

## **God and Caesar**

**Mark 12:13-17**

**Covenant Waterfall, 28 February 2021**

Read

Pray

### **Introduction**

Depending on who you speak to in South Africa, you are bound to get a range of opinions when it comes to our politics and government. Some detest the current government, say that they've destroyed this country by years of looting and corruption and because of this, argue that we should rebel against them and withhold our taxes as a form of protest.

Yet others will say that the government is really trying their best in challenging circumstances, has the best interests of the people at heart, that it can do no wrong and hold a blind loyalty towards them.

As Christians, how then are we to relate to the government? Reject it's authority over us as it's evil and corrupt? Or accept it without question?

Jesus was posed with a similar question by the Pharisees and the Herodians in our passage this evening. Should they pay taxes to their oppressive Roman colonisers, or not? Jesus' answer provides us with a basis for how as Christians, we are to relate to the government. What we will see is that while we are called to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, ultimately, because we've been created in the image of God, our lives belong to him.

- God and Caesar
- The legitimacy of government
- The sovereignty of God over all

## A. God and Caesar

**13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.**

The text starts off in verse 13 by telling us that “they” sent to Jesus a group of Pharisees and Herodians. Who are “they”? From last week’s text, which was just before this one, we can see that the “they” are the Jewish religious leaders. Last week we saw that Jesus spoke a parable against them (parable of the tenants of the vineyard), accusing them of ultimately rejecting God. Verse 12 of chapter 12, verse just before this one, ends with them scheming to have Jesus arrested.

It’s therefore no coincidence that immediately after this, we see here in verse 13 that the Jewish religious leaders send two groups to Jesus – the Pharisees and the Herodians. We are very familiar with the Pharisees – sect among the Jewish religious leaders who have added to the law, repeatedly rejected Jesus as the Messiah. We’ve come across the Herodians once before in Mark’s Gospel, chapter 3:6. Who are they? They are followers of Herod Antipas, a puppet ruler in Israel for the Roman colonisers.

So what we have here is two groups – sworn enemies of each other. Pharisees detest Roman rule over Israel, while the Herodians are Roman collaborators. What can they possibly have in common? End of verse 13 tells – they want to “trap Jesus in his talk.”

Verse 14 continues:

**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?”**

These two sworn enemies approach Jesus and set before him a question. But before they do so, they try to butter up Jesus, describing him as “true” and not caring about others’ opinions of him, as he is not swayed by others, but teaches the truth of God. Though they are being incredibly insincere, they are nevertheless speaking the truth. This is exactly what Jesus is like.

So their question to Jesus is, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?

What then is their motive in asking Jesus this question? We can already see in verse 13, that their intention is to **“trap him in his talk.”** So they come with evil intent. What is it about this question in particular that is aimed to trap Jesus?

The tax that is in question here was the Roman poll tax. It was introduced in Judea when it came under direct Roman rule in 6 AD. The result? Caused a Jewish revolt, led by a Jewish nationalist group called the Zealots. They detested Roman rule and wanted to start a revolution in order to overthrow their colonisers and restore Judea to Jewish rule. In agreement with the Pharisees – desired Israel to be a theocracy – Jewish state, free from the Romans.

If Jesus were to say then that they should pay taxes to Caesar (something that the Herodians, pro-Roman, supported), the result would have been that he would have been discredited among most of the Jews, as they would have seen him as a Roman collaborator. He would have lost face, and lost many of his followers.

On the other hand, if he were to say that they should not pay taxes (something the Pharisees, anti-Roman, supported), then he would have been guilty of rebellion against the Roman authorities and he would have almost certainly been arrested.

For the Pharisees and Herodians – though they completely disagreed with each other, this was then the perfect “gotcha” question. Either answer would have resulted in trouble for Jesus. And this was precisely what they both wanted.

So how then does Jesus respond to this dilemma? Verses 15-17 tell us:

**But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” <sup>16</sup> And they brought one. And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar's.” <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” And they marvelled at him.**

Before directly answering them, Jesus exposes their evil intent in asking the question. He knows their “hypocrisy”. He knows they are not sincere in honestly looking for an answer. They are only putting him to the test, trying to catch him out.

So how does Jesus get out of this dilemma into which they've placed him? He asks for coin, and asks whose likeness is on it. They answer that it is Caesar's likeness. To which Jesus masterfully responds in verse 17, **"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."**

Crowds response? **And they marvelled at him.**

Pharisees and Herodians are unable to catch Jesus out, as they had planned. How come? In Jesus' answer he does not side with the Pharisees and Zealots who reject Roman rule. Jesus affirms that they must pay taxes to Rome, because it is Caesar's image who is on the coin.

Yet neither does he side with the pro-Roman Herodians. How come? Give to God the things that are God's. By making this statement, Jesus is claiming God's authority and sovereignty over Caesar and the Roman empire. Yes, Roman rule is most certainly legitimate, yet it is not absolute. God is the true and ultimate Lord over all, Lord even over Caesar.

Let's flesh Jesus' response out a bit, as what we see here from Jesus is helpful for us as Christians to understand how we are to relate to the government. Deals with this relationship between Church and culture, Christ and politics... Jesus two main points: Governments are legitimate, but God is sovereign over all.

## **B. The legitimacy of government**

Jesus' statement in verse 17, **"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's"** makes it crystal clear that, according to the Lord, governments are completely legitimate. Despite the fact that the Romans were an oppressive, pagan, colonial, often brutal, occupying force; Jesus nevertheless affirms its existence, and affirms its claims and laws over the Jewish citizenry. He acknowledges that Caesar is indeed in power, and therefore he must be obeyed – taxes that are due to him must be paid.

