

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 22:15 - 22:22



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the dialogue between Jesus and his critics in chapters 21 and 22 of Matthew, where they attempt to trap him in a dilemma over paying tribute to Rome. They ask if Jesus is denouncing God as king by paying tribute to Caesar, to which he responds with the famous phrase "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Gregg explains that while it is not wrong to pay taxes, Jesus did not initiate the discussion on the morality of paying taxes, but rather emphasized the importance of recognizing oneself as bearing the image of God.

### Transcript

Chapters 21 and 22 of Matthew are largely taken up with dialogue between Jesus and his critics. And the dialogue is not all that friendly in many cases. There are... sometimes it's done politely, but that is often just a sham to get the guard down of Jesus in particular.

When they came and they'd flatter him and they'd say, okay, would you solve this mystery for us and so forth. But they were really trying to find fault with him. And we find in Matthew 22, beginning at verse 15, that Jesus is confronted three times in succession by religious people.

The first time he's actually confronted by the Pharisees. And the second time by the Sadducees. And then it would appear by a lawyer who is also a Pharisee, last of all.

And then in the final part of the chapter, Jesus confronts them. He asks them a final question which they cannot answer. And after that we read that no one dared to question him anymore.

But at this point, in Matthew 22, verse 15, Jesus has just finished telling three parables about the problem of the Jews' rejection of God and of his prophets and of Jesus. And has foretold that they will be judged. That God will send judgment upon their nation and upon their city.

Which he did, of course, in 70 A.D. But now Jesus has finished speaking and he's approached by various groups in sequence and challenged in various ways. The first

group to come to him is the Pharisees and they have some Herodians on their side too. Now the Pharisees, you should remember, were probably the religiously dominant influence in Israel.

They were not as numerous as some other groups, but they were still very, very influential. People viewed them as very spiritual and as being very much representatives of God's cause in many cases. And the Herodians, on the other hand, were compromisers.

They were Jews who supported the Herod dynasty. Herod, by the way, was not even a Jew and he was appointed by the Romans to rule over the Jews and the Jews did not like that very much at all. And so patriotic Jews and loyal Jews typically hated the Herods.

But there were some opportunistic Jews, I guess, who found that working for Herod and supporting Herod was profitable and maybe gave them a measure of security and so they associated with Herod and became servants and followers of him. And these were called the Herodians. Now the Pharisees and the Herodians would generally have nothing to do with each other because the Pharisees did not approve of Herod and therefore they would be disgusted with the Jews who collaborated, as it were, with the enemy.

But here we see them working together and I think I know why. Let's read the passage together and we'll talk about this a bit. In Matthew 22, 15, Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Jesus in his talk.

And they sent to him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God in truth, nor do you care about anyone, for you do not regard the persons of men. Tell us, therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? But Jesus perceived their wickedness and said, Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the tax money. So they brought him a denarius and he said to them, Whose image and inscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's.

And he said to them, Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. Then when they heard this, these words, they marveled and left him and went their way. Now, here we have a case where they are trying, we're specifically told in verse 15, they're trying to entangle Jesus in his talk.

That means they want to trap him. They are looking for some way to get him into trouble. Now, he was already in trouble, of course.

There were people plotting to kill him. The chief priests were plotting to kill him at this point in time. But no one could really find a legitimate way to capture him without it looking like they were doing some kind of a wrong thing.

And, of course, it was a wrong thing for them to try to capture Jesus and to kill him as they wanted to do. But they wanted to find some way to make it seem justified publicly

so that there wouldn't be some outcry against them if they had their will against Jesus. So they wanted to trap him with his words.

They wanted him to say something that would get him into big trouble so that they could seemingly, justly arrest him and do him in. Now, entangling him in his talk took this form on this occasion. They asked him, is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar? Now, first they flattered him, of course.

Teacher, we know that you're true. You teach the way of God in truth. Nor do you care about anyone, for you do not regard the person of men.

