

Give to God what Is God's

Mark 12:13–17

Following the parable of the wicked tenants that Jesus told against the religious leaders foretelling the end of their godless rule, we have three traps set by members of the Sanhedrin — the religious ruling counsel of the Jewish nation. They have been plotting to destroy him since the 3rd chapter of Mark. Watch this as we work through these traps: They try their best to trip up Jesus with what they think are clever questions. They are no match for God. He will humiliate them and their weak sauce schemes— and he uses the opportunity to teach greater truth about what it is to belong to God and his Kingdom. If you like to see bad actors get their comeuppance, you're in the right place. But be warned: As he exposes and demolishes their devilish schemes, he also reveals how much belonging to God requires. It costs everything here, which is passing away, to gain everything in him, which will never pass away. Or as Jesus said in Mark 8, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." Let's read today's text.

Mark 12:13–17 — ¹³ 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.

PRAY

Vv 13–14 — The Hostile Hypocrites, Part One

So we begin with the hostiles. The Sanhedrin is the presumed "*they*" who sent this group. It was made up of three religious sects, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes, who occupied offices that were build God's kingdom and communicate God's word. But they were opposed to the Son of God, the Incarnate Word of God. We are familiar with the Pharisees at this point. They study God's Law and the prophets as scholars, but they don't love God. They just love themselves and are self-righteous — they don't need saving.

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We know less about the Herodians except to say they were influential Jews who were loyal to Herod, as their name suggests. It appears they thought the best way for the Jewish nation to move forward was to make political accommodation to the political leaders. They were loyal to Herod, and therefore had the favor of Herod. They saw the arrangement as the future for peaceful living.

What is interesting about this pairing of Pharisees and Herodians is that they were polar opposites in terms of religious and political philosophy. The only thing uniting them is their hatred of Jesus and their fear of losing status as the people increasingly look to him as the Messiah. Indeed, all three sects — the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes — were perpetually opposed to each other. The only thing they could agree on is that Jesus had to be stopped.

The text tells us they were **sent**, which is from the root word for apostle. An apostle has the authority to act and speak on behalf of the one who sent them. So here the Pharisees are on the first of three “seek and destroy” missions ordained by the Sanhedrin with the intent to trap Jesus in his words and expose him as a false teacher.

They are not engaging in academic arguments. The word used for **trap** describes an aggressive hunt with the intent of killing the prey. They don't approach this casually; they have been scheming for some time. Now they bring the smooth words of v 14 to form the trap to catch him off guard. Everything they say about Jesus is absolutely true, but they did not believe the truth, even as it was coming out of their own mouths:

- Teacher. Correct, and everyone has heard his authoritative teaching.
- We know that you're true. Correct!
- You do not care about anyone's opinion. Absolutely correct! They know this first hand.
- You are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Right again!

They would have been flattered to hear these same words spoken about them — but they would not have been true about them. In light of what v 13 reveals about their **motive and plan** to trap and destroy Jesus, the **disingenuous flattery** of v 14 is repulsive. No wonder John the Baptist, when he saw many of the Pharisees, coming out to his baptism, said, “**You brood of vipers...**”

After their flowery flattery, they spring what they think will catch him: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or not?”

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They are certain they have Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. On one hand, if he says, “Don’t be part of this corrupt government by paying taxes, he will be deemed an insurrectionist and Rome will at least arrest him if not execute him. On the other hand, the Jews hated Rome and hated paying taxes. They were a constant financial reminder that Israel was under the rule and domination of Rome. Further, the coins had inscriptions that essentially said, “*Kaesar est Kyrios*” — Caesar is lord. The coin had an effigy of the head of Tiberius Caesar, and inscriptions on both sides, deified him — they declared him to be a god, which all Caesars declared about themselves. Imagine how offensive this was to Jews, who were monotheistic and claimed to worship the one true God, YHWH.

In front of the Jewish audience in the courts of the temple of God, they basically say, “Can we in good conscience give money to someone who claims to be a god, and who places himself at the top of a multiplicity of gods, and even considers YHWH a God under his authority. Yes or no?”

Jesus understands their hypocrisy, as he demonstrated with the fig tree. The fig tree appeared to be green and healthy, but it was fruitless. Here they appear to be asking a question as though they actually have the consciences of Israel as their primary concern. He knows what’s in their hearts, and he asks this question: “Why put me to the test.”

That particular word Mark uses for **test** is incredibly revealing. It only shows up four times in the Gospel of Mark. Here, 8:11, and 10:2 are the second, third, and fourth uses. Each of these uses describes the Pharisees tempting him. The first time it is used is in Mark 1:13, and there it applies to the work of Satan when he is tempting, or testing Jesus in the wilderness. Mark is showing us that their efforts to try to bring God down is the work of Satan himself.

Do you recall the conflict with the Pharisees that John records in his Gospel in chapter 8? As that conflict, similar to this one, plays out, Jesus says to the Pharisees, you are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. Here they are holding the offices of those who are to do God’s will, yet are doing the will of Satan himself. The question that Jesus asks, “Why put me to the test” — almost has a little sarcastic humor, as though Jesus is saying, “Your father, the devil, already tempted and tested me; he failed. So you’re giving it a go? Think you’re better than yo’ daddy?”

