

“JESUS AND CAESAR.”

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First Christian Reformed Church
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Scripture Texts: Mark 12:13-17

Introduction.

Prayer: Holy Father, we need your help this morning. I ask you to speak through your Word through me in such a way that you are glorified, the wisdom of your Word is exalted, your people are benefited and our faith rests more securely in your power. By your Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus and for His sake, Amen.

Some wise old wag once said we should never discuss politics or religion in polite company. Well I am about to discuss politics and religion and do it in polite company. But I am in good company because Jesus discussed both.

Actually He was forced into by some religious and political fanatics. The *“they”* in verse 13 is most likely the Sanhedrin, the supreme ruling body in Israel, made up of the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes and presided over by the chief priest.

Each authority in Israel would put Jesus to a test. The Pharisees in cahoots with the Herodians tested Jesus on taxes. Next the Sadducees will test Jesus on the resurrection and marriage. Then the scribes will test Him concerning Scriptural interpretation and the greatest commandment.

Their goal was to trip up Jesus and catch Him in a trap that would give them some justification to bring charges against Him. Jesus’ goal was to give them no such opportunity so that they would be left with the last resort which was to charge Him illegally and unjustly.

The Pharisees were superstitious religious fundamentalist who cared only about outward appearances and external rituals. They had the forms of godliness without any of the power.

The Herodians were compromised Jews who had fallen in league with the politicians. They were sympathizers of Herod, worldly minded men who feared man more than they feared God.

How could bitter enemies be united? Because they saw Jesus as a serious threat to their power and authority. They hated each other but they hated the Gospel more. So it was and so it has always been. A common enemy leads them to make common cause with each other.

Mark 12:13-14. Setting the Trap. The Question.

Smooth Words.

These guys were the ultimate schmoozers. They came up with the most convincing lines they could think of. They thought Jesus was like other men, that He could be fooled, taken in by flattery.

They feigned respect and honor. They came under the pretense of genuine interest and concern pretending to be god-fearing men with an honest desire to learn. “Teacher, help us, tell us what we should do.”

Ironically, from the lips of men who hate Jesus and have conspired to kill Him, we actually hear a true description of who Jesus is even though they don’t believe a word of it.

Jesus is the true teacher who teaches God’s way. Jesus has integrity, He is consistent, He is fearless, not swayed by men. He is the faithful interpreter of the things of God. He speaks the truth and doesn’t color it or spin it to suit His hearers. He isn’t a PC people-pleaser. He doesn’t compromise. He is a man without guile. He is everything they aren’t. Even His enemies get it right. They will be without excuse on the day of judgment.

We all must be wise and learn not to believe everything we hear. All that glitters is not gold. Beware of flowery speech and flattery. Beware of manipulation and appeals to our pride.

Nothing derails a pastor from faithfulness to the Word of God faster than trying to gain favor and approval from men or seeking worldly wealth or fame. No man can serve two masters; no man can please two masters.

Sharp Question.

They had the perfect question, one of those “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” kind of questions. A question designed to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma.

If Jesus said they should pay the tribute tax to Caesar that would make Him a traitor to Israel and Judaism, an enemy of His own people. If Jesus said they shouldn’t pay the tribute tax that would make Him a traitor to the Roman authorities who occupied Israel and guilty of treason.

It made sense that they would send the Pharisees and the Herodians on this particular mission. They represented the two polar opposite camps. If Jesus sided with the Pharisees in opposing the tribute tax, the Herodians would be there as witnesses against Jesus. If Jesus sided with the secular Herodians, the Pharisees would be there to witness against Jesus.

The perfect trap with the perfect witnesses.

And they posed the question as a yes/no question. “Should we pay them, or should we not?” They purposefully boxed Jesus in so His only escape was into their trap.

Mark 12:15-17. Springing the Trap. The Answer.

“Knowing their hypocrisy.” How did He know that? Their words sounded great. There was nothing in what they said that says hypocrisy. He knew because He was God, He could see right into their hearts and read their minds, just as He knows our minds and hearts.

What Jesus could do because He was God, we must pray for. We must ask for wisdom and discernment that we not fall into traps that would trip us up or lead us astray or cause us to undermine what we believe.

Jesus asked for a coin and asked a question.

There’s an old rabbinic tradition of answering a question with a question. I am reminded of a classic Woody Allen story. Someone asks a rabbi, “Why does a Rabbi always answer a question with a question?” After a long pause the rabbi says, “Why shouldn’t a Rabbi always answer a question with a question?”

“Whose image and whose inscription is on the coin?”

The coin was a denarius which was a silver coin used to pay the tribute tax or imperial poll tax. The image on it was Tiberius who was the Roman Emperor from about 14 to 37 AD. The inscription around the edge read: “Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus.”

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”

To the Pharisees, Jesus says render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.

To the Herodians, Jesus says render to God what is God’s.

Mark 12:17. Marvel at His Teaching.

Jesus made them give the answer that sprung the trap. The Pharisees and the Herodians were left flatfooted with nothing to say. No charges of blasphemy against Jewish law, no charges of inciting a tax rebellion against Roman law.

They are not only defeated and disgraced, they are forced to marvel at His wisdom and authority. They are forced to acknowledge His glory.

Yet their hard hearts can’t submit to the truth even when they hear it with their own ears. Another trap would have to be set.

Application and Conclusion.

I want to spend our remaining time talking about religion and politics by unpacking this one-sentence answer that Jesus gave. I want us to see how amazing and brilliant Jesus’ response is, how perfectly it brings together religion and politics, God and government.

