

Is It Right For Us to Pay Taxes to Caesar or Not?

Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26

Tuesday the twelfth of Nisan

DIG: Why were the Pharisees and the Herodians strange partners? How was Jesus a threat to each one? How did they act? What was their motive? What was the purpose of their question? What was the trap? What does this teach you about the relationship between Church and State? Which obligation is primary? Why?

REFLECT: What belongs to Caesar in your life? To YHVH? How well are you giving to each? What often prevents you from giving to God what is God's?

The most unusual allies united on account of their common denominator of hatred against the Son of God. The Pharisees were against Roman occupation under any circumstances; however, Roman rule was acceptable to the Herodians through the House of Herod. The Herodians were theologically in agreement with the Sadducees and politically both of these parties would have been the opposite of the Pharisees who were anti-Hasmonean, anti-Herodian and anti-Roman. The Pharisees looked for a cataclysmic messianic kingdom to remove the rule of the Herods and Rome, whereas the Herodians wanted to preserve the Herodian rule. So normally these two groups would never join hands on anything because they were at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Here, however, the Herodians and the Pharisees worked together to oppose Jesus because He was introducing a new Kingdom that neither wanted.¹²⁸²

Keeping a close watch on Him, probably in the marketplace of the Royal Stoa, an extension of the Court of the Gentiles, where commerce took place and money was exchanged freely (see Mz - The Interior of the Royal Stoa), the Sanhedrin sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians, who were really spies, but pretended to be sincere (Luke 20:20a). The irony of their alliance should not be overlooked.

ADONAI allowed the Pharisees and Sadducees to realize that the parable of the rebellious tenants (see Iy - By What Authority Are You Doing These Things?) alluded to them. Sadly, instead of receiving the truth of the parable, they hoped to snare Jesus in something He said, so that they might hand Him over to the power and authority of the Roman governor (Matthew 22:15-16a; Mark 12:13; Luke 20:20b). The Great Sanhedrin (see Lg - The Great Sanhedrin) hoped to anger the Roman authorities so Jesus would be executed. The word snare is *agreuo*, which means *to catch wild animals in a trap*.

So on Tuesday, the twelfth of Nissan, the most intense day of examination (see **Ix - The Examination of the Lamb**), the spies came to Him and questioned Him. At this point in the conflict, sincere questions should not have been expected. They started off with a patronizing stance, saying: **Rabbi, we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.** But if they really believed that they would not have opposed Jesus in the first place. They continued to try to soften Him up when they said: **You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.** Once again, that statement was true in itself. But all that was merely leading up to the heart of the matter.

Then the flattery ended. **Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right for us to give (Greek: *didomi*) the imperial tax to Caesar or not (Mattityahu 22:16b-17; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21-22)?** They had thought long and hard of a question that would **trap Him**. Their reasoning was this: If **He** said yes, the Pharisees would have a major accusation against **Jesus** as one who placed the pagan Roman Empire above obligation to **God**; but if **He** responded negatively, no doubt the Herodians would accuse **Him** of being guilty of trying to overthrow the Roman government. A simple "yes or no" answer would be a major problem for **Messiah** before either of the political parties. **They** thought **they** had **Him** pinned into a corner with no way out. Check mate - so they thought.¹²⁸³

But Jesus recognized **their evil intent**, and gave them an answer **they** could not have predicted. First, **He** exposed **their** true character by saying to them: **You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me (Matthew 22:18; Luke 20:23)?** The need **to trap** an animal was well known in the Jewish world because it was necessary to catch a kosher animal for ritual slaughter. A hunted animal could not be ritually kosher because its blood was spilled in the manner not prescribed by the TaNaKh. Consequently, a **trap** or a snare was set first to catch a kosher animal. This was often done by digging a pit and setting bait to draw the animal to its capture. This was the graphic illustration that **Messiah** used to expose the motives of the **hypocrites**. So how did **He** avoid **the trap**?¹²⁸⁴

