

Whose Image Do You Bear?

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Imagine what it must have felt like to be an Israelite during the days of Jesus. You were the people chosen by God ([Deuteronomy 7:6](#)), called to be a light to the nations ([Isaiah 42:6](#)), a people meant to display His holiness, righteousness, and glory before the world. God had made astonishing promises to your nation. Your forefather Abraham was told that his descendants would become a great nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)), and David was promised an everlasting kingdom and throne ([2 Samuel 7:16](#)). Israel was called to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and strength ([Deuteronomy 6:5](#)), remain separate from pagan corruption ([Joshua 23:6-13](#)), and be holy as the Lord is holy ([Leviticus 20:26](#)). What dignity, hope, and holy purpose those promises must have produced.

And yet now you stand humiliated beneath the crushing weight of pagan Rome, taxed by foreign oppressors, patrolled by Gentile soldiers, and reminded daily that you are no longer free. How did the people chosen by God fall into such humiliation? The nation repeatedly rebelled against God, ignored the warnings of the prophets ([Jeremiah 25:4-7](#)), and followed kings who “did evil in the sight of the Lord.” Judgment eventually came through Babylon in 586 BC, bringing destruction and exile for seventy years. Though God graciously allowed the people to return under Cyrus the Great and rebuild the temple and city ([Ezra 1:1-3](#)), their freedom was short-lived, for the Persians fell to Alexander the Great, and eventually Israel found itself under Roman domination. How devastating it must have been to wonder how the people to whom God declared, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse,” had fallen from such a privileged position into weakness, shame, and foreign rule.

A Question Meant To Trap

Every Roman coin, every tax payment, and every Roman soldier walking the streets served as a painful reminder that Israel was no longer free. The people who had once been called by God to be a light to the nations now lived beneath the authority of a pagan empire. It is within this atmosphere of political oppression, religious tension, and national disappointment that the religious leaders now approach Jesus with what they believe is the perfect question to destroy Him.

Matthew 22:15-17 NIV

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. 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. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

Before we can properly understand the tension and significance of this encounter, we must first understand the groups standing before Jesus. The Pharisees believed that God’s people should not submit to foreign rule and viewed Roman taxation as deeply offensive [1]. They were ardent Jewish nationalists who longed for the day when God would send a Messiah to overthrow pagan oppressors and restore Israel’s freedom [2]. Yet despite their resentment of Rome, they stopped short of openly resisting taxation as the Zealots did [3], revealing the contradiction between their public convictions and their desire to preserve influence and authority. The Pharisees were widely respected for their devotion to the Mosaic Law and their careful observance of religious tradition. They functioned as a religious and intellectual elite within Judaism, and their disciples were students rigorously trained in Pharisaic interpretation and oral tradition [4]. As a result, they wielded enormous influence over Jewish thought, worship, and public opinion.

The second group Matthew mentions were the Herodians, a political faction loyal to the Herodian dynasty and supportive of Roman rule. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39 [5], governing throughout the entirety of Jesus's earthly ministry. Unlike the Pharisees, the Herodians sought political stability through cooperation with Rome and the preservation of Herodian authority. Although Antipas embraced many aspects of Hellenistic culture, he carefully avoided openly offending Jewish sensitivities by removing graven images from his coins and regularly participating in Jewish festivals [6]. The contrast between these two groups could hardly have been greater. The Pharisees opposed Hellenism and longed for a coming Messianic kingdom that would remove foreign powers, while the Herodians embraced political compromise and supported the existing order [7]. The Pharisees emphasized strict Torah observance, whereas the Herodians maintained a far looser relationship to Jewish law and tradition [8]. Under ordinary circumstances these groups would have viewed one another with deep suspicion, but their mutual hatred of Jesus was powerful enough to unite them around a common purpose.

