

Thursday Bible Class. Image & Superscription

12th March 2026

- taken from **Matthew 22:20**

And he [Jesus] saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription?



Context – The Pharisees

These words of the Lord Jesus were in answer to the question of the Pharisees regarding the image on a coin. The Pharisees took their name from the Hebrew word *perushim*, meaning separated ones. They regarded themselves as very holy, and pious, and believed that they

had been selected above the common people, and their job was to apply the laws to everyday life and enforce it among everyone else. Their interpretation was the only way, and they loved to make commandments for others to keep, but they themselves did not, and instead they grew rich on the tithes they imposed on others.

They were fed up with Jesus as he was exposing their hypocrisy and fake religious piety and pretend holiness. They claimed to be the shepherds of the people but were in fact wolves devouring the flock. The more Jesus set a better example, having compassion on the people – because they were as sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34) the madder and angrier they got with Jesus, jealous and bitter that their position in society was being exposed.

Wanted to trap Jesus

They then got together to see *how they might entangle him in his talk (v15)*
In the parallel passage in Luke 20 the reason why they should do this is explained:

And they watched him, and sent forth spies, which should feign themselves just men, that they might take hold of his words, that so they might deliver him unto the power and authority of the governor.

This exact activity was prophesied in:

- Psalm 2:2: *The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed,[Christ]*
- Psalms 56:5-6: *Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts are against me for evil. They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul.*

That Jesus managed to foresee their reasoning and dodge being trapped is remarkable, but his careful response is used as an example for us to be encouraged, when we might feel we are being tricked and undermined in our belief of the Gospel; see Hebrews 12:3: *For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.*

The trap

Before the Pharisees asked the question they tried to soften Jesus up, and lure him into making unwise statements, by resorting to flattery, but also to lead him into a trap. They said: *Teacher, we know that you are truthful, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You do not court anyone's favour because you show no partiality. (NET)*

The Psalms again predicted this of Jesus' enemies how they would use flattery to deceive:

- Psalms 5:9: *For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue.*
- Psalms 12:2: *They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak.*
- Psalms 55:21: *The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords.*

Proverbs 29:5 gives such warning to watch out for flattery: *A man that flatters his neighbour spreads a net for his feet.*

But also hidden in this flattery they were setting up Jesus to fail. - *You do not court anyone's favour because you show no partiality.* Or as it is in the KJV: *neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men.*

This in one sense was true, but in another sense was not true, and the Pharisees knew that this.

To NOT be a respecter of persons: -

The Scriptures preach clearly that God is not a respecter of persons, and that likewise those who are godly should also not exercise partiality and bias:

- Job 34:19: *How much less to him that accepts not the persons of princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor? for they all are the work of his hands.*
- Acts 10:34: *Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons:*
- Romans 2:11: *For there is no respect of persons with God.*
- 1 Peter 1:17: *And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judges according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear:*

So the Pharisees highlighted this aspect, hoping that Jesus would then be ready to condemn the worship of men.

But in another way, it is important to be a respecer of persons: that is to give due respect to the rulers of the people, and those who are in government.

To BE a respecer of persons:

- Romans 13:1: *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*
- Titus 3:1: *Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work,*
- 1 Peter 2:13-17: *Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.*
- 2 Peter 2:10: *But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government*

So after flattering Jesus and setting a trap for him, carefully laying the snare, they showed him a coin, hoping that Jesus would commit to one of two answers:

Verse 17: *Tell us therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?*

If Jesus said it was lawful to give tribute to Ceasar, then they could accuse him of promoting worship of Caesar – and encouraging the paying of taxes. If he said yes, it was lawful, he would appear to be supporting the Roman occupation. By saying Yes, he would anger the people standing by, and the Pharisees would be successful in driving a wedge between Jesus and the people.

Additionally, the Romans at that time worshipped Caesar as a god. It would appear therefore that Jesus was condoning the respect of one who claimed to be God.

If Jesus said No, however they would have Jesus arrested. If Jesus said No, it was not lawful to give tribute to Caesar, immediately he would stand to be accused of preaching rebellion, and sedition. It would be contrary to Roman law, the punishment of which was death. We notice that the Pharisees sent their representatives with the Herodians (verse 16) The Herodians supported the dynasty of Herod, and the policies of the Romans, and the Pharisees made sure they were present so that they could then be angry and report Jesus to the authorities.

The trap was set.

But Jesus was no ordinary man. He was the Son of God, he had inherited an ability to process wisdom very effectively, he had been given the Holy Spirit, and could discern the thoughts and intents of the hearts (Matthew 9:4, 12:25) He knew the trap and could see the two options, - this is known as a false dilemma or a false dichotomy. A double bind, or a loaded question, is also terms which is used for this cunning and crafty method to trap someone. It is evil. It is wicked, and should not be practised among those claiming the name of Jesus.

The answer

He responded to the question. Verse 18,19: *But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites? Shew me the tribute money. And they brought unto him a penny.*

The Pharisees had spoken of this paying of tribute. The tribute money they were referring to was a penny. The Greek word for penny is *denarius*, and this was in fact a silver coin used to pay tax. It is why it is called a 'tribute penny' to this day.