Show me the coin used for paying the tax. The Oral Law (see **Ei - The Oral Law**) said a Jew could not carry anything with an image on it. So this money with **Caesar's** likeness could never be used to pay the Temple tax (see **Gf - Jesus and the Temple Tax**) or for any other reason because it had **Caesar's image** on it and the Jews considered it an idol. Nevertheless, our **Lord** asked for a **denarius**. Even though **Jesus** didn't pay any attention to the Oral Law it was necessary for someone to go and get **one** for **Him**. During the long pause, it is easy to imagine the breathless silence and great anticipation the wait caused.

They finally brought Him a denarius. Little did they know the profound question that awaited them. Being Jewish, Jesus began with a question. He asked them: **Whose image is this? And whose inscription?** There was no getting around it, the coin answered the question. "Caesar's," they replied. And having Caesar's image on it meant they couldn't use it at all! If a Jew ended up with this forbidden money there was nothing he could do with it but give it back to its owner, or Caesar! This is why Yeshua said to them: **So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's** (Matthew 22:19-21a; Mark 12:15b-16; Luke 20:24-25a). In the Greek it reads: **The things belonging to Caesar, pay off** (Greek: *apodidomi*) **to Caesar**. The Pharisees and Herodians had only used *didomi*, meaning *to give*. Our Lord's word was *apodidomi*, meaning *paying something as a debt*. The gist seems to be: **The coin is Caesar's, let him have his own coin.**¹²⁸⁵

I am sure the Herodians were overjoyed to hear the first part of Messiah's response, just as it would have surprised the Pharisees. Conversely, the second part of His answer certainly would have offended the Herodians and pleased the Pharisees when He added: **And to God what is God's** (Mattityahu 22:21b; Luke 20:25b). In other words, *the debts to man and the debts to God are both to be paid*. The brilliance of Messiah's words will last throughout the ages. There are two authorities, not one, found in the Bible. There is a **divine authority** exercised by ADONAI - **give to God what is God's**; but there is also **delegated authority** exercised by the government (Romans 13:1-7). Therefore, the Lord clearly affirms that our allegiance to HaShem take priority over everything else. It is, after all, the very first of the Ten Commandments (see my commentary on Exodus Dk - You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me).

There was no contradiction for Torah-observant Jews. **The fact that they paid taxes to Caesar did not nullify God's rule over Israel, and they still needed to pay their Temple tax.** We can be strong in our faith, and at the same time, be a loyal citizen. **So they were unable to trap Him in what He had said there in public.** The Herodians and the Pharisees could not have anticipated such a complete answer. **Astonished, they left Him and went away in silence** (Matthew 22:22; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:26). They had no snappy comeback because the maverick Rabbi had duped them!

The life of a believer is not set in opposition to civil life. As a result of our first parents' decision to usurp God's authority (see my commentary on Genesis Ba - **The Woman Saw the Fruit of the Tree and Ate It**), obedience to authority, whatever its nature, goes against our desire for independence. Nonetheless, Messiah died that all might acknowledge the authority of ADONAI in their lives. By gaining the power of **the Ruach HaKodesh** by faith, the desires of our fallen nature can be overcome; and by our witness of obedience, the

kingdom of **God** can come and reign among us. **HaShem's** plan for our lives far exceeds what we can imagine. **His** plan includes obedience to the laws of governing authorities as long as they do not oppose **God's** Word. **The LORD's** plan will not be frustrated. **Isaiah** recognized **Cyrus** of Persia as **ADONAI's** instrument for fulfilling **His** plan for the Jews to be returned from exile in Babylon to restore Tziyon and her Temple (see my commentary on **Isaiah Ic - This is What the LORD says to Cyrus His Anointed**). Let us pray that the light of **Spirit** may penetrate our minds so that we can recognize and respond to **YHVH's** plan for us.¹²⁸⁶