



## Mark 12:13-17 | God & Country According to Jesus

*Written & Preached by John Cole*

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Songs:

All My Ways

Great Is thy Faithfulness

Only A Holy God

Christ Exalted Is Our Song

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### INTRODUCTION

A man on vacation was strolling along outside his hotel in Acapulco, enjoying the sunny Mexican weather. Suddenly, he was attracted by the screams of a woman kneeling in front of a child.

The man knew enough Spanish to determine that the child had swallowed a coin. Seizing the child by the heels, the man held him up, gave him a few shakes, and an American quarter dropped to the sidewalk.

“Oh, thank you sir!” cried the woman. “You seemed to know just how to get it out of him. Are you a doctor?”

“No, ma’am,” replied the man. “I’m with the United States Internal Revenue Service.”

Bits & Pieces, March 31, 1994, p. 5

**Paying taxes is at the center of our text today, but the topic goes much deeper than our pockets!** What really is being addressed is the sovereignty of governments in relation to the sovereignty of God. How much can government demand of us? Who rules over governments? What does God require of us?

**I have entitled the sermon, “God & Country According to Jesus.”**

Jesus brought clarity on this subject while under Tiberius Caesar’s rule, and His words bring clarity for us today as we follow His Kingship from within the USA.

We have not yet had a text quite like this yet. The closest would have been in Colossians three and a couple others in Acts. But this one really gets at the root of some issues that are timely for us today.

**How do we live as Christians in relation to our country, government, and politics?** Ready for this hot topic that Mark has got us into? It all begins with some politicking opponents of Jesus...

## **OPPONENTS SENT BY THE SANHEDRIN (v13)**

### **Mark 12:13**

And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in *his* words.

**Mark connects this encounter with the previous one, so the ones “sending” the Pharisees and Herodians must be the Sanhedrin council of 71 members who oversaw the Jews in Jerusalem.**

Jesus had knowingly created enemies of the Sanhedrin when He condemned them and the temple, so they sent a series of attacks at Jesus that we will see as we go through chapter 12.

The attacks come from each of the three groups represented in the Sanhedrin: Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes.

The first group is of this unlikely alliance between Pharisees and Herodians that started back in chapter 3.

The Pharisees disdained Herod and despised paying taxes to Caesar.

The Herodians were a small group who were loyal to Herod and Rome. They held a conviction for paying taxes to Caesar.

**Both sects were bonded in their determination to destroy Jesus.**

So, they schemed up a plan to force Jesus’s hand, drawing from their differences. They would try to mislead Jesus into either showing support of Rome and Rome’s taxation, losing trust of “the people” or showing defiance to Rome and earning Rome’s wrath.

Either answer, they knew they had the perfect trap for Jesus.

*And just to make sure Jesus steps into their trap, they tried to butter Him up with flatteries...*

## **WITH INSINCERE FLATTERY & QUESTIONING (v14)**

## Mark 12:14

And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?

### **Their flattery begins by addressing Jesus as “Teacher” (Master).**

They continue by calling Jesus “true.”

They set the trap by “admiring” Jesus’s forthrightness and unwillingness to be persuaded away from truth by people of any type.

And then they placed the cheese on the trap by commending Jesus’s faithfulness to teach the way of God in truth.

**And it is with all that thick, strategic flattery that they presented their question: *Is it lawful [according to the mosaic law for Jews] to give/return tribute/poll taxes to Caesar or not?***

*But these opponents are...*

## **ARE OUT-SMARTED BY JESUS (v15-17)**

### **Mark 12:15–17**

<sup>15</sup> Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? bring me a penny, that I may see *it*. <sup>16</sup> And they brought *it*. And he saith unto them, Whose *is* this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar’s. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. And they marvelled at him.

**First of all, Jesus perceives their disingenuous motives and responds with prudence.**

**Secondly, Jesus immediately reveals their guiltiness by asking them to bring him a denarius—the common Roman coin that was a day’s wage for a worker or soldier. Their use of the coin alone condemned them according to their line of questioning! *They participated in Caesar’s economy!***

**Thirdly, Jesus asks them whose image and superscription is on the coin. Whoever's image was on it must be the one it came from and therefore to whom it belonged!**

**Therefore, Jesus simply and profoundly responded, "Give back to Caesar what he requires of what he owns."**

**And then Jesus went further saying, "Give back to God what's His." How do you know what is God's? His image has been placed on it! You!**

Ah, Jesus is back on the "ownership" message again!

Remember, the question is in relation to what is permissible for Jews according to the Law.

