

Honor

BELIEVERS' HIGHEST CALLING IS TO HONOR GOD
IN EVERY ASPECT OF THEIR LIVES.

Before the advent of coinage and banking institutions, people bartered; they exchanged goods or services for goods or services of comparable value. In Scripture, Job was a man of great wealth. His fortune was determined by the livestock he owned (Job 1:3; 42:12). “Abram [later known as Abraham] was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold” (Gen. 13:2). Abraham’s son, Isaac, was “rich and kept getting richer.” His wealth was not measured, though, in coins but in livestock and servants (26:13-14). Coins had not yet been invented.

Precious metals were measured for trade by weight rather than by their stamped size. A shekel was originally an indicator of size and weight rather than the name of an official government-issued coin. When the time came to bury his wife, “Abraham weighed out [rather than counted out] . . . four hundred standard shekels of silver” (Gen. 23:16; see also Jer. 32:8-9).

When were coins developed? Kings established coins to guarantee a standard weight for trade and commerce. The first known coins came from Lydia, which was a kingdom in Asia Minor—the western region of modern-day Turkey. About 610–560 BC, the Lydians stamped electrum, an alloy of gold and silver, with the head of a lion. The earliest silver coin was Persian and known as the *daric*. As the Persian Empire grew, the *daric*, also called the *drachma*, was increasingly used as the standard for commerce and trade.

Coinage had become standardized by the time the Greeks and then the Romans came to power. The Greeks had a common coin, also called a *drachma*, that was about the size of an American dime. This was similar in size and weight to the Roman *denarius*, which was valued at about a day’s wage for an unskilled laborer. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus for thirty silver coins, likely *denarii*. The widow at the temple gave two of the smallest Jewish coin, the *lepton* or “mite” (KJV). These bronze or copper coins were the least valuable coin in circulation in the time of Jesus. *Leptons* were just a bit wider in diameter than a pencil eraser; the Greek word *lepton* means fine, thin, or small.

**UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT**

Matthew 22:1–23:39

Events in today’s study occurred during the last week of Jesus’s public ministry; specifically, they happened on the Tuesday before His crucifixion on Friday. Just a few days earlier, Jesus and His disciples had gone to the home of his good friends, Mary and Martha, who lived in Bethany. He had heard that their brother, Lazarus, had died. After Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days, Jesus raised him from the dead. Incensed, the religious leaders in Jerusalem convened and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Word about their plans had gotten out; many of the Jews who were in Jerusalem preparing for Passover wondered whether Jesus would show up for the festival and risk being arrested by the chief priests and Pharisees (John 11:17-57).

**EXPLORE THE TEXT**

Government Authority (Matt. 22:15-22)

The Pharisees and Herodians wanted to catch Jesus in a verbal trap so they might arrest and condemn Him. They sent several people to Jesus to ask the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (v. 17). If Jesus approved of paying taxes, it could be viewed as support for the Roman occupation. If Jesus disapproved of paying taxes, it could be viewed as treasonous against Rome. Jesus stunned them with His answer: give to human government what is due and give to God what is due Him.

VERSE 15

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to trap him by what he said.

The question had been about authority (21:23-27). The chief priests and elders demanded to know by what authority Jesus was doing “these things.” He said He would explain His source of authority if they would identify John the Baptist’s authority for his ministry. When these religious leaders refused to answer, Jesus responded with three parables.

The first two addressed the error of the Jewish leaders and the fate they deserved (21:28-44). The chief priests and elders realized Jesus was talking about them in His parables! Jesus continued. In His third parable, He told how the Father intended to carry out the sentence (22:1-14).

After hearing Jesus's parables and realizing He had been talking about them, **then the Pharisees** decided to act. But who were the *Pharisees*, and why did they oppose Jesus? They were the largest Jewish religious group of Jesus's day. They opposed Jesus because they did not believe He was obeying the law. He performed miracles on the Sabbath. He touched a corpse. He did not observe the ritualistic purification traditions. He allowed a woman to touch Him. Over and over, Jesus violated their interpretation of Old Testament law and their oral traditions.

The Greek word translated as **went** conveys a sense of intentionality. Any action the Pharisees took would be premeditated. The KJV translates **plotted** as they "took counsel." They who lived separated lives (*Pharisee* means "separate one") were willing to conspire with others if that meant they could trap Jesus in some theological error so they could discredit Him and thus destroy His ministry and influence.

VERSE 16

So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are truthful and teach truthfully the way of God. You don't care what anyone thinks nor do you show partiality."

This is the only time the **Herodians** are mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. The Herodians were a Jewish political group that supported the work of Herod the Great, his family, Rome, and its emperors. This meant the Herodians promoted Jewish oppression in their day. Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, was the territorial ruler (or "tetrarch") of Galilee 4 BC–AD 39, which meant he was in power during Jesus's lifetime. Herod Antipas was the ruler and thus involved in the deaths of John the Baptist, Jesus, and James, the son of Zebedee.

