably political statement in a world in which Caesar thinks himself lord and god. But that’s another story for another time... SDG.