Now, all of that is a bunch of hypocritical flattery. Of course, they didn't believe any of those things about him. And that's why he said to them when he first answered them, why do you test me, you hypocrites? The word hypocrite means you're acting, you're playing a role.

You're not really being transparent and honest as to who you really are and what you're really up to. They came to him as if they were really concerned to know what God wants them to do with respect to this matter of the tax money to Caesar. Now, the reason this came up is because there was a controversy in Israel.

Ever since the Romans had conquered Israel, Israel had been put under forced tribute, and they'd had to send some money each year off to Rome. And there were some Jews, at least, especially exhibited or exemplified in the Zealot Party, who taught that it's not lawful for a Jew, whose real king is God, to pay tribute to some other king as if God was not his king. And therefore, the Zealots taught that if you pay tribute to Rome, really you're denouncing God as your king because you're suggesting that Caesar is your king.

Caesar, of course, imposes himself as king, but they felt that every Jew ought to be courageous and stand against this perversion and own up that God alone was his king and that Caesar was not his king. And that being so, he should not pay tribute to Caesar as if to acknowledge Caesar as king. So a man named Judas of Galilee in the year 6 AD founded a party called the Zealots, and he taught that it's not lawful for a Jewish person to pay tribute to Caesar.

It's an act of blasphemy. Now, most Jews probably went ahead and paid the tribute because they didn't want to be crucified by the Romans, which is probably what would happen if they withheld their taxes. At the same time, they inwardly resented the taxes and probably sympathized largely with the Zealots on the matter.

Now, the Pharisees generally would tend to be on the side of the Zealots on this point. That is, they didn't support Roman oppression. They didn't much like paying the tribute.

In all likelihood, they did pay it, but they probably wished they didn't have to and thought it was a bad thing. The Herodians, on the other hand, were on the side of Rome.

They were on the side of Herod in Rome, and therefore they would have been supportive of the tribute.

And this may be why the Pharisees sent some Herodians along to confront Jesus this way, because there would be witnesses. If Jesus said, yes, pay tribute to Caesar, then the Pharisees' disciples could bear witness against him to the Jews, who would say, well, he's on Caesar's side. We reject him.

We thought he was our deliverer from Rome. Now he's just trying to bring us under further subjection to Rome. And on the other hand, if he said, no, don't pay tribute to Caesar, the Herodians there would be offended, and they could take the report back to Herod that Jesus was teaching people not to pay tribute to Caesar.

In other words, either answer that Jesus would give would get him into trouble. That's why this was a trick question. They had him on the horns of a dilemma, so to speak.

He was damned if he does or damned if he doesn't, as one might say. He's going to be in trouble. He's going to be in trouble and condemn himself with either answer.

This is what they at least had in mind for him. Jesus, however, is not so easily trapped, and he's quite a bit smarter than they were. And therefore, instead of answering directly when they said, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not, Jesus, it says, perceived their wickedness.

He could tell these were not just Jewish people wondering, you know, how can we please God? We really don't want to neglect something God wants us to do. We do have the Romans breathing down our backs for this tribute. On the other hand, if it's wrong to pay tribute, we probably should withhold it.

What do you think, Jesus? Now, he knew that they were not sincere men looking to know the will of God, but just trying to trap him on the horns of a dilemma, and he saw their wickedness. He said, why do you test me, you hypocrites? Show me the tax money. Now, he didn't just answer their question directly.

He said, show me the tax money. Now, the tax money was a denarius. A denarius was a coin minted by the Roman government with Caesar's face on it, just as our modern coins have the face of political figures usually upon them.

So the coins that were minted for the pain of the tribute had the face of Caesar printed on them. Now, what's interesting is that many devout Jews would not even carry such a coin because the Jews had a command, you shall not make any graven image, and especially of any other god. Now, Caesar was regarded to be a god by many of the Romans, and here's an engraved image of his face.

For a Jewish person to carry such a coin was considered to be sacrilege in the eyes of

many Jews because it was definitely a graven image. It's clear that Jesus didn't have one of these coins on him, but his opponents did. He said, show me the tax money, so they brought him a denarius.