It is in the Law (Genesis) where we are taught that God made us in His image—to represent Him in all the world.

So Jesus's answer is: "It is permissible to give back what you received from Caesar, but make sure more importantly that you give back to God what you received from Him—your very self!"

**Once again, Jesus turned the tables around and set Himself up in the judge's seat and placed His opponents down in the seat of the guilty accused.**

Before we dive down deeper into what Jesus said and into how we are to apply it today, let's just consider three lessons to be learned from how Jesus responds. *Consider these...*

**Derived principles for answering questions of ulterior motives:**

1. Don't let fools force you into foolish reasoning and jargon.
2. Expose fallacies with evidence.
3. Remain biblical and God-centered with your answers.

Want to learn to respond wisely like Jesus?

**This sort of wisdom is found in Proverbs. The wisdom found in Proverbs is seen in Jesus because He is the source of that wisdom.** If you want to grow in this sort of wisdom, let me commend to you a regular reading or study of Proverbs and the Gospels.

Studying and following Jesus will lead us to be wise in our conduct, speech, and arguments.

**Young people, I started reading Proverbs every day when I was 11 years old.** I can't tell you how many bad decisions God's wisdom in Proverbs saved me from! Read it!

*But now it is time to get deeper into what Jesus said and into how we are to apply it today.*

## **AND TAUGHT ABOUT THE SOVEREIGNTY OF KINGDOMS (v16-17)**

**So let's begin with a closer look at the denarius coin that they brought at Jesus's request.**

If you recall, Jesus asked them who's **image** and **inscription** was on the coin.

The emphasis placed on both of these details establishes Jesus's intention to draw conclusions from both of them:

1. The image of Caesar made the claim that the coins belonged to him.
2. The inscription made the claim that Caesar was God. And yet, Jesus contrasts "Caesar" from "God" in His response.

*Commentaries help us know that...*

### **The Gospel of Mark 7. The Question Concerning Tribute. Ch. 12:13–17**

The only coin that was accepted for payment of taxes in Judea, as throughout imperial territory, was the Roman denarius. This was a small silver coin that was worth normally about eighteen cents. The denarius of Tiberius portrayed the emperor as the semi-divine son of the god Augustus and the goddess Livia and bore the (abbreviated) inscription "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus" on the obverse and "Pontifex Maximus" on the reverse. Both the representations and the inscriptions were rooted in the imperial cult and constituted a claim to divine honors.

Lane, William L. *The Gospel of Mark*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974.

### **Before Tiberius was Augustus and before him Julius Caesar.**

Julius and Augustus were treated as gods, and temples were erected in such honors.

Before Rome was an empire and on through much of its history, Rome received in the "gods" of their defeated enemies. Julius believed in adding their gods to give favor to Rome.

We can see that God used this for the good of Judeo-Christianity spreading in such an eclectic society.

But at the same time, these other gods were truly worshipped, and false believers merely added Jesus to their pantheon of gods.

Along with that was the divine and semi-divine status of their emperors.

**Why does this matter? Because Jesus came on the scene being announced as the Son of God, the Christ/King, and the One bringing the Kingdom of God.**

As Jesus will soon quote from Scripture, *YHWH our God is one.*

There is no other YHWH, and He is King of kings, Lord of lords, and God of gods.

Caesar may honor rebellious spiritual beings and claim to have power from them, but all those are subservient to YHWH.

*So, Jesus tells them to bring Him the denarius...*

### **Mark 12:16–17**

<sup>16</sup> And they brought *it*. And he saith unto them, Whose *is* this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar's. <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

**So Jesus's response both confirmed and limited Caesar's authority and the authority of all government rulers.**

In one sense, Jesus's answer *confirmed* Caesar's authority.

But in another sense, Jesus's answer greatly *limited* Caesar's authority and the temporary authority of the rebellious spirits he worshiped.

Jesus confirmed *Caesar's right* to require back some from the coins he distributed.

But Jesus also confirmed *God's right* to require what He chooses from every human because He is the One who created them in His image—including Caesar.

**Jesus simultaneously taught to submit to the limited authority of human government while also teaching that YHWH rules over them all—and us all!**

*So let's apply some principles from this wisdom from Jesus.*

**Derived principles for living under human government:**

1. Owners set the rules.

### **10,000 Sermon Illustrations Price Went Up**

It seems there was a pretzel stand out front of an office building in New York. One day, a man came out of the building, plunked down a quarter, and then went on his way without taking a pretzel. This happened every day for three weeks. Finally, the old lady running the stand spoke up: “Sir, excuse me. May I have a word with you?”

