



Mark 12:13-27
Answering Big Questions

Summary: How should Christians view government and does the Bible really make sense?

Has anyone ever asked you a hard question about God, the Bible, Jesus, or what you believe about spiritual things? Have you got a few hard questions you'd like to have answered yourself? If so, I think you'll get something helpful out of our time together as we watch Jesus face hostile questions about Christian ethics and doctrine. We'll hear His specific answer to each question and then make some general observations that help broaden the application for us today.

In order to cover it all, we need to jump right in. We pick things up in the final week of Jesus' life. He's in the Temple in Jerusalem with crowds watching and listening to everything He does.

Mark 12:13 Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in *His* words.

That's important, notice they came to **catch Him in His words**. It's a trap. They want to get him to say something they can use against Him. So, who are these guys? Well, first you have the Pharisees – they were super conservative, ultra-religious, Jewish nationalists. Imagine if the Amish didn't just live in Amish communities but lived everywhere and wanted everyone to live like they do. The Pharisees hated the idea of doing anything that supported Rome because it felt like a violation of their religious convictions.

The Herodians were people who supported the Herodian dynasty. You hear about Herod the Great each Christmas – he's the one the wisemen came to asking where they could find Jesus. He's also the one who had sponsored rebuilding the great Temple in Jerusalem. He got along well with the Romans and they let him rule Israel however he wanted. When he died, his kingdom was split up among three of his sons.

The two governing in the north and central regions did alright, but Archelaus who governed the south, where Jerusalem and the Temple were, had some problems. As a result, the Romans stripped him of his power and installed a Roman procurator to govern in his place – the man currently filling that position was Pontius Pilate. The Herodians were a group that wanted Pilate to go back to Rome and let Archelaus or another Herodian family member do the job again.

So that's who these two groups are.

14 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. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? 15 Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?"

Now, remember this is a loaded question. And here's what's going on. Remember I said Archelaus had some problems and was stripped of his throne? Well, it happened over this exact issue. In the year 6 A.D., when Jesus would have been a little boy and Archelaus had just taken over, a revolutionary zealot named Judas had sparked a rebellion over paying Roman taxes and when Archelaus proved unable to stop the rebellion, the Romans came in and did it for him and then took over his throne.

So, this group wants to know – what do you think Jesus – should we pay the Roman taxes and effectively endorse the Roman government and all of its pagan temples, philosophies, and lifestyles. Or should we resist and rebel again?

Here's why that's a trap: if Jesus says *pay it*, they can say there's no way He's the Messiah, the coming King of Israel who will restore the Kingdom. But, if He says *don't pay it*, they can report Him to the Romans and have arrested for starting another rebellion. It seems like they can win either way. So, what's He going to say?

(vs 15 cont'd) But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see it." 16 So they brought it. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's."



A denarius was a coin worth a day's wages. It had the face of the current Roman Emperor on the front, which was Tiberius at this point, and along with his picture was the inscription "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of divine Augustus." On the back were the words "Pontifex Maximus" which translates to "high priest of the Roman nation" along with an image of the Roman goddess Pax, or peace. Now, as a side note, it's widely accepted that his mom was the model, something to keep in mind if you ever become absolute ruler of a massive empire – do something nice for your mom.

Did you know that in England, the Queen's face is still on all their money today? They're printing new money with King Charles on it that will come out next year, but still the – the King or Queen is on everything. The point of it all is: money is power and when your face is on everyone's money, it says something – it says *I'm in charge*, I control the economy. And you can tell how far your power reaches by looking at where money with your face on it is accepted. So, since money with Caesar's face on it is being used in Jerusalem, you can see what kind of message that sends to the Jews.



Personally, I keep a fifty peso bill from Mexico in my wallet because it makes me feel like a baller. It's all that's left of what we spent during a recent family vacation. I can't spend it here in the US and it's only worth about \$3.

But let's get back to Scripture and see what Jesus is going to say about this coin with a Roman emperor on it claiming to be a divine prince:

17 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.