Now he sets about to ruin and demolish their devilish trap. In doing so he also drops massive truth bombs about what belonging to God entails. They will marvel. Here we go with the crux of it, now:

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Bring me a denarius and let me look at it — a common coin of the day, amounting to what a common laborer would get for a day's wage. Apparently neither Jesus nor the disciples had one or they wouldn't have asked for one to be brought. So the Pharisees produce one with the offending likeness of Caesar and the blasphemous inscriptions claiming deity. "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" Caesar's, they say. Ah. Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." They did not see that coming. They did not understand that God has established different domains of order. They viewed themselves as being the only legitimate domain of authority. But not only did Jesus destroy their trap by his response, he gives massive teaching about the kingdom of God, the rule and reign of God, his sovereign control over all things, including bringing kings down and setting kings up, and especially teaching about our very own lives and bodies.

First, note that there **are** things that belong to Caesar, to the state. Romans 13 tells us that the state is instituted by God and has borrowed authority from him to accomplish what he assigns it to do. The state is ordained by God to punish evil, and provide civil order so that we can live our lives in peaceful obedience to God, though it often does not hit that mark.

There are certain responsibilities that go with being a citizen, and paying for those things through taxes is part of that responsibility. I told you I would provide tax counseling today. Here's my counsel, rooted in God's word: Pay your taxes. Note that you don't have to agree with the state on everything. In this case, it's a pagan Roman government. But in fulfilling our responsibility as citizens we acknowledge God's sovereignty over government. He establishes rulers as sources of both blessing and judgment. In Isaiah 45, God describes Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, as "his anointed." He says he has gripped Cyrus' right hand and is using him to judge and subdue nations. John Calvin famously said, "When God wants to judge a nation, He gives them wicked rulers." A nation under God's judgment may experience it from the hands of its enemies or wicked rulers. God is still ruling and still works through the means of government.

Jesus teaches that the secular state — the corrupt secular state — has some level of authority. He does not advocate for theonomy — he does not say that the government is brought under control of the church. In John, 18 he said His kingdom is not of this world. *But, the lines of authority of the state are clearly limited*. There are certain things that are due the government — but not everything. The state cannot forbid what God has commanded nor command what God has forbidden. When the

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state and God are in conflict, we choose to obey God. It's not a close call. The state is to provide civil order so that we can live our lives in obedience to God, not demand disobedience.

Historically, the state seems to have an inherent bent to go beyond its God-given authority. We are living in a day when the state is increasingly encroaching on both individual freedoms, and the authority of the other domain that God has established. What other domain? The church! The church is to obey all that God has commanded, which may be summarized in the first and second greatest commandments, and her mission in the great commission. We are to first love God and worship and serve him. We are to love and care for our neighbor, essentially meaning the world. And we are to declare his glory, his holiness, his goodness, his salvation in every land, making disciples.

When the overreaching state attempts to restrict us from doing these things, we are to understand what Jesus says, in the second part of his response. There are things that are to be rendered to God. There are things that belong to God that do not belong to the state.

It is a striking contrast that Jesus draws through this object lesson of the coin. The coin was stamped with the image of Tiberius. Give to Tiberius what bears his image. But who's image do you bear? In whose image were you made? As we memorized over the summer, we are made in God's image! Render to God what is God's. What we owe to God is vastly superior and thoroughgoing when compared to the government.

The apostle Paul captures what it looks like to give to God what is God's. In 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, he writes that not only do we not belong to the government, but **we don't belong to ourselves**. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. It is not my body, my choice. It is God's body, God's choice. I belong to him. You belong to him, if you are a believer.

It is a beautiful act of love when you rightly surrender every aspect of your life to him. Romans 12 directs us away from any imagined sovereignty over ourselves, and directs us to consider the mercies of God. His mercies have been poured out on us as a life-giving motivation to present your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

There is daily dying to myself and my notions of what life should look like, and daily placing myself on an altar as a **killed sacrifice** in order to live fully for King Jesus. My everything is rendered to God.

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- My thinking is to be brought under the authority of his word.
- The way that I see and understand the world around me is to be viewed through Christ's eyes.
- My schedule is to be submitted to the King for the advance of his kingdom.
- My energy, and the resource of life — my heartbeats, my breath are to be harnessed for his glory.
- My finances are to fund his agenda and mission globally.

Give to God the things that are God's. Do this in view of the fact that he died to redeem you.

Teasing that out, we might ask, "Why is he due this level of sacrifice and obedience — this consuming level of love that demands body and soul?"

- It is because he knew no sin became sin, so that we would become the righteousness of God.
- He is worthy of this because he was slain, and by his blood he ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.
- It is because the Eternal King humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, setting aside the glory of heaven, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

He did all this so that we would not perish under God's wrath for our sin, but that we might have his life and have peace with God through faith in Christ.

Therefore, God has exalted him to the highest place, and given him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Give your life to God, render to God what is God's, because he is the one who **gives** you life, **sustains** your life, and will **require an accounting** of your life.

PRAY