

# Mark 12:13–17

## God & Government

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**CONTEXT:** We are in **the final week** of Jesus' ministry here on earth before going to the cross. He is in the temple in Jerusalem, and (to quote one song writer) "*He's giving the pharisees ulcers.*"<sup>1</sup> To be more correct, he's giving all of the leaders ulcers: the pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians... He isn't playing by their rules. He isn't *kowtowing* to their religiosity. He isn't *hat-tipping* to their legalistic traditions. He isn't *winking* at their pseudo spirituality. He's exposing them as hypocrites (play actors) everywhere He goes.<sup>2</sup> He's constantly blowing their cover.<sup>3</sup>

And He is a wrecking ball when it comes to their temple operations.<sup>4</sup> This week marks the second time that Jesus has come into the temple like a bull in a China shop. He single-handedly destroyed their money-making operation while unleashing a torrent of verbal assaults against their wickedness, and so, they want nothing more than to get rid of Him – for good.

He is despised by all of them, but (up until now) they haven't been able to do anything about it. Why? Because... He has an authority unlike anything they have ever seen or heard. He has wisdom and power that are clearly supernatural. He is loved by the people. And He has never actually done anything wrong.

So, here in these final days of Jesus' earthly ministry, all the different sects of religious leaders ban together in a mission to get rid of Jesus. First, they need to **discredit Him** in the eyes of the people. Then, they need to **convince** the Roman authorities that He is worthy of death. Both of these are agendas are highly unlikely given how much the people already loved Him and how disinterested the Roman courts were in dealing with the religious squabbles of the Jews.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in just a few short days, they manage to accomplish both.<sup>6</sup>

The first group of leaders to link arms are the **Pharisees** and the **Herodians**.<sup>7</sup> And now, you have to understand how **strange** this sight would have been to anybody watching – because these two groups of people absolutely hated each other. **In my world**, this might be like seeing **John Piper and Kamala Harris** fishing together in the same canoe, or **Tim Walz and Kristi Noem** sitting on the same float in a parade. Given what they believe, these are **not** people that you expect to see hanging out together. One biblical scholar described their differences this way:

“The Pharisees were the most extreme advocates of religious law and conduct; the Herodians the least religious and violators of all that was sacred to Jews. The Pharisees were most concerned with the law of God; the Herodians were most concerned with the law of Rom. The Pharisees were most devoted to Israel; the Herodians were most devoted to Rome. The Pharisees were intensely religious; the Herodians were intensely political.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lecrae, “Rebel”

<sup>2</sup> Matt 23:13.

<sup>3</sup> Example: like the time my “cover” was blown at an upscale club in New York City.

<sup>4</sup> First in John 2:13–20, and then again in Mark 11:15–19.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Acts 18:12–16.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 15:13–14.

<sup>7</sup> This is not the first time that the Pharisees have banned together with the Herodians against Jesus (Mark 3:6).

<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, Mark 9–16, 176.

Yet, as the old saying goes, “*The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*” And so, these strange bedfellows are joined together in yet another attempt of discrediting Jesus and getting Him on the radar of Roman authorities. This is **why they have come**. “*Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words*” (12:13). This is the only time this word shows up in the NT,<sup>9</sup> and it refers to a hunter capturing an animal.<sup>10</sup>

They begin by dumping flattery on Jesus.

When they had come, they said to Him,  
“Teacher, we know that You are true, and care about no one;  
for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth...”  
~ Mark 12:14

1. **Teacher:** *a term of honor... and they did not honor Him.*
2. **You are true:** *ironically, as they praised Jesus for His truthfulness, they were lying through their teeth. In reality, they viewed Jesus as a deceiver, a liar, and a fraud. There were at least two purposes for this claim that went against what they truly believed. **First**, they were attempting to endear themselves to the general population by pretending to respect Jesus as much as the crowds did – to create the impression that they were all on the same team.<sup>11</sup> **Second**, they were probably hoping to get Jesus to take down His guard.*
3. **You care about no one:** *in other words, they are claiming that Jesus would never change His message based on the opinions of His audience. They are attempting to set Him up by saying, “It doesn’t matter that the Herodians are here, we know that You are going to speak what is true no matter what. So, don’t worry about offending anybody with the question we are about to ask you.”*
4. **You do not regard the person of men:** *You don’t show favoritism. It doesn’t matter who is in the audience, we know that You are going to speak the truth no matter what.*
5. **You teach the way of God in truth:** *again, they don’t believe this. They are only saying this in order to inflate His pride and relax His guard so that He will walk into their trap.*

The irony of their flattery is that Jesus would soon demonstrate the truthfulness of their words by unleashing a blistering condemnation against these very people and against those who sent them.<sup>12</sup>

Now that they have set the stage with their flattery, they set their trap.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?  
Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?  
~ Mark 12:14–15

Once again, they thought they had Jesus cornered with this impossible question because, with both the Pharisees and the Herodians standing in front of Him, there was no right answer.

