

Mark 12:13-17 Paying Taxes to Caesar

Read Mark 12:13-17. In the parable in Mark 12:1-12 Jesus pointed out that the religious leaders of Israel had been anything but faithful to the commitment God expected of them. It was a scathing indictment of their failure to be the people God wanted them to be. Read Mark 12:13 for what came next. Perhaps we can appreciate the uniqueness of those two groups getting together if we substitute instead of Pharisees and Herodians President Trump and Nancy Pelosi. In Jesus' day the odds were about the same for the Pharisees and Herodians sitting down to come up with a plan they could work on together.

The Pharisees and Herodians could not have been more opposite in their political and religious views. The Pharisees were religious zealots who saw everything in life associated with keeping God's commandments. The Herodians were the political zealots who saw everything in relationship to how they could cooperate with Rome so as to stay in power. The Pharisees were strongly committed to Israel in opposition to Rome while the Herodians were committed to Rome. Normally they would not even talk to one another, but they did, and they did so for a very different reason but a similar goal. They both wanted to get rid of Jesus. The Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat to their religious positions and the Herodians saw Him as one whose actions could bring the wrath of Rome down on them, thus ending their place in the political system of the day.

Mark wrote they wanted **“to catch him in his words.”** (v.13). The word **“catch”** was the one used to catch or trap a wild animal. In verse 15 we read Jesus asked, **““Why are you trying to trap me?”** Incidentally, the word **“catch”** or **“trap”** is the same one Mark used in Mark 1:13 to write that Satan **“tempted”** Him. That would indicate that from Mark's perspective the attempt to catch Jesus was a demonic attempt to somehow destroy either His ministry or His life, depending on how He answered.

Read Mark 12:14. The word **“teacher”** was one of great honor and usually reserved for a rabbi. They wanted to butter Him up so He would feel obligated to answer a question that, from their perspective, could only get Him in trouble.

Note the way they described Jesus in verse 14. Their flattery was in reality truth and if they truly believed that what a difference it would have made. Of course, they didn't. Jesus was described as a man of integrity who would not dilute or deny truth simply to please someone. His teaching would not change just to satisfy a particular group. While we who know Jesus know He would only **teach the way of God in accordance with the truth**, His adversaries certainly did not believe that.

Read the answer of Jesus in Mark 12:14-15.

In their minds the trap was set. If He said **“Yes,”** the multitude would turn on Him because they hated Rome and hated paying taxes to them. To tell them to pay the Roman tax would make Him, in the eyes of most, a traitor to Israel. If He said, **“No,”** He would have been immediately

reported to the Roman authorities and arrested on charges of treason and inciting a riot. In their minds this was a win or win situation. They couldn't lose.

Jesus responded, after letting them know He understood they were trying to trap Him was, according to verse 15, **“Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.”** A **denarius** was a Roman coin that was used to pay a man a day's wage. Given the fact that Jesus did not reach into His pocket and take one out may imply He did not even have that much money. He who owned the cattle on a thousand hills had to ask for a small coin. Read Matthew 8:20. And II Corinthians 8:9.

Read Mark 12:16,

On one side of that Roman coin was the image of Tiberius Caesar with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The other side of that coin had an image of Tiberius's mother with the words that literally meant “High Priest.” In addition to hating the Romans for their occupation of Israel they hated these coins, which they had to use, because they depicted a man who claimed to be a god and a woman, identified as a priest. It could not have come up a much worse scenario for the Pharisees and the truly religious Jews.

The name “Augustus” was not his real name, but a title conferred on him by the Roman senate. It literally meant “August One,” and was a religious honor, indicating that he possessed divine attributes including that of majesty. The Jews, of course, reserved that title for God alone and any other use was blasphemous.

Verse 17 reads,

This passage certainly says a lot about the Christian and government. The New Testament actually has a great deal to say about that subject. Read Romans 13:1-7 and I Peter 2:13-15.

Not only are we to respect government and honestly pay taxes but we are to pray for those in positions of leadership, even when we may not agree with their philosophy. Read I Timothy 2:1-2.

That is certainly a powerful reminder for the church today when it seems as if Christians are as divided as society and too often angry with those who differ with them.

There is more to see in the response of Jesus. He said, **“and to God what is God's.”**

To fully appreciate what Jesus was saying we have to back up to His statement, **“Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's.”** Jesus was saying more than simply pay taxes. It was at least the common belief, if not the law, that all of the coins with Caesar's image on them belonged to him because they bore his image. Note that Jesus did not say, “*Give Caesar*” but **“Give back to Caesar.”** Literally Jesus said, *“Give him back what can be legitimately seen as his because his image is on them.”*

That statement was followed by **“and give to God what is God’s.”** This part of His answer is interesting because it was not part of their question but is important because one can never have a right relationship with government if one does not first have a right relationship with God.

Before looking at the implications of that for us, note that in adding the reference to the true God, Jesus was declaring Caesar was not really the god he claimed to be. Jehovah is the one to whom all things ultimately belong.

Here is the logic Jesus was presenting when He answered their question. If the coins of Rome technically belonged to Caesar because his image was on them, then does it not follow that we belong to God because He has stamped His image in us? Read Genesis 1:26-27, Psalm 100:3, and II Corinthians 1:22.

If we are to give the coins back to Caesar because they have his image on them, should we not likewise give ourselves back to God because He has His image on us? What are we to give to God? We must give Him our praise and thanksgiving, our tithes and offerings, and our service. Read 1 Corinthians 10:31.

Mark concludes his account of that encounter by writing in verse 17, **“And they were amazed at him.”** The tense of verb that Mark used implies they marveled and continued to do so. He eluded their trap. Do we marvel often enough about what Jesus said, did and continues to do for us? If so, we will want to give ourselves back to Him in whose image we have been created.