He affirms all this against the very spiritual sounding Zealots who want to overthrow the Romans and establish a theocracy – an independent Jewish government that is Jewish in nature – a government that is rooted in the worship of the true God of Israel, instead of the pagan Romans.

By his statement about Caesar in verse 17, Jesus out of hand rejects two things: He rejects any revolutionary overthrow of governments (Caesar must be obeyed, don't resist him). And he rejects the notion of a theocracy – that the church and state should be one in the same (he distinguishes between Caesar and God – affirming the existence of both).

Consider God's Word in Romans 13:1-7, Paul giving the church instruction on how to relate to the government:

**“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. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> 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, honour to whom honour is owed.”**

It's clear from this, echoes and expands upon what Jesus has said in Mark 12:17. From all this, we can see the following truths that are applicable for us as the church in how we relate to the government:

- We must obey the government (v.1). Not just the governments that we like, but also the ones we detest. Not just the friendly governments, but also the governments that are oppressive, corrupt and unjust (like Jesus and the apostles did under the Romans).
- How come? God has set them all in place. There is no authority upon earth that God himself has not instituted.
- Therefore, to resist (disobey), or try to overthrow (start a revolution) any government actually is resisting God himself, and as a result will incur judgement.

- So what then is the purpose of the government, as ordained by God? “God’s servant for our good” (v.4). To bear the sword, to execute justice upon wrongdoers.
- This means that we are bound, according to God’s Word to obey the laws of the land, pay our taxes, and respect and honour our leaders.

Now many would stop there, in terms of how we are to relate to government. Yet Jesus doesn’t. Mark 12:17 says, **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”**

### **C. The Sovereignty of God over all**

While we’ve seen that Jesus affirms the legitimacy of civil government, he goes on to say that we must give to God the things that are God’s. What does he mean by this? He affirms that ultimately, God rules over Caesar. Yes, God has most certainly ordained the government and set them in place, yet they are subject to him.

Consider Daniel 2:20-21:

**“Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings;**

Because it is indeed God who has established human governments, this means that he is sovereign over all of them. It is he who raises them up, and it is he who removes them. Compared to the eternal God, governments, kings and presidents are here today and gone tomorrow. They are very much temporary.

The other feature of governments is that all of them – from the best to the worst – are all intrinsically sinful, due to the effects of the Fall. This is why it is the tendency of many governments to bend toward tyranny, oppression and injustice.

What then do we make of all this? While we’re called to obey our government, at the same time we are to keep things in perspective. Because of their temporal nature, and their bent toward evil – we must not stake too much upon the government. The government is not our saviour! The government is not always right! We should never place blind loyalty in a president or political party. Why? Because governments are very much subordinate to

Christ. Psalm 146:3 tells us to, **“Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. <sup>4</sup> When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish.”**

Our citizenship is not upon this earth – our ultimate hopes don’t lie here, in the success or failure of our country or government. Hebrews 13:14 says that we have no lasting city in this creation, but that we seek the city to come. 1 Peter 2:11 calls us sojourners and exiles upon this earth. Instead, our citizenship is in heaven, as Philippians 3:20 declares.

While we are called to obey the government, we must also understand that their claims over us are not absolute. Like the apostles and the early church, we are to endure persecution if the state persecutes us. Yet when it comes to choosing to obey Christ or the emperor, we must obey Christ. This is exactly what the apostles did in Acts 5:29 when the authorities forbade them from preaching the gospel. Did they submit to their decree? No, because it was contrary to the Word of God. This is a reminder to us that we don’t blindly follow governments, as God’s claims upon our lives supersede the emperor’s. We are to give to God what is God’s!

## **Conclusion**

In verse 16, Jesus asks the Pharisees and Herodians whose “likeness,” or as the original Greek says, whose “image” is on the coin. As we’ve seen, Jesus’ conclusion is that we are to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, because it is his image stamped on our currency. It’s interesting that the word used for “image” here is the same word that’s used in the Greek OT in Genesis 1:27, **“So God created man in his own *image*, in the *image* of God he created him; male and female he created them.”**

Whose image then is stamped upon every single one of us? God’s! If we must give to Caesar what is stamped with Caesar’s image, how much more then must we give to God, that what is stamped with God’s image? In this case – it must be our whole lives.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s first question and answer is, “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” What is the point of life? How are we to spend our lives? The catechism echoes what Jesus tells us here in Mark 12:17

– give to God what is God’s – give all of our lives to be lived for his glory. What does this look like? A life lived in obedience to God’s Word, a life submitted to him, glorifying him in every aspect of our lives – our work, family, friends, church, finances – not one area that we don’t surrender to the rule and reign of God.

Our natural tendency is to live for ourselves and our own glory. Been that way since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, live our own lives independently of God. Root of sin – living in rebellion to God, living life on our own terms, our own way. Or live as hypocrites – say we love God, but the reality is that we live like we don’t love him. Basically – we don’t give to God what belongs to God.

Result? Live independently from God in this life, you’ll be independent from God eternally – face his deserved wrath for your sin.

Doesn’t have to be that way. There is good news! God sent his Son to earth, to live a life that perfectly glorified God in every way – completely obedient to God to the point of death on the cross. Jesus lived the perfect life we could not live, and died the death for sins that we all deserved.

Brothers and sisters, repent and receive Christ. Know that in trusting in his name, your sins are removed from you as far as the east is from the west. Know that in his name, his perfect obedience – his righteousness is counted to you. He gives you a new nature, a new heart that desires, by the Spirit’s power, to truly give to God what belongs to God – a life lived for God’s glory.

Amen