

Give to God What Belongs to God

Matthew 22:15–22 | Bible Study Handout

Theme: Earthly authorities have legitimate but limited claims upon our lives. The coin bears Caesar's image, but we bear God's image. Our ultimate loyalty belongs to God.

Introduction

When Jesus tells His opponents to give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and God what belongs to God, He is teaching more than a lesson about taxes. He is asking us to consider where our deepest loyalty belongs.

- The religious leaders want to trap Jesus with a politically dangerous question.
- Jesus refuses to accept the limited choices they offer Him.
- His answer recognizes legitimate earthly responsibilities while affirming God's greater authority.
- The coin carries Caesar's image, but Genesis 1:26–27 reminds us that human beings bear God's image.

Central Question: If we bear God's image, what does it mean to give God what belongs to Him?

Background

Matthew presents Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah and the authoritative teacher of God's kingdom.

- **Authorship:** Traditionally attributed to Matthew, the tax collector and disciple. Many scholars identify the writer as an educated Jewish Christian.
- **Date:** Commonly dated around A.D. 80–90, possibly written in Antioch.
- **Historical Setting:** Rome controlled Judea, and taxation reminded Jewish people of foreign occupation.
- **Context:** During Jesus' final week in Jerusalem, religious leaders repeatedly challenge His authority.
- **Purpose:** Matthew emphasizes that genuine faith must shape obedience, mercy, justice, and everyday life.

The question about Caesar follows several parables in which Jesus challenges the religious leaders. Their growing hostility leads them to search for a way to discredit Him publicly.

Matthew 22:15–16: A Carefully Planned Trap

The Pharisees join forces with the Herodians, despite their different interests, because both groups oppose Jesus.

- The Pharisees are concerned with Jewish religious tradition.
- The Herodians are associated with the political interests of the Herodian dynasty and Roman authority.
- They flatter Jesus by praising His honesty and independence.
- Their words sound respectful, but their intentions are dishonest.

Key Truth: Religious language can disguise selfish motives. God cares about the honesty of our hearts, not merely the correctness of our words.

Matthew 22:17–18: A Question with No Safe Answer

Jesus' opponents ask whether it is lawful to pay the imperial tax to Caesar.

- **If Jesus says yes:** He may alienate Jews who resent Roman rule.
- **If Jesus says no:** He risks accusations of rebellion against Rome.
- Jesus recognizes their hypocrisy and refuses to be manipulated.

Key Truth: Faithfulness sometimes requires refusing false choices. We should seek God's truth rather than allow pressure or popular opinion to determine our convictions.

Matthew 22:19–20: Whose Image Is on the Coin?

Jesus asks for a denarius, a Roman coin bearing Caesar's image and inscription.

- The coin represents Roman political and economic authority.
- Its inscriptions could include religious claims associated with the emperor.
- Jesus asks His opponents to identify whose image appears on it.
- The Greek word *eikōn*, meaning image, also appears in the Greek translation of Genesis 1:26–27.

Key Truth: Caesar's image identifies the coin, but God's image establishes the dignity and worth of every human being.

Give to God What Belongs to God

Matthew 22:15–22 | Bible Study Handout, Page 2

Matthew 22:21: Give to Caesar and Give to God

Jesus acknowledges legitimate civic obligations while reminding His listeners that God has the greater claim upon their lives.

- Paying taxes and fulfilling lawful responsibilities can be part of faithful citizenship.
- Governments possess limited authority; God possesses ultimate authority.
- Psalm 24:1 reminds us that everything belongs to the Lord.
- Our political, financial, and social responsibilities must remain subject to God's purposes.
- God desires more than a portion of our time or possessions. He desires our hearts and lives.

Key Truth: We may owe certain things to earthly authorities, but we belong entirely to God.

Matthew 22:22: Amazed but Unchanged

Jesus' opponents are amazed by His answer and leave without further argument.

- They recognize His wisdom but show no evidence of repentance.
- Admiring Jesus is not the same as following Him.
- Genuine discipleship requires allowing His teaching to change our lives.

Key Truth: God's Word should do more than impress us. It should transform us.

Wesleyan Emphasis

John Wesley taught that genuine faith changes the whole person and becomes visible through love and service.

- **Prevenient Grace:** God reaches toward us before we recognize or respond to Him.
- **Responsible Grace:** God enables us to respond freely and faithfully to His invitation (Maddox).
- **Sanctifying Grace:** The Holy Spirit continually restores God's image within us and shapes us toward holy love.
- **Social Holiness:** Our faith must influence how we treat others, use resources, pursue justice, and participate in community life.

Wesley recognized that Jesus' answer affirmed civil responsibilities without surrendering God's greater authority (Wesley).

Wesleyan Truth: We do not earn God's love through obedience. We respond to the love and grace God has already given us in Jesus Christ.

Living the Passage

Examine Your Loyalties. Consider what receives the most attention, energy, and commitment in your life. Money, security, reputation, and political convictions have legitimate places, but none should replace God.

Practice Responsible Citizenship. Fulfill your obligations honestly, contribute to your community, and speak against injustice while remembering that your ultimate loyalty belongs to Christ.

Recognize God's Image in Others. Every person possesses God-given dignity, including people whose beliefs, circumstances, or choices differ from yours. Disagreement never excuses cruelty or contempt.

Offer God Your Whole Life. Allow faith to influence your relationships, finances, conversations, decisions, and responsibilities. God is concerned with how we live throughout the week, not simply how we worship on Sunday.

Depend on Grace. When your priorities become confused, remember that God has not stopped loving you. His grace continues inviting you to turn toward Him and begin again.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Pharisees and Herodians believe their question would trap Jesus?
2. What does the image on Caesar's coin teach us about earthly authority?
3. How does being created in God's image affect the way we view and treat others?
4. How can Christians balance civic responsibilities with their greater loyalty to God?
5. What things in modern life most often compete for our devotion to God?
6. How should faith influence our political disagreements and public conversations?
7. What does Wesley's teaching about social holiness add to our understanding of this passage?
8. What is one area of your life that you need to place more fully in God's hands?

Key Scripture Connections

- **Genesis 1:26–27:** Humanity is created in God's image.
- **Psalms 24:1:** Everything belongs to the Lord.
- **Matthew 6:33:** Seek first God's kingdom.
- **Romans 13:1–7:** Fulfill legitimate civic responsibilities.
- **Acts 5:29:** Obey God above human authority.
- **Romans 12:1–2:** Offer your whole life to God.

Takeaway

The coin bears Caesar's image, but we bear God's image. Our responsibilities in this world matter, but our ultimate loyalty belongs to God. Through His grace, we learn to live faithfully, love our neighbors, and reflect Christ in every part of our lives.