In other words, Jesus says give to Caesar the things with his image on them. He had them made, he controls them. The logic is – since these things bear the image of Caesar, you should honor him with them. And then you should honor God with whatever is His – it sound simple at first.

But, hold on to that thought and look at what we find on the first page of Scripture:

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.

What does that say? *Human beings are made in the image of God.* So, if we use the same argument, we should give to God the things that are His, which means our very lives, including the life of Caesar.

But now think about this – the government *takes* its taxes. In fact, as Benjamin Franklin said, the only thing certain in life is death and taxes. You can avoid some, you can get creative, but if you're caught cheating or not paying your taxes, you will go to jail. The government will arrest you, seize your assets, or garnish your wages. You must pay.

But what about God? Does He send you a bill each year of what you owe? No. Because you could never pay. This is why we often speak of Jesus' death on the cross as a payment for our sins. Jesus took our tax bill and covered the entire amount Himself and each time we come up short on our payments, He's still there offering to make up the difference if we ask.

Well, that's the specific answer to the question, but I want to pull back a bit and see a general principle which I think is hugely important for us living in this area. And that is,

There is a way to walk in integrity before God and men.

The Pharisees and Herodians wanted to use either Jesus' loyalty to God to cause problems with Rome or use His support of Rome to comprise His relationship with God, but Jesus proved there was another way. So too, today, it is possible for you to walk in integrity as both a Christian and a citizen – it's even possible for you to excel in each.

Think of the examples we find in men like Daniel. Everyone knows the story of Daniel and the lion's den. But do you remember how he got there? He was doing such a great job in his work for the government, that they were looking to promote him to the number two position in the administration and that made people jealous so they contrived a plot against him.

But here's something important to remember – Daniel wasn't working for the government of Israel. He was serving the government of Babylon - a pagan nation that had invaded his homeland, taken him and other Israelis hostage, and deported them across the desert. It was *under those conditions* that he was able to excel, because God was with him.

In fact, when the king comes to check on him the next day after spending the night in the safety in the lion's den, Daniel tells the king:

Daniel 6:21 ...“O king, live forever! 22 My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, because I was found innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done no wrong before you.”

In other words, Daniel found a way to live with integrity and excellence before God and men.

Or what about Paul the apostle? When his presence sparked a riot in the Temple the Romans arrested him and launched an investigation into what happened. We read in

Acts 25:7 ...the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove, 8 while he answered for himself, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.”

Paul was able to stand before a ruler of the Roman government and say, I have done nothing against the laws of God, or against the laws of Rome – I have walked with integrity and excellence before God and man. And, just like with Daniel – he did it under a pagan nation that has invaded his homeland. These men are not in what we might consider ideal situations. Their favorite political party isn't in power.

Church, as we prepare to move into 2024 and the upcoming elections and political news cycle I want you to remember, the Church exists in places like Afghanistan, Iran, and China. The Church existed in Russia under the old communist, and officially atheist, Soviet Union. The Church is able to exist in places like India with its Hindu extremists and in Berkely with it's liberal secularism. The Church can exist in all these places because God is in all of these places and Christians there are learning to live in a way that honors God and, when and where possible, blesses the community and nation as well.

Scripture contains admonitions for Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament to seek the good of the community and nation, even when they're in exile, because, it is possible – not easy, but possible – to walk with integrity before both God and man no matter who is in power.

And all of that is possible because the Holy Spirit is producing spiritual fruit in you and giving spiritual gifts to you. God wants to use you to be a source of blessing, encouragement, comfort, and leadership to others.

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So pray for your work. Take a minute in the car before you go in tomorrow or while you're walking up to the door and pray, God I'm here *for* you, help me to know I'm also here *with* you. Show me *some* way that I can do *something* here that will bring You pleasure today. You're my God at church. You're my God at home. You're my God at work, school, and play too. Show me how to do this and help Me know You're with me. Amen.

Well, it would be great to stop there, but that's not the only trap Jesus faced.