The Herodians may have joined the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus due to Jesus's close relationship with John the Baptist. The Herodians would have opposed John because he condemned Herod's divorce and subsequent marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias, Philip's wife (Mark 6:14-29). The Pharisees may have thought their disciples would have seemed to be less of a threat to Jesus than their mentors. Furthermore, the Pharisees may have believed their disciples' false flattery would have caused Jesus to lower His guard.

Everything these men said to and about Jesus in this verse was accurate and true. However, their words were not sincere; the Pharisees and, by extension, their disciples believed Jesus was a heretic by claiming to be God (John 10:22-33).

VERSE 17

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” was a loaded question. The Herodians supported Herod and thus favored paying taxes. The Pharisees resented paying taxes to Rome; they believed it violated Hebrew law. Both believed regardless of how Jesus answered, He would offend one of the two groups. However Jesus answered, they expected His words would ensnare Him.

One answer meant Jesus would be rejected by the masses who were looking for a Messiah to free them from Roman occupation. The other answer would imply He opposed Roman rule; this could result in His being condemned to death as a revolutionary.

By asking *lawful . . . or not?* these men thought they were cornering Jesus into having to choose one of their options. They would soon find out, though, that Jesus would not be trapped by their clever verbal posturing.

VERSE 18

Perceiving their malicious intent, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, hypocrites?”

As before, Jesus did not answer their question. That Jesus knew their **malicious intent** was evidence of His omnipotent and divine nature. He demonstrated having a supernatural knowledge more than once in His public ministry (for instance, Matt. 12:25; 16:7-8; Luke 5:20-25; 6:6-11). As mentioned above, they intended to trap Jesus in His words—a malicious act (“malice,” ESV, NASB; “evil intent,” NIV).

Jesus challenged His opponents in two ways. First, He asked why they were **testing** Him. Matthew elsewhere used this same Greek word, translated as “tempted” (Matt. 4:1). Second, Jesus called them **hypocrites**. This was a theater term that referred to a play actor; it could also refer to an impersonator or pretender. Again, Jesus’s supernatural knowledge allowed Him to see behind these pretenders’ masks.

VERSE 19

“Show me the coin used for the tax.” They brought him a denarius.

In teaching, Jesus often referred to something regularly seen in first-century life—sheep, vineyard workers, sowing seed, a wedding banquet. For this teaching moment, He used a coin as an object lesson. This was not just any coin but specifically the one used for **the tax**.

Jesus was not referring to the temple tax, which the Old Testament law required (Ex. 30:11-16; Matt. 17:24-27). The Romans collected three types of taxes in the first century. They collected a land or property tax that they levied against farms and dwellings. The second was a head tax that was tied to the Roman census. This tax compelled Joseph to go to Bethlehem before Jesus’s birth (Luke 2:1-5). The third was a customs or poll tax. People paid this as they transported goods along major highways or through city gates. Matthew had been this type of tax collector when Jesus called Him to be a disciple (Matt. 9:9). Jesus was likely referring to this third option, the poll tax.

The **denarius** was considered a standard wage for a day laborer, such as an agriculture worker, in the first century (20:1-16). This was the required coin for paying the poll tax. These silver coins were widely circulated and thus readily available for this teaching moment.

VERSES 20-21

“Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked them. “Caesar’s,” they said to him. Then he said to them, “Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The coin would have borne the **image** of Tiberius, who ruled the Roman Empire AD 14–37. The reverse side would have had an image of a female seated, facing right; this was likely Livia, who was the wife of Caesar Augustus, or Pax, Rome’s goddess of peace.

Tiberius’s **inscription** read “TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS,” which translates as, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The other side referred to the high priest of Roman religion: “PONTIF MAXIM.” Thus, both sides promoted the pagan Roman belief that the emperors were divine and worthy of worship. Jews considered this to be a violation of both the first and second commandments, which forbid having other gods before Yahweh and worshiping a graven image (Deut. 5:7-10).

“Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Jesus’s statement most likely affirmed the legitimacy of the secular, civil government. His balanced reply meant a person could be both a loyal citizen and a committed person of faith. The coin had the image of the emperor; we bear the image of our Creator (Gen. 1:26-27). Giving **“to God the things that are God’s”** referred not only to the temple tax but also to the worship He and He alone deserves.

Paul affirmed governmental legitimacy in his letter to the Romans: “Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God . . . Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor” (Rom. 13:1,7). Jews paid their temple tax; citizens were (and are) equally expected to pay their taxes to the Roman government.

VERSE 22

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

The Pharisees and Herodians had joined forces to trap Jesus with their clever question. However, His response showed support for both Rome and God. Jesus had taught truthfully the way of God (v. 16). Thus, they were **amazed** by His answer.

Matthew recorded other times people marveled at what Jesus had said or done. They were astonished at His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (7:28-29), at His power over the raging sea (8:26-27), at His power to heal a man physically and spiritually (9:8), and His ability to deliver a man demon-possessed (12:22-23). Whereas earlier the Pharisees “went” to plot against Jesus (22:15), here they simply **went away**.

