

First Baptist Church Merritt Island
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Q & A with Jesus (Part 1)
Mark 12:13-17

This morning, we are continuing our verse-by-verse study of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is in the final few days before He will be crucified. This section of Mark records the escalating conflict between Christ and the leaders of Israel. He entered the temple in Jerusalem. He overturned the money-changers tables and confronted a group of leaders who were basically members of the Jewish Supreme Court, known as the Sanhedrin.

Those leaders hated Jesus but feared the crowds who seemed to love Jesus. So, they decided to employ a strategy of public debate with Jesus, hoping He would be fooled into saying something wrong or foolish enough to give them the upper hand. Jesus ties them in knots, and by the end of this chapter, they all agree not to ask Jesus any more questions. It's pretty awesome.

So, let's jump into our text and see this Q&A session between Jesus and the corrupt leaders of Israel.

Mark 12:13–17 (ESV)

And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. 14 And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" 15 But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 17 Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him.

Last week, we talked about the Jewish High Court, known as the Sanhedrin. It was primarily comprised of men who served in three different positions of Jewish culture: the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.

Those are descriptions of leadership roles. But there were also groups that functioned like political parties: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. A priest or a scribe might also be a Pharisee or Sadducee, just like a Senator might be a Democrat or Republican. And this might come as a major surprise, but political parties don't always get along. If I start to talk about the Democrats, all the dyed-in-the-wool Republicans get on the edge of their seats...evaluating my every word to see if I seem sympathetic or antagonistic to the Democratic party. As long as we believe there is good and evil in the world, partisanship will be part of life and we will believe our party is good and the other party is evil.

That's why we would naturally pay attention if we heard that Republicans and Democrats were working together in unity...not that that would ever happen.

An, our text is one of the greatest bi-partisan efforts in the history of human government. The Sanhedrin sends a delegation of Pharisees and Herodians to ask Jesus a question. And those two groups hated each other. The Herodians supported the Herods – a series of kings who were appointed to rule over Israel as puppets of the Roman Government. The Pharisees believed God was going to send a Messiah to overthrow the wicked rule of both Rome and Herod. So, they saw the Herodians as religious and national traitors.

But here they are together, trying to trick Jesus. After attempting to butter Him up through a series of compliments that were true but insincere, they pose a question designed to put Jesus in a no-win situation. Kind of like asking your kids if they still cheat on their homework...just answer the question yes or no.

What was their question: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

The issue of taxation was an explosive topic in first-century Israel. The Romans had adopted a system of taxation that had been developed by Alexander the Great. It worked sort of like a franchising business model. Rome would allow individuals to purchase the right to be a tax collector for a specific region. They would sell that right to the highest bidder who would then be responsible for extracting that amount from the citizens of their region and pass it on to Rome. However, if the tax collectors could collect more than their allotted amount, they could keep the excess. As you might imagine, greed and corruption ran rampant.

In addition to the taxes they owed Caesar, Jews had to pay the taxes that were incorporated into the Old Testament Law. Some scholars estimate that common people in Israel paid around 40% of their annual income in tax. Ultimately, it was a Jewish revolt against taxation in 66 AD that led to Rome destroying Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD.

So, when the religious leaders pose their question about taxes, the trap is set.

- If Jesus answers “yes, you should pay taxes to Caesar,” He would lose support with the common people which would allow the Jewish leaders to arrest Him without inciting a riot.
- If Jesus answers “no, you shouldn’t pay taxes to Caesar,” the religious leaders could report Him to the Roman authorities who would arrest Him for sedition.

But Jesus sees the trick, so He doesn’t just say ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ He starts by saying, “You’re a bunch of hypocrites...” which is a great lesson in how to win friends and influence people. Jesus doesn’t try to cultivate false peace and fake relationships. He knows they are a bunch of religious liars who try to manipulate people (Including Him) for personal gain. He knows they are trying to set a trap.

So, He asks them to show Him the Roman Denarius, the coin that was used for paying the tribute tax to Caesar. Here’s a picture of that coin...



The image on the front side of the coin (on the left) is of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman ruler during the life of Jesus. The inscription says, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The backside of the coin is believed to be a picture of Tiberius Caesar’s mom, with the inscription “high priest.”

Jesus holds this coin in His hand and asks a really simple question before He gives His final response. Whose likeness is this? The group answers back that it’s Caesar’s image (we’ll come back to that in a minute), then Jesus gives His answer to their gotcha question with the famous words of verse 17:

17 Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The word “render” means “to pay what is owed; to give back.” It carries the idea of returning something back to its original and rightful owner. In other words, Jesus is saying we should give to Caesar what is rightfully Caesar’s. And we should give to God what is rightfully God’s. And there are two ways to interpret what Jesus is saying here.

Some people hear what Jesus is saying and get the idea that there are two categories: things belonging to Caesar and things belonging to God. Here’s a picture that I got somewhere that represents that idea.



Some people envision Christ’s teaching like this. There is a separation between God and government. They think Jesus is saying that there is a sphere marked “Caesar’s things” where government and politics have their place apart from spiritual things. Sometimes people refer to this as separation of church and state. Other times, people simply think of their civil duties as being completely separate from their relationship with God.

But I don’t think Jesus is saying there are two separate and distinct realms, not at all. Every realm of life is ultimately under the governance of Almighty God. He is the Ruler of Heaven and earth. He is God over the Pharaohs of Egypt and the Caesars of Rome and the Presidents of the United States. That’s the power behind the answer Jesus gives.

He asks whose likeness is on the coin. It’s Caesar’s likeness imprinted on the coin, so the coin rightfully should be given back to Caesar. It belongs to him, and he has the authority to receive it back. But here is the question that would have been hanging in the air, where is God’s likeness imprinted?

Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Every man, woman, and child is made in the likeness of God. The Pharisees were made in the likeness of God. The Herodians were made in the likeness of God. Caesar was made in the likeness of God. You and I are made in the likeness of God. So, while the coin belongs to Caesar, Caesar belongs to God. The Pharisees and Herodians and you and I, we belong to God.

There aren’t two distinct realms where government exists apart from God. It’s something a bit more like this...



All things belong to God, including the governments of men. God has chosen to place the governments of men in a place of authority but that doesn't mean God allows the governments of men to replace His authority. So, what I take Jesus to be teaching here is that, while we honor the rightful place of government, we ultimately honor God's place above all.

And that gives us our big idea for this morning:

Big Idea: Jesus calls us to honor the role of Government while we honor God above all.

As much as we might wish it had gone differently, Jesus is clearly saying that it is right to pay taxes. But He is also clearly pointing to the greater accountability that we have to God. We bear the likeness of God Himself and are called to render our highest honor to Him alone. 20 mins

So, in the time that we have left, I just want to consider what it looks like to honor the role of government while we honor God above all else.

Honoring Government includes Submission

Romans 13:1-2; 5-6

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

5 Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul says we are to recognize the fact that God has placed governing authorities over us as part of His authority in this world. So, when we rebel against the government's authority, we are rebelling against God's authority.

That means we pay our taxes with integrity. We don't cheat on them even though it's perfectly fine to take advantage of legal provisions to reduce our tax burden. Emily and I had three kids so that we could claim the child tax credit...just kidding.

We are also called to obey the laws of our government. Obedience is part of submission. But remember, our highest honor is reserved for God. And that gives us a point of clarity on how far our obedience to government is supposed to go. If obeying our government requires us to disobey God, then we must echo the words of the Apostles in Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men."

And there is certainly a line being drawn by our government today. Whether it's about abortion or gender identity or the affirmation of sexual immorality, there are many leaders in our government who would legislate

actions that are incompatible with what God has said in His word, the Bible. In those instances, the way we honor the authority of God in relation to our government is to obey God above the ungodly mandates of errant laws, no matter what the cost may be.

But there's one more way I believe we honor God in relation to our particular form of government. We don't live in a monarchy or under the dictatorship of a Roman Caesar, at least not yet. We live in a government that is of the people, by the people, and for the people. I believe that means one of the ways we submit to our form of government is by voting and representing the heart of God in the ballot box. We should represent God's heart for the unborn. We should represent God's heart for marriage and sexuality. We should represent God's heart for justice. And we should ask God for Holy Spirit wisdom because it often feels like we are asked to vote for the lesser of two evils....

This is an election year. And I want to challenge us to be engaged, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as followers of Jesus Christ and children of the Most High God. Our highest citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, not the United States of America. Heaven is our real and eternal home. We honor our God by taking His word as our final authority and representing Him as temporary citizens of this world.

Honoring government includes submission to the authority of God within the authority of our government.

Honoring Government includes Intercession

1 Timothy 2:1-2

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

One of the ways we honor our governing leaders is by lifting them up in prayer to Almighty God.

I was deeply convicted over this as I prepared for this morning. I strongly disagree with the politics of a great number of our highest elected officials in Washington DC. In my private life, I have a tendency to read the latest headlines about various decisions being made by our leaders and feel disgusted by the trajectory of our nation. I've even been known to complain to my family and friends. I think it's possible that some of you might feel the same way and I'm ashamed of how much I have complained about our leaders and how little I've prayed for them.

It's almost as if I live like I believe our leaders are in control and our God isn't. What would it look like if we took to heart the Word of God in Proverbs 21:1?

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

God is able to influence the hearts of our leaders in a way that no one else can and the Bible leads me to believe He wants to do that in response to the prayers of His people, our prayers. I can't help but wonder how much the trajectory of our nation reflects the lack of prayer among God's people rather than the presence of power among godless leaders.

We honor God as we give honor to our leaders by lifting them up in prayer to our Heavenly Father.

Honoring Government includes a Kingdom Mission

1 Timothy 2:2–4

for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

The whole point of praying for our leaders to lead well is so we could be undistracted from the conflicts of government (like international war) and remain focused on the mission of a God who desires all people to be saved. The agenda of God's people isn't that we would make the church a voting bloc for a political party, or a political rally for our nation (even though we might need to talk about moral and spiritual issues that overlap with decisions our government is making). The agenda of God's people is set by God and His word, the Bible. It's that we would be aligned as God's church with His Kingdom mission to make the gospel of Jesus known in this nation and the nations of the world. That is our Mission from God Himself.

John Hancock, the famed signer of the Declaration of Independence and president of Congress, called the people of his home state of Massachusetts to pray...

- that all nations may bow to the scepter of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and that the whole earth may be filled with his glory.
- that the spiritual kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be continually increasing until the whole earth shall be filled with His glory.
- to confess their sins before God and implore His forgiveness through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Where would our nation be today if we as God's people had remained steadfast with that kind of clarity and persistent in that kind of prayer? Friends, the agenda of the church of Jesus Christ has been set by the Lord of the Church not the leaders of any political party. Our calling is to make the Good News of Jesus known to the people of this world.

Jesus Christ lived the perfect life that all of us have failed to live, He died the death on a cross that we all deserve to die, He rose again from the grave so that He give His resurrected, eternal, and abundant life to anyone and everyone who would trust Him as their personal Lord and Savior.

What would it look like if you took the time and energy you use to get your favorite politicians into office and used them to get the gospel to the people where you live, work, learn, and play? What would it look like if you desired to see Jesus enthroned in the hearts of your friends and family more than you desired to see your favorite candidate placed in the Oval Office?

Jesus is calling us as His people to honor the role of government while we honor our glorious God above all.

This is the word of God for us today.