Mark 12:18 Then *some* Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him;

This group, the Sadducees, were the religious liberals of their day – they didn't believe in much of the supernatural. They rejected things like angels and the idea of a resurrection. So, they tried to point out what they saw as the inconsistencies of these ideas. But Jesus provided yet another stunning answer.

and they asked Him, saying: 19 "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother dies, and leaves *his* wife behind, and leaves no children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. 20 Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife; and dying, he left no offspring. 21 And the second took her, and he died; nor did he leave any offspring. And the third likewise. 22 So the seven had her and left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also. 23 Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife."

The issue they bring up is called levirate marriage. It's described in Deuteronomy (25:5-6), one of the early books of Israel's history, but it occurred in other times and cultures as well. The intent was to provide a sort of social and economic protection to women in family-based cultures where women typically did not work outside the home or own property. If her husband died, she likely had no means of survival except charity. So, a brother of the deceased man would marry her and take care of her.

Now, I know that sounds completely foreign to us. But you have to remember that our modern ideas of finding the love of your life and feeling completely fulfilled are a romantic invention that is very recent in the scope of human history. And, it doesn't seem to be working out so well when you consider modern rates of divorce.

So, the Sadducees ask, how is all of this supposed to work if there's actually a resurrection instead of just annihilation? Who will she spend eternity with?

24 Jesus answered and said to them, "Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God? 25 For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

Jesus says, you're drawing the wrong conclusions, because you don't know what Heaven is actually like.

Today we still have questions about Heaven, and not all have answers, but Scripture does tell us this:

1 Cor 2:9 *“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man
The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”*

If you have questions about Heaven, start with this assumption: no one will be disappointed with what God has prepared. So, will your family pet be there and will you recognize it? I don't know. If there is no marriage what will your relationship with your spouse be? I don't know. But I can tell you there will be no tears, no weariness, no fatigue, and no death – all the problems of the world will be solved – no conflict, no poverty, no worry, no anger. If there's one thing I can guarantee you about heaven, it's this: there's no complaint department because no one will be disappointed.

But there's one other part of the Sadducees' question to deal with:

26 *But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?* **27** *He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken.”*

Jesus cites a portion of Scripture that the Sadducees accepted (Exodus 3:6) and says when God spoke to Moses about these founders of the nation, He said *I am* their God – present tense, not past tense, *I was* their God. The implication is, they have not been annihilated, but somehow, even after their death, they exist and await resurrection.

Now, I get what He's saying, but I confess it doesn't really blow me away – yet it did for the Sadducees. When Matthew tells us about this moment and Jesus' answer, he adds that people were **astonished** at what Jesus said.

So, there you have the specifics of what happened and the answer Jesus gave. But, I want to draw out another general principle like we did with the first question. So, point number two this morning is:

Christianity can answer questions.

People often have questions about Christianity and sometimes they're even hostile questions, just like this was for Jesus. What I want you to know is: those questions can be answered.

Sometimes the questions come from friends, family members or co-workers – people who have their own agenda or bias and they have this hard question they want to throw at you. So, how should we answer? Well, the Bible says two things, sometimes we should respond to those questions, and sometimes we should not.

1 Peter 3:15 always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear

And,

Matthew 7:6 Do not cast your pearls before swine

It takes wisdom and discernment to know which is which. Is this question being asked by someone who really wants to know, or is it someone who's just looking to make a point or start an argument? Should I engage, or let it go?

In this case, Jesus chose to engage even though He knew their motives were insincere.

And that brings me to the next thing I want to say – which is: if God is willing to answer the insincere, baited questions of cynics, how much more willing is He to answer your honest questions?

Friends, here's the thing – it's OK to have questions for God. I did. And I still do. But we're not always honest about it. We think we have to hide it or we're not allowed to talk about it. And maybe that's because you asked some questions and it made other people who didn't have answers nervous and they told you not to ask or think stuff like that. But you do.

I remember making a list in high school of all this stuff I thought was really serious and keeping it all to myself because I thought I was really intellectual and I had come up with these questions that other people weren't asking and I didn't want to ask them in front of my friends because I didn't want to shake their 'simple faith.' But I had skeptical questions, heavy stuff like – where did Cain get his wife?