The fellow said: “I know what you’re going to say. You’re going to ask me why I give you a quarter every day and don’t take a pretzel.”

And the woman said, “Not at all, I just want to tell you that the price is now 35 cents.”

(From a speech by William Schreyer, chairman of Merrill Lynch)

**Owners set the rules! That makes sense.**

**I guess that is a good reason to limit the scope of what governments own—if you can!**

God warned the people of Israel of their desire for a king turning into them losing ownership of much of their possessions and people. Governments never think they have enough!

**The scope of God's demands is limitless because God owns everything, including every human created in His image.**

2. God owns and rules everything.

[Psalm 24:1](#) “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; The world, and they that dwell therein.”

Not only does God own and rule everything, but also God is all: holy, good, wise, and powerful.

Our trouble is not God’s ownership. It is our trust in Him.

### **10,000 Sermon Illustrations Jonathan Edwards**

When Jonathan Edwards, the great pastor and theologian died unexpectedly from a smallpox vaccination, his wife wrote these words, “What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it...But my God lives; and he has my heart...We are all given to God.”

3. God gives governments a limited realm of ownership and rule.

**Even though most people in government around the world do not consider themselves as accountable to the God of the Bible, they are!**

They have true authority granted by God and given by His providence, but their authority is limited.

Whether they believe it or not, their authority is limited to what is said in Scripture.

God ordained government as described in [Genesis 9](#), and God rules over governments.

**The most loving thing we can do for rulers in governments is to tell them the truth of Scripture by which they will be held accountable.**

At the same time, Scripture teaches us to be wise in how we speak to government authorities because they use their power often as they please.

In addition to more direct words for rulers in government, the faithful witness of Christ’s church—gathered and scattered—is itself a witness to government limitations.

**The church represents the Kingdom of God on earth. We are like embassies of God’s kingdom.** It is vital they we remain faithful at representing God’s Word. Family, Government, and Church are the three institutions ordained by God with their own realms of authority. The church is to give witness to what God has said to each institution.

*Your partnership in a local church such as ours is a part of God’s witness through His church until Christ returns. So...*

4. Christians are to honor government authorities to the extent they require disobedience to God .

**Preaching through the book of Acts a few years ago gave us a number of opportunities to see this in action.**



To get a good example of both honoring local rulers (the Sanhedrin) and disobeying them once they've reached their limits, I recommend you read [Acts 4](#). If you go there in the Bible in our church app, you will find sermons preaching in that chapter as well.

Scripture is full of people who both honored government rulers while also standing with conviction against any demands of disobedience against God.

Some of the first examples you might think of with this would be Daniel and his three Hebrew friends. He was thrown into a den of lions for being unwilling to refrain from praying, and they were thrown into a furnace of fire for being unwilling to bow to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar.

**This does not give license to disobey everything we dislike!**

We are to be neither reckless nor anarchists.

Many of God's people have put up with things that went against their personal convictions and preferences so long as they did not go against God. That is where the line must be drawn.

**Christians should be the best citizens of a country.**

That doesn't mean we should be the most liked—just the best!

Doing good will often earn you disdain and hatred, but we should never justify it!

**This means we need to be prudent in how we stand up for what is true and right.**

We need to speak to the audience God gives us. If it is the actual leaders and decision-makers, then great, speak accordingly.

If it is neighbors and young people who are blinded by only listening to one of the many echo-chambers, we ought to speak accordingly. It does not help to speak to the deceived ones in the same way we would speak to the ones doing the deceiving. Jesus didn't!

So we must both honor and limit our disobedience as we represent God in society. *And that leads me to...*

5. Christians should clearly distinguish between God and country.

**The USA and political parties are not Christian, Christ's church is.**

The church should be a witness of God to them, but we should not portray human governments and parties—here or anywhere—as though they represent God’s Kingdom and church. They don’t.

And if we have convictions about a country or political party and desire to make it known, I recommend communicating what specific party policies/principles you believe in and why.

**Instead of drawing a direct connection between Christianity and your preferred party, draw *many* direct connections between Scripture and specific principles of your preferred party—and maybe on occasion the other party.**

Even a broken clock is right twice a day!

And we must be diligent and honest to be sure we are not forcing a message the Bible does not make.

