

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 22 (PART 2)

Matthew 22:15-22 - Jesus Re: Poll Tax To Caesar

Pharisees - Experts in the Law, influential among the people, focused on religious purity and opposed Roman rule.

Herodians - Supporters of the Herodian dynasty, aligned with Rome politically.

Though these two groups were typically opposed, they united against a common threat - Jesus. The “poll tax” (Greek: *kēnsos*) was a per-person tribute required by Rome since A.D. 6, when Judea became a Roman province. It was deeply resented, as it symbolized submission to pagan rule and funded Caesar’s empire. Some groups, like the Zealots, outright refused to pay. The tax coin (a denarius) bore Caesar’s image and inscription calling him “divine” - a theological offense to monotheistic Jews.

Q - Why are the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus?

The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus because His growing influence threatened their authority and exposed their hypocrisy. They wanted to force Him into a political or theological mistake - a statement that would either anger the Jewish people or get Him in trouble with Rome. By asking about taxes, they set a perfect trap in a deeply polarized world - but Jesus’ answer revealed a higher loyalty: to God’s kingdom above all earthly powers.

“The tribute money or poll tax paid to the Roman emperor was a contentious issue. It was bitterly resented in the province of Judea. The question was very cunning: if Jesus said, ‘Refuse the tax’, he would immediately be liable to arrest. If he said, ‘Pay it’, he would immediately forfeit popular support. And with the improbable coalition of the Herodians (who advocated paying) and the Pharisees (who did not like it at all) watching every word and gesture, Jesus was in an exceedingly difficult situation; his opponents were itching to exploit it. (Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, page 233.)

The Pharisees and Herodians ask, “Is it lawful to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”, which is a carefully crafted question. If Jesus says “yes”, he appears disloyal to Israel and God, losing credibility with the Jewish people. If Jesus says “no”, he could be charged with rebellion against Rome. Either way, the question is designed to destroy him - religiously or politically.

He sees through their hypocrisy immediately. Rather than taking the bait or aligning with one side of a political divide, He calls out their motives: “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?”. By holding up the denarius, with Caesar’s image and blasphemous inscription declaring him divine, Jesus exposes the Pharisees’ compromise: even as they resent Rome, they carry its currency. In one sentence, Jesus dismantles their trap and reframes the entire issue. Earthly rulers have

limited authority, but ultimate allegiance belongs to God alone. Jesus refuses to be a pawn in political games; instead, He calls His followers to a higher loyalty - to give their taxes to the empire, but their hearts and lives to the true King.

Render - *apodote* - means 'give back'. The coin bears Caesar's image: give it back to him. You bear God's image: so give yourself back to him! (Ibid, 234)

Jesus has a third way of living – in light of the kingdom of God. He's not establishing a rival empire to Roman nor a new Jewish alternative to the Pharisees – he's establishing something that will surpass them all.

Matthew 22:23–33 - Jesus & Sadducees

The Sadducees were a small but powerful Jewish sect made up mainly of wealthy priestly families. They accepted only the Torah (the first five books of Moses) as Scripture and rejected later writings and oral traditions accepted by the Pharisees. They denied the resurrection of the dead, angels, and spirits (Acts 23:8). They were closely connected with the temple system and cooperated more with Roman authorities.

While the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus politically and socially, the Sadducees are trying to attack Jesus from a more theological angle. Their question is about resurrection and they are attempting to make Jesus (and his affirmation of the historic and biblical position of bodily resurrection) seem foolish and antiquated.

Jesus' teachings about resurrection and eternal life directly contradicted their theology. They likely saw Jesus as a threat to their control over temple worship and their relationship with Rome. Their goal was to publicly embarrass Him with a theological question that would make belief in the resurrection look absurd and so they ask a question in light of the Mosaic Law's teaching on marriage and protocols for care for a child-less widow upon the death of her husband.

Deuteronomy 25:5-10

In another beautiful picture of the wisdom of Jesus, he instead makes them look foolish. First, he straight up tells them "you are mistaken. You don't understand the scriptures or the power of God." Then he gives them logical and Scriptural evidence to support his point.

Jesus expertly uses a passage the Sadducees would have affirmed (from Exodus 3:6) to teach them that Yahweh calls himself the God of the patriarchs, long after their death. He remains their God because they will be resurrected on the last day. Jesus certainly challenges the arrogant assumptions of the Sadducees, who likely walked away not happy, but sad, you see?

Side Note: Marriage & The Resurrection Statement - This doesn't mean we won't know our spouses in the age to come, but that marriage isn't an institution that will continue in the kingdom of God.

Q - How do these two records teach us about how to engage with “gotcha questions” or the pressure of our day to pick a side? How does Jesus’ interaction with these opponents teach us how we should interact with our opponents?

Both the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus with agendas, not openness. The Pharisees wanted to trap Him politically, and the Sadducees wanted to trap Him theologically. Yet in both cases, Jesus refuses to play their games. He answers wisely, exposing their motives and revealing truth without becoming combative. In an age that was deeply polarized-religiously, politically, and socially-Jesus modeled a way of engaging with opponents that was both courageous and gracious. He neither avoided truth nor weaponized it, reminding us that the goal of our conversations is not to win arguments but to bear witness to the kingdom of God.

We live in a time when nearly everything demands a side - political parties, social media, news feeds, even church spaces often feel like battlegrounds of “us versus them.” The algorithms amplify outrage, the headlines reward division, and communities fracture along partisan lines. Our conversations too easily become about winning arguments rather than seeking truth, about staking identity in ideology rather than in Christ. When the church reflects this landscape, we risk becoming indistinguishable from the culture we’re called to redeem. It’s worth stepping back and asking: Are we being shaped by this polarization - or are we being shaped by the kingdom of God?

Life is rarely as black and white as one side being completely right and the other completely wrong. Recognizing that complexity helps us stay humble and gracious toward others. People are more than their positions - someone might support a particular policy without embracing every idea of the party behind it. When we remember that, it softens our tone, opens space for understanding, and allows us to see people as God does - not as labels or opponents, but as image-bearers worth listening to and loving.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live above the noise and polarization of our age. The world around us is divided by loyalty to parties, ideologies, and tribes - each demanding that we pick a side. But Jesus shows us a better way. He didn’t align Himself with the Pharisees or the Sadducees, the zealots or the Romans; He aligned Himself with His Father’s kingdom. That’s our call too. We are citizens of heaven first, and our allegiance must shape how we speak, post, vote, and relate to others. The church weakens its witness when it mirrors the outrage and division of the culture. But when we walk in humility, truth, and love - refusing to be pulled into the world’s battles - we show that our hope isn’t in any system or leader, but in the King who will make all things new.