Though they “were opposed to one another in economic and political matters” [9], the Pharisees and Herodians became “strange bedfellows” [10] because of the growing influence Jesus was having upon the people. Their hatred of Christ united men who otherwise despised one another. To set their trap, they approached Jesus with “with ‘words that ooze with hypocrisy and falsehood’” [11], cloaking malice beneath a veneer of admiration. They addressed Him as “Teacher” and described Him as “a man of integrity,” not because they believed those words sincerely, but because they hoped flattery would pressure Him into publicly answering a politically explosive question that appeared to have no safe response.

Their question concerning the imperial tax struck a deep emotional nerve within Jewish society. For many listening in the crowd, this was not merely a theological debate—it touched the daily humiliation, poverty, and longing of an occupied people. To many Jews, paying taxes to Rome was a humiliating reminder that God's covenant people lived under pagan domination [12]. The

tax itself carried idolatrous overtones since Caesar's image appeared upon the coin [13], symbolizing Roman authority and even divine claims associated with the emperor. The financial burden only intensified the resentment. By the time the average Jewish household paid Roman taxes of approximately 32%, Jewish religious taxes of 12%, and additional payments extracted by corrupt officials, nearly half their income was gone [14]. The trap therefore appeared flawless. If Jesus endorsed paying the tax, the Pharisees could portray Him as sympathetic to Rome and alienate Him from ordinary Jews already crushed beneath taxation and oppression. Yet if He rejected the tax, the Herodians could accuse Him before Roman authorities as a revolutionary guilty of treason. From a human perspective, the trap appeared inescapable.

A Heart Fully Seen

Though the Pharisees and Herodians believed they had constructed the perfect political trap, they stood before One who could see far beyond carefully crafted words and directly into the hidden motives of the human heart. Their flattery may have deceived the crowd, but it could not deceive Christ. Jesus immediately discerned that their question was not rooted in a sincere desire for truth but in a calculated attempt to entangle Him publicly [15].

Matthew 22:18 NIV

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

When Jesus calls them hypocrites in [Matthew 22:18](#), He exposes the profound dishonesty lurking beneath their outward religiosity. A hypocrite is someone who disguises himself as something other than what he truly is, pretending outwardly to possess virtues that inwardly are absent [16]. The Pharisees cloaked malice beneath compliments and concealed hostility beneath religious language. Their lips honored Christ while their hearts plotted against Him.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, hypocrisy is repeatedly portrayed as living for human applause rather than divine approval—honoring God externally while remaining inwardly far from Him [17]. The Pharisees carefully cultivated an appearance of holiness before the people, yet Jesus continually exposed the tragic inconsistency between their outward religious performance and the corruption hidden within their hearts [18]. They spoke passionately about righteousness while harboring sinful motives that contradicted the very truths they claimed to defend.

This danger did not disappear with the Pharisees. Contemporary Christian hypocrisy often reveals itself through performance-driven faith, where spiritual activity becomes more about human recognition than genuine devotion to God. Believers may subtly desire applause for their generosity, prayer life, ministry, or biblical knowledge, practicing righteousness in ways designed to be noticed by others rather than done quietly before the Father ([Matt. 6:1-6](#)). Like the Pharisees, it is possible to say the right spiritual words publicly while nurturing pride, bitterness, greed, lust, or self-exaltation privately. Self-righteousness becomes another expression of hypocrisy when Christians compare themselves favorably against others while ignoring the sin present within their own hearts ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). Selective obedience creates yet another form. One may become deeply concerned about visible external standards while neglecting the weightier matters of justice, mercy, compassion, humility, and generosity—cleaning the outside while remaining inwardly unchanged ([Luke 11:39-44](#)). Scripture warns that merely hearing God's Word without obeying it produces spiritual self-deception, like a man who looks into a mirror and immediately forgets what he has seen ([James 1:22-24](#)). The greatest danger is not open rebellion against God, but outward religion without inward surrender.

An Image that Reveals Ownership

Having exposed the hypocrisy hidden within their hearts, Jesus now turns the very object they intended to use as a trap into a profound lesson about ownership, allegiance, and identity.