**On the negative side, we can also make direct connections between Scripture and policies/principles that we believe go against Scripture.**

Some obvious ones would be:

1. **Policies that protect people’s right to do what God did not authorize them to do: *abort unborn image-bearers in the womb, take the lives of those considered to be unfit or unhealthy enough to live through euthanasia, or steal and sell humans as property.*** There are a lot of parallels between abortion, euthanasia, and slave-trading/human-trafficking. All three are still in operation today, and many government policies promote some or all of these—including our government. All of these demean humans to less than being created in the image of God and thereby step into God’s realm and earn God’s just judgment.
2. **Policies that force the sexualization of students in school classrooms.** Our own Fairfax school system has passed more policies to promote this for 2025. Scripture makes clear that marital intimacy is an expression of [Genesis 1](#) oneness between one husband and one wife who have entered into a covenant between them and God—not government. Our government schools are heaping up judgment from God for targeting children with such abusive, perverted indoctrinations. Such rulers will give account to God.
3. **Policies that bypass parental authority and perform irreversible physiological damage to minors.** This rebels against God’s design for making us male and female. It infringes on the God-ordained realm of the home. It pushes forward the selfish agenda of evildoers at the expense of weak, naive minors. Scripture calls this perversion and oppression. It is marketed as healthcare, but it is subverting the care of health.
4. **Policies that label clear, loving teaching like this to be hate speech.** 1 & 2 John teach us to speak truth in love and that to love is to live in God’s commandments. Speaking truth is the exact opposite of hate speech. True hate speech is when we tell lies or for our own comfort hold back the truth.

**Okay, those are just several examples, but I think we all get the point!** Government and parties are not Christianity, but Christianity does have messages of truth for government and political parties.

When we blend Christianity with political platforms as though the two are one, we lose our legitimacy of representing Christianity.

What happens when a party or country stands for unscriptural things after we have identified them as Christian?

How can we claim to represent the truth of Christ if we have married Christianity to people and platforms who contain a mixture of Christian and non-Christian qualities?

This just brings confusion!

**While people in government may profess to be Christian, we must not prop them up as leaders of Christianity either, and we should expect their local church to hold them accountable to their profession.**

This of course assumes that such persons have committed themselves to the mutual discipleship within local church membership.

If someone professes to be a Christian, we should expect this of them.

No one is above God's authority, and it is God's Word that teaches us that Christianity is lived out in the accountability of local church fellowship.

***Okay, so how do we live under the authority of governments with which we disagree?***

6. Our primary obligation to human governments—good or bad—is summed up well in [1 Peter 2:11-17](#) and [Romans 13:1-7](#).

**We'll just look at [1 Peter 2](#). And in case you think Peter is writing to Christians under good leadership, he is not.**

Peter is writing from Rome to believers in the Roman Empire and most likely during Nero's reign.

**1 Peter 2:11–17**

<sup>11</sup> Dearly beloved, I beseech *you* as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;

<sup>12</sup> Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by *your* good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

<sup>13</sup> Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme;

<sup>14</sup> Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.

<sup>15</sup> For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men:

<sup>16</sup> As free, and not using *your* liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.

<sup>17</sup> Honour all *men*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

1. Honor all—as being made to image God and able to through faith in Christ.
2. Love the brotherhood—as the church for whom Christ died.
3. Fear God—Who sovereignly rules all.
4. Honor the king/emperor/president/constitution and branches of government—who presently have authority over you according to God's providence.

**We don't hear any "God bless Rome" here.** But Peter is instructing God's people on how to live in God's blessing while in Rome. *Just hear what Peter calls Rome at this time:*

[1 Peter 5:13](#) "The church that is at **Babylon...**"

**While America falls short in many ways of what God requires of governments, we also have a strong presence of Christ's church.**

Unlike those empires, our history from the beginning includes faithful churches and much biblical influence in our governing principles.

A mixture of true Christians, professing Christians, and unbelievers fills our history as a nation. Praise God!

**That said, we are to pray for God's blessing on Christ's faithful church and for His church to be a blessing to our country.**

**Our primary obligation to our human government is to rightly represent God's Kingdom within it.**

**So now that we have considered applications from what Jesus taught, we will finish by marveling alongside Jesus's opponents as we think on His authoritative word!**

Like recorded throughout the rest of Mark, Jesus spoke with authority.

*His opponents were out-smarted and taught...*

### **BY JESUS'S AUTHORITATIVE WORD. (v17)**

#### **Mark 12:17**

And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

**Notice: "And they marvelled at him."**

They didn't know what to say.

They had worked on this trap possibly for many months. And without forethought, Jesus answered them with authority.

**This is why governments and groups have hated Jesus: *He is authoritative and true.***

And deep down, the truth that sinners try to suppress cries out that we will all give account to Jesus one day.