Explore Further

Read “Jewish Parties in the New Testament” on pages 896–897 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does this article add to your understanding of the opposition Jesus faced from these groups in His ministry?

God’s Authority (Matt. 22:34-40)

Another Pharisee, an expert in the law, approached Jesus and asked, “Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?” (v. 36). Jesus replied that the greatest command was to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (v. 37). He followed this with a second command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 39). All of the Old Testament commands and teachings fulfilled these directives.

VERSE 34

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together.

After the Pharisees and Herodians failed to entrap Jesus, the **Sadducees** asked Jesus a question. The Pharisees and Sadducees were two distinct groups. The Sadducees were typically wealthy and aristocratic; they held the majority on the Sanhedrin. They were politically liberal but theologically conservative. The Sadducees held that only the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the Torah, were sacred Scripture. Thus, they rejected the possibility of a resurrection—since it is not mentioned in these books. Jesus had silenced the Sadducees after they asked Him a question involving the afterlife (vv. 23-33). In Matthew’s Gospel, the Pharisees and Sadducees sometimes united in their opposition to Jesus (3:7-12; 16:1-4,5-12).

VERSE 35

And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him:

An expert in the law (“scribe,” Mark 12:28) asked a question of Jesus. By profession, scribes copied the law of Moses; additionally, they interpreted the law during legal proceedings. This **one of them** was a Pharisee. The New Testament indicates that many scribes were Pharisees (see Mark 2:16; Acts 23:9). This man’s copying and interpreting the law would have qualified him to be an *expert*.

The purpose of his question was to **test** Jesus. The same verb occurs in Matthew 4:1, which states that Jesus went “into the wilderness to be tempted [or tested] by the devil.” Jesus also used this verb earlier in His encounter with His opponents: “Perceiving their malicious intent, Jesus said, ‘Why are you testing me, hypocrites?’” (22:18).

VERSE 36

“Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?”

This expert in the law referred to Jesus as a **teacher** or a rabbi. Whereas Jesus’s opponents had earlier used this title as a form of false flattery (vv. 16,24), its usage here may have been sincere. Asking what was the greatest commandment was a loaded question. The Old Testament law, the Torah, contained more than 600 laws. Jews in this day debated how to rank or prioritize them. Choosing just one would certainly have annoyed other rabbis who might choose another as their favorite.

VERSES 37-38

He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command.”

Jesus chose a law that began in a person’s heart; He spoke of loving God. Jesus quoted what is known as the Jewish *Shema*. Jews recited this as a prayer twice daily, in the morning and evening. The word *Shema* is the first word of the Hebrew prayer; it means “listen” or “hear.” Deuteronomy 6:4-5 says, “Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Mark’s Gospel includes both of these verses in his account of this conversation as well (Mark 12:29-31).

The **heart, soul, and mind** (or “strength,” Deut. 6:5) are not separate categories; when spoken together, they refer to the fullness of a person’s being. So, this type of love was not a fleeting emotion, subject to a person’s whims or daily circumstances. This was (and is) a call to wholehearted devotion to God with every aspect of one’s being.

Two factors made this the greatest and most important command. First, this type of love would ultimately produce visible proof of obedience. This fullness-of-being type of love ultimately would affect and be evident to those around us. Second, this type of love affirms that God alone is worthy of this level of devotion. It says something about the God we worship and follow.

VERSE 39

“The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Whereas the first command was to love the Creator, this one focuses on loving humans, whom He created: **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

In giving this command, Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19:18. The chapter gives pragmatic instructions about how to put this love for others into practice (Lev. 19:9-18). It teaches that God's people are to share gleanings from their harvest. Do not lie, act deceptively, steal, spread slander, threaten another person's life, or take revenge. Do not mistreat the blind or deaf. Judge cases fairly, regardless of the person's social status. These are ways to put that love into action.

Loving God, others, and ourselves are inextricably linked. John, the beloved disciple, taught that our love for others is the byproduct of God's love for us. (1 John 4:11).

VERSE 40

“All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:1-21). The first four address our relationship with God. Numbers five through ten instruct us about how we are to treat others. Expanding outward, God gave Moses over 600 laws found in Genesis–Deuteronomy that were part of the Mosaic law. Rather than taking the panoramic view, Jesus zeroed in on the two commands that were the foundation for all Old Testament law. On these two **depend** all of **the Law** and **the Prophets**, meaning all the teaching of the Old Testament. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared He did not come “to abolish the Law or the Prophets.” He came to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17).

So, moving from the most expansive to the tightest view, God gave over 600 commands to His people. These 600 can be summarized in the Ten Commandments Moses received on Mount Sinai. The Ten are focused down to two—we are to love God with our whole being and to love others as we love ourselves.

Explore Further

How do we determine if we are living a life fully devoted to God? What can keep us from achieving this type of commitment? Why is living a fully devoted life such a challenge? As you pray this week, ask God to reveal to you areas in which you struggle in your devotion and commitment to Him.

- Also ask for His strength as you address this area or these areas.