- **The Pharisees** represented all the Jews who hated paying taxes to Rome. The Jews didn’t want to pay taxes to Rome; they were forced to. They hated being under the oppressive rule of Rome.

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<sup>9</sup> ἀγρεύω

<sup>10</sup> **Ex.** Catching chipmunks in my Colorado trap... 😊

<sup>11</sup> **Ex.** Attempting to make the little girl I was babysitting feel like I was on her team as we looked for her missing mom together...

<sup>12</sup> Matt 23:1–36.

The land of Israel had been given to them, and so they believed that it belonged to them – and that Rome had no moral right to their land, to their laws, or to their money. And, among all the numerous taxes imposed on them by the Romans (e.g., *on the land, crops, transportation, imported goods, etc.*) the tax they hated the most was the **poll-tax** – because this was a tax they paid just for living in the land of Israel. They hated this (*not only because the land belonged to them, not Rome*) but also because it implied that **Caesar owned them**.<sup>13</sup> The tax consisted of one denarius per person per year, which was equal to approximately one day's wage. Each denarius was stamped with the face of the Roman Emperor (*Emperor Tiberius Caesar in this case*) – which many of the Jews saw as a blatant disregard for the Second Commandment.<sup>14</sup> So (trap!), if Jesus says that the people should pay taxes to Caesar, He will be setting Himself against the Pharisees and (more importantly) against all the Jews who despised the Romans and abhorred their taxation.

- **The Herodians**, on the other hand, were devoted to Rome. They benefited from Roman law, Roman politics, and Roman taxation. And so (trap!), if Jesus says that the Jews should **not** pay taxes to Caesar, He will be setting Himself against the Herodians – who would immediately report this rebel to the authorities – which would almost certainly result in His arrest and execution on the grounds of sedition.

Checkmate.

Or so they thought...

But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them,  
“Why do you test Me?  
Bring Me a denarius that I may see it.”  
So they brought it. And He said to them,  
“Whose image and inscription is this?”  
They said to Him, “Caesar’s.”  
And Jesus answered and 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.  
~ Mark 12:15–17

His divine wisdom is on display yet again in His answer to their trap question. It is masterful on multiple levels.

1. His answer doesn't give them anything to work with when it comes to accusing Him.
2. His answer actually appeals to both sides: those who advocated for Roman law would have heard Jesus supporting Roman taxation, while those who advocated for God's law would have heard the opposite – because, if the universe (*and all that is in it*) belongs to God, then there is nothing to give to Caesar because nothing belongs to him in the first place.
3. His answer only continues to elevate Him in the eyes of the people. They came to trap Him, but their trap just gave Him something to stand on that only made Him stand even taller in the eyes of the people. Even the Pharisees and the Herodians are marveling at His wisdom!

## APPLICATION

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<sup>13</sup> Contra John 8:33.

<sup>14</sup> In AD 6, a Galilean named Judas (*the founder of the Zealots*) led a revolt against the Romans in response to a census that was connected with collecting this poll-tax. He claimed that anyone who would endure paying a tax to the Romans was a coward.

What do we learn from Jesus' answer regarding paying taxes to a pagan government full of godless, idolatrous leaders? This question is actually just as timely today as it was back then because we are still forced to pay an exorbitant amount in taxes which are used to fund all kinds of wickedness – not only in our country, but in countries all over the world.<sup>15</sup>

Can Christians (in good conscience) submit to governing authorities when their policies and programs and platforms and initiatives and laws are clearly wicked? We live in a state with wicked leaders promoting wicked laws. So, the question is: should Christians submit to their authority? And should we pay taxes to a government when we know that a percentage of our money is going to support things that are against the heart of God?

## LESSONS

### 1. **Jesus legitimizes earthly governments.**

He acknowledges that there are things that belong to Caesar, and He expects His followers to submit to their governing authority. Paying taxes is just part of what it means to submit to the governing authorities that exist by God's sovereign decree. "*He removes kings and raises up kings*" (**Dan 2:21**). God "*rules in the kingdom of men [and] gives it to whomever He will*" (**Dan 4:17**).<sup>16</sup>

Jesus is legitimizing earthly spheres of authority that exist underneath the ultimate authority of Almighty God. Later on, we will hear the apostles say the same thing.<sup>17</sup> Governing authorities exist by God's design for the sake of human flourishing, and those who are in authority are placed there by the hand of God for the purpose of God. You and I may never know what that purpose is, but God has not called us to discern all His purposes; He has called us to trust and obey even when His purposes are totally unknown to us.