Now, maybe you don't struggle with issues like that – but I am *certain* that at some point you have had some questions about God and the Christian faith. **What do you do with those questions**, do you just sweep them away, lock them in the closet and pretend they don't exist and hope nobody asks you about them, or do you take them to God and seek out answers? My friend, *if God is willing to answer the questions of critics who are trying to trip Him up, certainly He is willing to answer your honest inquiries.*

And don't think that just because you don't have all the answers that you must be wrong or your position is weak. If there is one valuable lesson coming out of all the creation vs. evolution arguments over the years it's been to highlight the fact that the evolutionary camp operates on at least as much faith as the creationists.

It's pretty humorous to watch a movie like *Expelled* when Ben Stein interviews highly educated, well-respected, people and asks them "OK, how did organic life begin – we know you say it evolved, but *what* started evolving?" And you hear them respond, in all sincerity, that life just suddenly happened on the backs of crystals, or that perhaps some other intelligent alien life form 'seeded' life here – as if earth is somebody's galactic garden, they

planted a little seed and look what grew out of it! Well, OK, but where did the alien gardener come from?

My point is: don't be intimidated when people like that ask hard questions about your faith – they're operating on a lot of faith too!

And if you have questions personally, seek out the answers – take them to God, and do a little bit of research – Proverbs speaks over and over again about the value of **seeking out** wisdom. If you have questions *ask them* and be prepared to answer the questions *people are asking you* – if the questions are really important, **seek out answers**. And if I can help or one of the other pastors can, let us know – we'll be happy to help you find answers – or at least help you find the right places to look.

Now, of course, you have to be prepared for the fact that some of your questions will require you to walk by faith – to trust God in this area because of what you are convinced of in that area. And you also need to be remember, that even when God provides the answers, what He really wants is for you to draw closer to Him. He's after intimacy more than intellect – though that always remains a part – you don't just check your brain at the door of the church, the goal is to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

We're going to close our time together this morning with communion – the chance to remind ourselves of the core beliefs of the Christian faith and to hold in our hands symbolic reminders of Christ's sacrifice for us. We might not have all the specific answers, but we can know this. And it's a starting point as we seek to go out into the world bearing the image of God and therefore rendering to Him what He is due.

Take a moment now as the worship team plays to pray about the things we've seen this morning – respond back to God or ask Him your questions and in a moment, when your heart is ready, come forward and receive the elements of communion. Take them back to your seats and we'll partake together in just a moment.

Here are few things you might want to remember and pray about in this time:

Integrity and excellence are possible
Heaven is more than I can imagine
Answers are available

Let's pray.

Apostle's Creed
Doxology



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 12:13-27 Answering Big Questions

Summary: How should Christians view government and does the Bible really make sense?

- What taxes or fees do you hate paying the most?
- Review the following passages – what do you learn about how God’s people should view government authorities? In each case, also ask: who is the government at the time this passage was written?
 - o Proverbs 11:11
 - o Proverbs 14:34
 - o Jeremiah 29:7
 - o Romans 13:1-7
 - o Titus 3:1
 - o 1 Peter 2:13-17
- How does your faith influence your work?
- The government forcefully takes what it is owed - how does this make paying taxes easy for you, but giving back to God hard?
- What would make heaven heavenly for you?
- What are some hard questions you have faced about your faith? Have you found answers? What questions do you still have?
- According to Jesus, the Sadducees erred because they did not know God’s Word. Reflect on the following commentary. Is Ryle correct? If so, what can you do?

The churches which are most flourishing at this day, are churches which honor the Bible. The nations which enjoy most moral light, are nations in which the Bible is most known. The parishes in our land where there is most true religion, are those in which the Bible is most studied. The godliest families are Bible-reading families. The holiest men and women are Bible-reading people. These are simple facts which cannot be denied.

Let these things sink deeply into our hearts, and bear fruit in our lives. Let us not be ignorant of the Bible, lest we fall into some deadly error. Let us rather read it diligently, and make it our rule of faith and practice. Let us labor to spread the Bible over the world. The more the book is known, the better the world will be. – JC Ryle

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