We are fortunate to have one in our possession, and here are some photographs:

The coin in question:



If you look closely you will see all the scratches on the silver, from the many pockets and money bags that the coin has been in for over two thousand years! You can see the image of Caesar. The writing around the edge is: TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS, which translates to "Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus". So the Son of God, Jesus Christ was asked to comment on a coin belonging to Caesar who also claimed to be the Son of a God!!

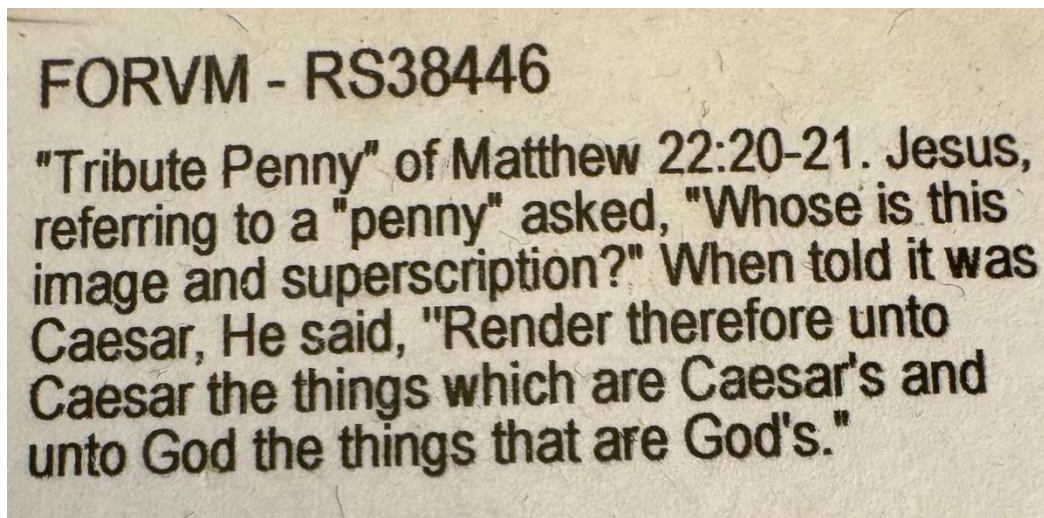
Here is the other side:

Here you can see the words PONTIF MAXIM. This is Latin for High Priest!

Now you can begin to see the significance of the moment. Jesus is our High Priest. Caesar was the fake!



Here is the official note that came with the coin:



This was the coin brought to Jesus. Well, probably not the exact one, because many of these coins were produced and stamped, but maybe!

😊 (nice thought)

Jesus would have held up the coin to emphasise the point he was going to make.

"Whose is this image and superscription?"

They answered Caesar's. They were of course correct. The image represented Caesar. The superscription, - the words on the coins belonged to him. That was a fact. It did not mean that the words were true or not, it was the design Caesar had authorised. Jesus did not have to comment on the words, although, it was obvious the words were wrong.

Then Jesus replied. His words were so powerful, that they are quoted very often today in so many different contexts. We are reminded of the words of Jeremiah: 23:29: *Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?*

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

This answer avoided the trap, by giving a double answer, and leaving the Pharisees with the riddle. They were the ones now in the trap.

The coin belonged to Caesar. The Roman occupation controlled all commerce and currency. They set the taxation and levies. God had authorised and permitted their existence, and overthrow of the Jewish state. The Romans sanctioned by their leader had produced the coin. Therefore, there was no way out of ducking the issue. The Pharisees were left with the realisation that according to the same rules they applied to Jesus they had now to agree to pay tax and tribute to Caesar, or else they were not being resisters of those in authority, and were not exercising truth, by denying what they had just admitted! They were now in their own double bind!

No wonder we read in verse 22: *When they had heard these words, they marvelled, and left him, and went their way.*

They had to move on quick, else the crowd would turn on them.

There is a further lesson to be taken from this though.

The coin had the image and superscription of Caesar and should be given to Caesar therefore in tribute. Jesus did not preach rebellion, but that which his apostles taught, to give respect and honour to those who God has put in charge to govern, and to pay taxes (see Matthew 23:23, Romans 13:7) when they are due. If we cannot obey those who we can see, then how is it possible to obey Him who is not seen? (Hebrews 11:1)

But Jesus also send Render to God the things that are God's. It is interesting that in this very same chapter Jesus explains what should belong to God, in verse 37: *Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*

(We treated with this in last week's Thursday Bible Class on Deuteronomy 6.)

Nothing can trump, outrank or surpass the worship and allegiance to God. He must be first and foremost in our lives. We note this in Peter's comments 1 Peter 2:13: *Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake*: For the Lord's sake therefore we have to give honour to

kings, and submit to the higher powers. But as Peter also observed: Acts 5:29: *Then Peter ...answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.*

Let us conclude with the obvious question that is left hanging in the air.
Whose image and superscription is written on our hearts?

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