### 2. **We are called to submit to the governing authorities even when that government consists of wicked people making wicked laws.**

The face on the coin in the hand of Jesus was that of Tiberius. As the Pontifex Maximus, he would have presided over sacrifices to Jupiter, Mars, and the entire Roman pantheon of gods. Ancient historians describe his home as a place of notorious sexual immorality (*including perverse acts with children*).<sup>18</sup> The general population experienced all kinds of persecution under his authority (*via Praetorian Prefect, Sejanus, his right-hand man*). Under his rule, Rome was invading foreign countries without provocation and subjecting the citizens of those countries to tyranny and slavery. And it was under his reign that the Son of God was condemned as a criminal and sentenced to execution by the most humiliating and excruciating death in the land.

The lesson here is that the moral or ethical failures of others do not have the ability to override God's command on our lives. We are to bless our enemies even as they hate us. We are called to pray for those who are presently persecuting us. We are commanded to forgive the trespasses of others even as they continue to repeat the offense against us. And we are told to submit to the laws of the land even when those lawmakers are using our submission against us.

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., Planned Parenthood (via Title X sub-grants); NIH-funded research using human fetal embryos; Arts grants that have funded blasphemous & sexually explicit works; USAID funding LGBTQIA+ programs and agendas overseas; Title I and Title IV funding that promotes "inclusive school climates" which included LGBTQ-affirming curricula.

<sup>16</sup> See also: Jer 27:5–6; Pro 8:15–16; John 19:10–11.

<sup>17</sup> Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–15; 1 Tim 2:1–2.

<sup>18</sup> See: Suetonius.

Why? Because, as we submit to them, we are ultimately submitting to the God who put them there. As we honor them, we are ultimately honoring the God who put them there. You don't know what God is going to accomplish through your faithful obedience (*and you may never know*), but then we aren't the ones who write the story.<sup>19</sup>

3. **Jesus legitimizes taxation.**

In *Matthew 17:24–27*, we see Jesus instructing Peter to pay the temple tax. Here in *Mark 12:15–17*, we see Jesus holding a coin stamped with Caesar's image and instructing His audience to give to Caesar what belongs to him. The word "**render**" (ἀπόδοτε) means "*to meet an obligation*." In other words, the way that Jesus phrases this indicates that paying taxes isn't something that's optional: rather, it is a legal and moral obligation. You are giving to the government what belongs to them (*even if the amount is immorally, unethically, and excessively burdensome*). Paul writes, "**Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due...**" (*Rom 13:7*). The governing authorities will be held accountable for the degree to which they taxed you; but you and I will be held responsible for whether we paid our taxes.

4. **We are responsible to be faithful in doing our part to submit and to support the governing authorities; we are not responsible for what they do with our submission or with our financial support.**

Jesus instructed Peter to pay the temple tax when He knew that it was being used by corrupt religious leaders for their corrupt purposes. And, here, He instructed His audience to pay taxes to Caesar even when He knew the corruption and idolatry withing the Roman government. It your taxes belong – not to you – but to the governing authorities, then **they alone** will be held responsible for how that money is spent, not you.

5. **We are to give God our lives for we bear His image.**

Our hearts belong to God. Our souls belong to God. Our affections belong to God. Our minds belong to God. Our bodies belong to God. Our marriages belong to God. Our children belong to God. Our churches belong to God. Our worship belongs to God – and to God alone. The authorities of this world have no rightful claim over any of these things – which is where the doctrine of civil disobedience comes into play.

The governing authorities have no claim over our **worship**, and so when they demand that we give them our worship, "***we must obey God rather than man***" (*Acts 5:29*).<sup>20</sup> The governing authorities have no claim over our **bodies**, and so when they demand that we receive any kind of vaccination, those who refused were exercising their God-given right. The governing authorities have no claim over our **churches**, and so when they demand that churches worship in a certain way or that they close their doors for a certain period of time, churches who refuse to comply are exercising their God-given right of civil disobedience. Marriage belongs to God, which means that the governing authorities have no God-given right to redefine what a marriage is. Therefore, when a pastor refuses to officiate a ceremony or when a baker refuses to make a cake for a same-sex couple, they are honoring God (regardless of the laws of the land) as they give ultimate allegiance to God alone.

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<sup>19</sup> John 21:22.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Daniel, Shadrack, Meshack, Abednego.

## CLOSING

As Christians, we are called to honor the governing authorities with all that is under their God-given jurisdiction – regardless of whether we approve of their character or their laws – because, as we honor them, we honor the God who has given them this authority for His purposes. For the sake of God, we “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” – i.e., the things of earth.

And, as Christians, we are called to honor God above all else – because all that we are and all that we have is from His hand. We are citizens of an earthly kingdom, this is true; but we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom first and foremost. God alone has final say over our lives...over our money, over our homes, over our families and churches, and over our worship.

And so, we will honor our governor.

And so, we will honor our president.

And we will worship God and God alone.