God has revealed His power and authority in the creation around us and the conscience within us.

**And we are found guilty. No one likes being found guilty.**

Jesus instructed them and us to give back to God what belongs to Him.

We know Jesus was referring specifically to the image of God He made us to be since these words immediately followed Jesus's point about Caesar's image on the coin.

*Rulers and citizens alike fail at returning to God what is expected of us...*

Government rulers fail at protecting the lives of God's image-bearers.

**Think about the many lives throughout human history who have been lost—intentionally or unintentionally—by the decisions and policies of government rulers.**

Romans calls government rulers “ministers of God for us.” That means they are both ordained by God and accountable to God.

What are rulers to do to make things right?

How will we ever have a government that truly protects lives and even gives victory over death!?

We know that no government we put in place will accomplish that for us—because it will always be led by sinners.

*And that leads us to another problem...*

We all fail at our commission to image God.

**The Bible, history, and our own lives testify to this reality.**

We fall short of what God requires of those He made to image/represent Him.

We sin against God!

And like a citizen who gives account to his or her government for paying taxes, we give account to God—but with more certainty than any government can require.

In truth, this is frightening: we have failed as representing God, and we will give account.

[Romans 3:23](#) “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”

[Hebrews 9:27](#) “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:”

*But there is good news...*

Jesus as the express image of God obeyed on our behalf, paid the price of our sins, and is exalted as King of kings.

God's requirement of us was fulfilled by Jesus's life, death, and resurrection—as promised by God from the beginning.

### [Hebrews 1:1-3](#)

#### **Hebrews 1:1–3**

<sup>1</sup> God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> Hath in these last days spoken unto us by *his* Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; <sup>3</sup> Who being the brightness of *his* glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;

#### **Friends, we don't want to give account to God based on our own track record of fulfilling God's requirements.**

The only way to be accepted in God's sight and presence is to have our sins purged by the work of Christ and to have our citizenship supplied by being united to Christ by faith in Him as the risen King.

Jesus is currently reigning on the right hand of the Majesty on high!

Jesus is accomplishing His good and promised purposes on earth as it is in heaven.

And He will return as King to judge the just and the unjust. *But...*

All who repent and believe the Gospel are united to Christ and restored as one of God's image-bearers in His eternal Kingdom.

#### **This is the good news—the Gospel.**

What Jesus has done on our behalf is available to all who turn from sin with faith in Jesus to save and rule them.

When the sinner turns from sin to Christ, God gives His Spirit to dwell in them and begin transforming them back into the image of God they were created to be.

And the sinner is brought into the Kingdom of God as an eternal citizen, never to be cast out and forever kept safe.

As a citizen of heaven on earth, the believer follows Jesus among His church and represents God in the world.

That's what it means to be a Christian.

**And as a Christian, you obey human authorities according to your new King and kingdom.**

Though human government is not our ultimate authority, it is a limited authority in this present life. And we obey God partly by how we honor the authority He has given now and by how our good works give witness to God's purposes.

**So you might wonder, "How does this look with my specific questions? How do I represent God's eternal Kingdom while in earthly ones?"**

### **Discussion Questions**

- How do you know when and when not to obey government?
- What do you do when government goes beyond the authority God has given them?
- How does a Christian know when to quietly pray and when to openly seek reform?
- When do you accept persecution as God's plan for you—like Jesus, Peter, and Paul?
- When do you escape some persecution to fulfill your mission—like Jesus?
- How does a believer do good for an ungodly government—like Daniel?
- When should a believer declare the truth by which God will judge government rulers—like John the Baptist?
- When is it right to help ungodly governments implement strategic plans for the good of lives—like Joseph?

**These questions and more are all great discussion points for lunch today.**

Answers will depend on a number of factors for each moment and context.

**If I had only one word to give as an answer, I would say that the answer to these questions is: "Wisdom."**

**"Wisdom."**

**Seek wisdom for questions like these.**



**But since I can say more than that, I will add how we seek wisdom:**

1. Continue to repent from sin and believe the Gospel every day.
2. Faithfully gather and fellowship with your church.
3. Diligently hear, study, and obey God's Word.
4. Earnestly pray and seek the Holy Spirit's leadership every day.
5. Seek wisdom in discipleship relationships with others doing points 1-4.

**Main Argument:** Give witness to God's sovereign rule by how you wisely honor and steward the limited realms of authority He *presently* sets over us until Christ returns and replaces them.

God & Country According to Jesus