Matthew 22:19–20 NIV

Show me the coin used for paying the tax. They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

The coin presented to Jesus was a denarius, a Roman silver coin roughly equal to a common laborer’s daily wage [19]. Considering Christ’s itinerant ministry and the fact that the disciples shared a common purse [20], it is possible Jesus did not personally possess such a coin. More likely, however, His request was intended to expose the contradiction and duplicity already present within the hearts of His opponents. The very men who condemned Roman rule were themselves carrying Caesar’s currency. Yet this denarius was deeply offensive to many Jews for several reasons. First, the emperor’s image stamped upon the coin served as a continual reminder of Israel’s political humiliation and subjection to pagan authority. Second, the Mosaic Law strictly warned against graven images [21], making the coin spiritually troubling as well as politically painful.

If the coin was minted during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, it likely bore his engraved portrait on one side and an image of him seated upon a throne in priestly garments on the reverse, accompanied by inscriptions identifying him as high priest [22]. The offense ran even deeper than politics. The inscription declared him to be “Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus,” language that carried explicit claims of divinity. Several Roman emperors, including Julius Caesar, had accepted divine titles and demanded forms of religious homage, an idea profoundly repulsive to Jewish monotheism [23]. While Jews were expected to honor governing authorities, emperor worship directly collided with their devotion to the one true God. Beyond its religious

offensiveness, the denarius symbolized Israel's political bondage. The circulation of such a coin throughout the Promised Land stood as visible proof that God's covenant people now lived under Roman domination. Every coin exchanged reminded Israel they were no longer free. Yet despite their resentment, the Jewish people relied upon this very currency in daily life, including the poll tax that had already provoked the famous revolt of Judas the Galilean in AD 6.

Does this not help us understand the depth of the dilemma confronting faithful Jews in Jesus' day? The very coin required for the tax bore the image and titles of a pagan emperor who accepted honors belonging to God alone. Every use of the denarius was a visible reminder of Roman domination and idolatrous power. Would not even touching such a coin feel spiritually defiling to a faithful Jew? Had not God declared, "You shall have no other gods before me," and revealed Himself as a jealous God? The taxes collected by Rome helped finance pagan temples, imperial expansion, and activities deeply contrary to God's holiness. The question therefore became unavoidable: Should God's people support such a corrupt government, or should they resist it entirely? And if this tension existed for Israel under Rome, how should believers today think about governing authorities whose policies and practices may also conflict with the Word of God?

A Command that Divides Allegiance

Having drawn their attention to the image stamped upon the coin, Jesus now delivers an answer that not only escapes their carefully crafted trap, but forever distinguishes between earthly authority and ultimate allegiance to God.

Matthew 22:21 NIV

"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.”

Jesus’ response is far more than “some witty way of getting out of a predicament” [24]; it is a profound declaration of divine truth concerning authority, ownership, and worship. As Creator of all things visible and invisible ([Colossians 1:16](#)), God possesses sovereign rights over all creation. The taxes paid to earthly governments were not acts of worship toward Caesar, but obligations rendered in exchange for the civil order, protection, infrastructure, and benefits provided under governmental authority [25]. Christ therefore rejects the false dilemma presented by His opponents. Paying taxes to Rome did not require the Jewish people to surrender their devotion to God, nor did it constitute an act of idolatry simply because Caesar’s image appeared upon the coin.

At the same time, Jesus’ answer reveals that His mission was not to lead a political revolt against Rome, but to establish a far greater kingdom through His sacrificial death. Unlike the Zealots, who concealed daggers beneath their garments in preparation for violent uprising, Christ came “to give his life a ransom for many” ([Mark 10:45](#)). Until the day He returns in glory to establish His perfect reign, earthly governments and rulers continue to exist under God’s sovereign authority ([Romans 13:1-2](#)). The coin could be returned to Caesar because it bore his image—but humanity belongs to God because we bear His ([Genesis 1:26-27](#)). Therefore, while coins may belong to earthly kingdoms, our worship, obedience, hearts, minds, and entire beings belong ultimately to God alone. Jesus reveals that the deeper issue was never taxation, but allegiance.