They were able to find one among themselves, probably among the Herodians. And he said to them, whose image and inscription is this? And there was only one answer that could be given. Honestly, it was Caesar's.

And Jesus said to them, render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. Now, this statement is very full of meaning, and we need to take a look at it because it really, at least partially, addresses a very important question for Christians today. And that is, what is the Christian's obligation toward the government, toward politics, toward keeping the laws of the land, and so forth? I mean, if Jesus had rendered to Caesar what is Caesar's, we need to know today, as Christians, how does that apply to me and the government? Well, it's hard to know exactly because the statement doesn't clarify what is Caesar's and what is not Caesar's.

Jesus made it very clear that you should give Caesar what is Caesar's, but you should give to God what is God's. And it seems clear from the way the statement is made that he's emphasizing the second point. Okay, if that's Caesar's, give it to him.

Now, more importantly, give God what belongs to him. Now, what underlies some of this? What's in Jesus' mind here? He says this coin bears the image of Caesar, and the very fact that it does means it was minted by Caesar. You must have gotten it from Caesar.

The word render to Caesar, that word render doesn't just mean give. It literally means give back. To render something means to return something to its rightful owner.

And therefore, he's saying, well, it looks like Caesar gave you that coin. It's got his image on it. And if it bears his image, it must have come from him.

And if it's his and he wants it back, give it back to him. That's what he's saying. Now, he says, but you need to do the same to God.

Now, where is the image of God minted? It is imprinted on the human being. We were made in the image of God. Just as the coin that they showed to Jesus bore the image of Caesar and therefore proved that Caesar had created it and owned it, so every human being, including these people that were confronting Jesus, they were made in the image of God, which means that God made them and owned them.

And what was made and owned by Caesar should be returned to him if he wants it back. And what was made and owned by God should be returned to him. Just as the coin with Caesar's image should be given to Caesar because it's clearly his, so the human being who is made in the image of God should be given back to God because we are clearly

his.

We belong to God. Now, what actually does belong to Caesar beyond his face on the coin? Actually, I've known some teachers who say that Jesus was not saying you should pay taxes. He's just saying, well, give Caesar what's his, and what's his is the face.

Give him the face. Let him have his face back. But that's not necessarily saying, they think, that we should pay taxes to him.

Jesus didn't really address the tax issue as an issue of taxation. He basically said you should give to the one whose image it bears what he wants. He wants that thing, he wants his face back.

He wants that coin back. What are you doing with it anyway? You're a Jew. You shouldn't have this engraved image on you.

Why don't you just give it back to Caesar if he wants it back? But more importantly, realize that you yourself bear the image of God, and God made you. You have received your body and your life from him, and he wants it back. Give that back to him.

The point Jesus is making is not really a point about taxes so much as it's a point about devotion to God. Now, of course, he incidentally does seem to approve of paying taxes. I mean, when he said, render to Caesar what is Caesar's, in the context of that comment, he was talking about the face on the coin, and therefore saying, well, give Caesar the coin.

And in doing so, of course, one is then paying taxes. So Jesus did not stand with the zealot party on this. He did not say that it's wrong to pay taxes to Caesar.

Although he didn't really address the issue of the morality of paying taxes at all. But Paul takes this up in Romans 13, and he apparently is thinking of Jesus' own statement because he says in verse 7 of Romans 13, Now, in this context, Romans 13, Paul spends the first six verses to indicate that those who work for the government in the capacity of law enforcement and maintaining the security and the justice of society in general, by arresting criminals and punishing them and by ensuring the safety of innocent citizens and encouraging good things, those government officials that are doing that are really doing a service to God. God has ordained them to do that, and they are God's ministers for our benefit of those very things.