Jesus’ response is brilliant for at least two reasons.

First, Jesus escapes what they thought was the perfectly laid trap. This was a huge, hotly debated issue in His day and Jesus answered it in one sentence. No one taught like this man. No one spoke with as much wisdom and authority. Brothers and sisters, listen to Jesus. Listen to His Word. Listen and obey. Do not be hypocrites with no interest in the truth.

Second, Jesus uses their evil intentions to teach us fundamental principles on the Christians attitude toward the state. How important is this text? It's has formed the basis for Western political thought for 2000 years. Jesus answers the God and government question.

Jesus exposes the lie of two kingdom theology, the false notion that life can be conveniently separated into two separate watertight compartments. Jesus repudiates the idea of separate categories for sacred and secular, for religion and everything else.

God is not just God of Sundays or churches and spiritual things while the secular world is totally separate and unrelated.

The Jews believed you could only be loyal to one sphere, either the Jewish faith or the Roman state. They said they couldn't faithfully worship God unless they were free from every yoke of man and government. They felt their service of God was diminished by having to also render obedience and submission to secular authorities.

Jesus said render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's *and* to God the things that are God's.

What is God's? Or better what isn't God's? Nothing. Everything is God's.

Psalm 24:1 The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.

Jesus says that Christianity embraces all of life and has something to say to all of life. There are not two separate and exclusive spheres of authority, God is sovereign over all things, over all nations, over all human and political affairs.

Everything is God's and everything is from God. Governments and rule and authority are from God. What we render to Caesar we render for God's sake. Any obedience we render to Caesar we render for God's sake, because we owe God obedience and He calls us to obey those over us.

I Peter 2:13-17 Be subject *for the Lord's sake* to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ... 16 ... *living as servants of God*. 17 Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

In one sentence Jesus says a volume. He acknowledges there is legitimacy to human authority and government. Jesus dignified government by giving it its due.

Government is Biblical, its authority comes from God and is given for our benefit. Order is better than chaos. Government is a reflection of the cultural mandate to fill the earth and subdue it.

Furthermore, Jesus says we can fulfill our duties to human governments without compromising or infringing on our ultimate duties to God. Christians are called to be good citizens.

Finally, Jesus is clear that while the state has power and authority, it's limited. It's not ultimate, it doesn't have final claim on her citizens. God has ultimate claim on us, and we understand our secondary duties from the perspective of our faith and our ultimate allegiance.

The coin that bears *Caesar's image* belongs to Caesar, but we who bear *God's image* belong to God. Give the coin to Caesar, but give your worship to God.

The great difficulty of course is determining where the claims of Caesar end and the claims of God begin. Where that is has been cause for controversy and strife in the church in every age.

What are we to render to Caesar?

Jews received Roman roads, aqueducts, military protection.

We receive the same and much more. Roads, utilities, defense, law and order, courts, schools, recreation, standards for goods and services, regulations for our benefit, federal programs, loans and subsidies, Social Security, the currency we use every day.

What are we to render? Certainly taxes which is our due. As Paul says:

Romans 13:7 Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

The Christian citizen is to obey the authorities God has placed over him. Pay your taxes and do so without complaining, as godly Christian citizens.

We are to render respect and honor, obedience to laws, and prayers and intercession. But we are not to render our worship, or our conscience, or our absolute allegiance and loyalty.

We give the honor that is due. We submit and obey as long as our obedience is not disobedience to God. We serve as long as we are not made to bow down and worship another god.

When the two conflict then Scripture guides us, "We must obey God rather than men."

That statement was made by Peter and John to the Sanhedrin which was abusing its power and authority by commanding the disciples to stop teaching in the name of Jesus.

When our government abuses its God-given power and authority, then we must obey God. We must say no to government sponsored greed in lotteries, government sponsored killing in abortion and government sponsored sexual immorality in approval of homosexuality.

Jesus affirms government and limits government.

What are we to render to God?

What do we receive from God? In the words of our hymn, God “fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us, who guides us and leads to the end of our days.” He gives us life, health, strength, provision and protection, blessings and benefits, His daily bread. He gives us Jesus, Holy Spirit, His Word, His church, grace, mercy, love, wisdom, truth, correction, salvation, eternal life.

We owe God love and obedience, repentance and faith, fear and honor, spiritual worship, prayer, devotion.

Trust God and God alone for your future and your hope. Don't put your trust or hope in the state. Especially as Christians. We live in a nation where it is more acceptable for a man to marry another man than it is to pray in school. We live in a nation where it is more acceptable to kill your baby in the womb than it is to spank your child.

The days are evil and the challenges ahead will take the wisdom of Solomon.

Right now we have liberty to worship God freely and openly without interference. Right now we can serve God according to our conscience and we can obey God according to His commandments. And so far we are able to submit to our government without violating our worship, conscience and obedience.

The secular culture is pressing more and more into the church and dictating what can be believed or practiced. On some issues it isn't enough that we have to accept them, now we have to approve them.

Those who hate Jesus and all that Christianity stands for will team up again and again. Christianity is now the most persecuted faith in the world. Those who hate it will show no mercy. They came to trap Jesus and they will come to trap us. We must not be surprised, nor must we fear. God is sovereign over such things and causes all things to work for His glory and the advance of His kingdom. Pray and be wise and discerning.

We bear His image. Render to God what is God's.

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Prayer:

Holy Father, by the enabling grace of your Son and the power of your Holy Spirit help us to give ourselves body, soul, mind and spirit to you. To render to you our worship, allegiance, love, loyalty, respect, trust. All we have and are.