If the denarius belonged to Caesar because it bore his image, then humanity belongs to God because His image is stamped upon our very lives. The image of God is seen in our conscience, our longing for truth, love, justice, beauty, and ultimately in our capacity to know and worship Him [26]. Yet God’s purpose is not merely that we possess His image, but that we reflect His character. As believers are transformed inwardly, they increasingly embrace

God's righteousness, holiness, love, and truth as their own rather than merely obeying externally from fear [27]. We were created to represent God upon the earth through our actions, relationships, stewardship, and treatment of others [28]. For this reason, to dishonor another human being is ultimately to dishonor the God whose image they bear. Humanity's highest calling is therefore not merely to exist, but to reflect the holy character of the One in whose image we were made [29].

A Wisdom That Silences Critics

The trap that was intended to discredit Jesus instead became a breathtaking display of divine wisdom that left His critics speechless.

Matthew 22:22 NIV

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

Though the Pharisees prided themselves on their devotion to Scripture and their meticulous observance of the Law, they had also constructed an elaborate network of traditions and regulations intended to make the Law manageable within everyday life [30]. Yet despite their immense theological knowledge and their self-appointed role as guardians of truth, this encounter reveals what humanity repeatedly forgets: God's wisdom infinitely surpasses our own ([Isaiah 55:8-9](#)). The religious leaders believed they could outthink and outmaneuver Christ, but they stood before the very wisdom of God incarnate. Dust-born humanity cannot reshape the eternal God into its own image. God is holy, transcendent, and altogether beyond the limits of finite human comprehension. As Augustine famously observed, "If you understand it, it is not God," while Gregory of Nazianzus declared, "It is difficult to conceive God, but to define Him in words is an impossibility." Yet although God is infinite and unsearchable, He has graciously revealed enough of Himself that we may truly know Him—not merely as distant observers, but as those invited into covenant relationship and

adopted into His family through Christ. Tragically, though the Pharisees and Herodians stood face to face with divine wisdom itself, they marveled only long enough to walk away unchanged. They walked away amazed by Christ's wisdom, yet unchanged by His truth.

Conclusion

In the end, the great question of this passage is not merely whether taxes should be paid to Caesar, but whether our lives have truly been surrendered to God. The Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus concerned about a coin bearing Caesar's image, yet they failed to recognize that they themselves bore the image of God. Their minds were consumed with politics, power, and reputation, while their hearts remained far from God. Tragically, they marveled at Christ's wisdom and then walked away unchanged. The same danger confronts us today. It is possible to admire Jesus publicly while refusing to surrender to Him personally. It is possible to speak religious words, attend church faithfully, defend biblical truth publicly, and yet still reserve portions of our hearts for pride, self-rule, hypocrisy, or worldly devotion.

But Christ's words force every one of us to answer a far deeper question: If Caesar's coin belongs to Caesar because it bears his image, then to whom do we belong, since we bear the image of God? The answer is that our lives, worship, obedience, relationships, thoughts, and very souls belong wholly to Him. We were not created merely to exist beneath earthly kingdoms, but to reflect the glory, holiness, love, and righteousness of the God whose image is stamped upon us. And though sin has distorted that image, Jesus Christ came not to lead a political revolution, but to redeem and restore image-bearers through His death and resurrection. Therefore, may we not leave this passage like the Pharisees—astonished yet unchanged—but instead surrender ourselves fully to the One who alone is worthy of our ultimate allegiance, worship, and lives.

Caesar's image was stamped on a coin—but God's image is stamped upon your soul. The question is: who truly has your allegiance?

Footnotes

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[5] Helen K. Bond, “Political Authorities: The Herods, Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate,” in *Jesus among Friends and Enemies: A Historical and Literary Introduction to Jesus in the Gospels*, ed. Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 222–223

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[9] David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 293.

[10] Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 808.

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[15] Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1:809

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[17] David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 300

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[20] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007), 833.

[21] John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985–1989), 3:320–321

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[24] D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 459–460.

[25] Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 208.

[26] Ron Nikkel, Andy Corley, and Dan W. Van Ness, *Pilgrims and Prisoners: When Justice and Mercy Meet* (New York, NY: Cascade Books, 2023).

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