Paul also says that they do this continually, verse 6, that they do this full-time. And because they do that full-time, they are full-time ministers and should be supported. And it's in that context that he says, Therefore, render to them their due, taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

What Paul is saying is that these agents of the government who do the thing that God

ordained them to do are serving God just like the priests in the temple are serving God, or the ministers in the church are serving God. And they do it full-time, and therefore they need to be supported. Anyone who does something full-time needs to generate support from some means, and the way that the government officials are supported is by the taxation of those who benefit from their services.

And so what Paul is saying is we should pay taxes, and he seems to even be alluding to what Jesus said because he uses the word render, the same word Jesus did, render to all their due, taxes to whom tax, and so forth. So it is my understanding that Paul took the statement of Jesus and did apply it to payment of taxes, even though it was not Jesus' primary concern. Jesus did not initiate any discussion in his teaching about payment of taxes without being asked.

And when asked, he did seem to say, well, go ahead, give the coin back to Caesar, but there's really some things a lot more important than that, namely that you render to God what is his. But Paul, of course, rightly saw that this statement of Jesus does endorse payment of taxes, and Paul gave a reason why we should pay taxes, because we benefit from the service of the government. However, Paul did identify that service of the government that God has ordained the government for, namely to maintain justice and peace and security.

He does not say that every activity that the government wants to intrude itself into, that it has the right to tax people for. For example, he does not say that the government is ordained by God to educate children or to run public libraries or to feed the poor or to do a number of other things like that. Now, our government does a lot of those things, and it charges taxes for those things.

And, by the way, I pay my taxes. I'm not a tax protester. On the other hand, of course, that doesn't mean that the government is legitimately charging for those taxes, because the government can only legitimately tax people to pay the paychecks of those officials of the government who are doing what God ordained the government to do.

And that has to do with law enforcement and so forth. That's what God ordained the government for. When the government intrudes into many, many other areas of activity and service that God did not ordain them to do and then forcibly taxes the citizens to pay for this, this is not just.

And while we Christians may pay our taxes in such a case, it is not really rendering to Caesar what is really Caesar's. What is Caesar's? Well, Paul tells us, it belongs to Caesar and his agents to be paid for doing what God ordained them to do. But when the government does more than what God ordained them to do, they are going beyond.

They are oppressors. And if they force people to pay taxes to support additional services that God did not authorize, then the government has gone beyond God's authorization

and is charging for services that they shouldn't be charging for. And if the citizens don't even care about those services or use them and are forced to pay for them, that's not any more moral than for the government to take your money at gunpoint.

Since obviously, you know, if you don't pay your taxes, you go to jail. It sort of is robbery at gunpoint. So what belongs to Caesar is a just payment for services along legitimate lines that God has ordained.

What belongs to Caesar is not just everything Caesar may claim for himself, because presumably Caesar at that point could begin to claim whatever he wants. He could begin to say, well, you work for me. Ninety percent of what you earn belongs to me no matter what services I provide.

Well, just because Caesar says so doesn't make it so. The Bible does not teach that governments have absolute authority. They have an authority, a realm of authority, a sphere of authority that is defined by God himself.

Their faithful activity in that realm of authority is a service to God and one for which Christians should be very happy to pay taxes for it to be provided. But there are times also when Caesar wants you to do something that God would disapprove of. How can you then render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's also? Well, again, you must always render to God what is God's, and what is his is you.

You have to obey him at all times. If Caesar wants you to do something that God tells you not to do, then you must obey God rather than man. Because Caesar is asking for what is not his.

Caesar is then asking you to render to him what belongs to God. And Jesus, I think, is saying something along those lines too. You can pay your taxes, but realize that Caesar can never usurp God as your ultimate authority in your life.

You may give Caesar what is legitimately his, but you cannot give Caesar what is legitimately God's. And therefore there are times when the government may ask you to do things that simply go against what God says to do. And, you know, there's no option for the Christian but to obey God and suffer the consequences at the hands of government, as Christians have done throughout history.

And many died martyrs because they would not obey Caesar. They wouldn't burn incense to Caesar and call him God because they have a God to whom they must render that worship. We have analogous situations today as well.