

Series: What We Need Now

Title: A Proper View of God and Government

Text: Mark 12:13-17

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Verse 13

Mark 12:13-17 gives record of an event in which religious and political leaders tried to ensnare Jesus. Mark began his account of the episode with the following words, “Then they sent some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to Jesus to trap him in his words” (Mark 12:13). The event in our current text is one of many instances from the Holy Week in which local leaders tried to entrap Jesus (Mark 11:27; 12:18; and 12:28). The regional authorities wanted to bait Jesus into saying something that would incriminate Him.

Notice from our current text that it was “the Pharisees and the Herodians” who challenged Jesus on this particular occasion. An alliance between the two groups would have been unlikely under most circumstances. The Herodians were regarded as compromisers by many. As the local supporters of Herod, they were in league with Rome. Because they had gained positions of power and wealth through their alliance with the outsiders, they were complicit in maintaining the status quo of foreign domination.

The Pharisees were purists who valued devotion to the traditions of the elders. One has remarked that they “were strict in their interpretation of the Mosaic law, and bitterly hostile to foreign influences.”¹ The unholy alliance between these two parties stands as a reminder that a common enemy can make close friends out of the most heated adversaries. In Luke’s gospel, one can similarly read of how Herod and Pontius Pilate, two men who were rivals under ordinary circumstances, established a friendship on the basis of their prosecution of Jesus (Luke 23:12).

Back in Mark 3:6, the two groups in our current text (“the Pharisees and the Herodians”) started plotting to see “how they might kill” Jesus. Now they approach the Lord, hoping to “trap” Him. The word translated “trap” is one that was used in Jesus’ day in reference to hunting and fishing.² It depicted the act of ensnaring an animal or fish through stealth. In the context of our current passage, the word represents an act of deceit and treachery.³

Verse 14

Trying to entrap Jesus, the depraved duo asked, “Teacher, we know you are truthful and don’t care what anyone thinks, nor do you show partiality but teach the way of God

¹ Machen, J. Gresham. *The New Testament: An Introduction to its Literature and History*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 34.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.

³ Brooks, 192.

truthfully. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" (Mark 13:14). Notice the preamble of flattery that preceded the question from the Herodians and Pharisees. Four different qualifiers appear. The first was a vain attempt at showing feigned respect to Jesus. The two groups called Jesus "teacher." As with others in Mark's gospel, our Lord's opponents had too low of a view of His character and nature (Mark 4:38; 5:35; 9:17 and 38; 10:17 and 20). They should have regarded Him as being much more than a mere rabbi. In their minds, their moniker for Jesus was complementary, but it really wasn't.

The other three forms of flattery in verse 14 were insincere compliments. The Pharisees and Herodians didn't really mean it when they said, "We know you are truthful." They were merely coaxing Jesus to say what He really thought. They assumed He would lash out against Roman paganism. In saying, "You don't care what anyone thinks," the leaders were priming our Lord, encouraging Him to not be afraid of the backlash He would encounter for taking a side in a manmade debate. Their statement concerning Jesus not showing "partiality" was meant to spur Jesus to speak out against the wealthy elite who oppressed people through what were seen by many as unjust taxes.

The tax in view was the tribute or poll tax.⁴ History tells us that Roman taxation began in Judea in 63 B.C.⁵ It was levied on the basis of two different items — names and property. Based on the census, every male between the ages of fourteen and sixty-five was required to pay a "head tax" or "poll tax." It cost a denarius each year. The payment was the equivalent of a land worker's daily wages.⁶ Property taxes were also levied. They were based on land ownership and the income gathered from annual production off of the land.⁷

The question from the Pharisees and Herodians was grounded in an age-old debate. What are the lines of demarcation between devotion to church and state? To this day, many faithful Christians wrestle with this subject. We may never find clear-cut answers this side of eternity. As long as we are in a fallen world, we may struggle to know where to land on political issues and state involvement. In the United States of America, our entire nation was established because of a struggle concerning this matter. It would be unwise and unbiblical for us to believe that a solution will be found in this temporal earth. Until Christ returns to rule supreme (Revelation 19:11-15 and 20:11-15), believers will always find themselves in political quandaries.

The question from the Pharisees and Herodians regarding local taxes was intricately designed to ensnare Jesus. Notice its binary nature. The Pharisees and Herodians demanded a "yes" or "no" answer. Their question is reminiscent of modern debates on popular television news programs in which a host tries to paint pundits into a

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.

⁵ Schnabel, 291.

⁶ Brooks, 192.

⁷ Schnabel, 291.

proverbial corner with stout questions that can only be answered with one of two responses. In like manner, Jesus' opponents gave Him no wiggle room, no margin for gray. They wanted a black or white response. Their politically-charged interrogative allowed no place for the middle ground of godly wisdom (Proverbs 26:4-5). They weren't open to the wisdom of the Lord; they only wanted to trap Jesus. Scheming in their wickedness, they sought to snag Him in the proverbial Catch-22.

Through their question, the Pharisees and Herodians believed they had put Jesus in a lose-lose situation. First-century zealots and nationalistic patriots would have expected an answer of "no" from the newly-minted Messianic figure (Mark 11:9-10). Jewish history attests to the widespread disdain for Roman taxation. In A.D. 6, a man named Judas of Galilee led a revolt against Rome. All who were unwilling to join in a war against foreign levies were labelled cowards.⁸ One can see how the Pharisees and Herodians put Jesus in a difficult situation with their question.

The religious and political elite would have wanted a "yes." They held positions of power because of the Roman government. Their livelihoods sprang from the coffers that collected taxes. If Jesus answered in the negative, He would have infuriated the ruling elite. Such were the people who had the power to put Him to death. A refutation of the responsibility to pay taxes would be regarded as a treasonous act.

Verse 15

In verse 15, Mark continues his account of Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees and Herodians: "But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius to look at' (Mark 12:15). Notice that Jesus didn't answer His adversaries' question as they requested. Having wisdom from above, He sniffed out their ploy. He avoided their trap by answering their question with a question.

Jesus' motive wasn't to manipulate, or to simply avoid giving an answer. His aim was to show that the wisdom of God transcends the wisdom of man. Not only did the Pharisees and Herodians not have the right answers, they didn't even know the right questions! The Lord can't be put into one's manmade box of human philosophy and understanding. His ways are always above our ways (Isaiah 55:8 and 1 Corinthians 3:19). Believers should remember this as they navigate the troubled waters of contemporary politics. The Lord isn't always interested in taking sides in the latest political debates. His ways are higher than ours (Joshua 5:13-15). He will not reduce Himself to propping up the manmade opinions of earthly rulers.

As He did back in Mark 2:8, Jesus perceived the sinful motives of His opponents. In particular, He detected their hypocritical spirit. Hypocrisy involves applying a standard to another that you don't adhere to yourself. The Herodians and Pharisees were adept at such duplicitous living.

Jesus previously called the Pharisees out for their hypocrisy back in Mark 7:6. In our current passage, they engage in such ungodly behavior through their unholy alliance with the Herodians. Though they often stood against Herod, they hypocritically

⁸ Schnabel, 291.

kowtowed to Him when it served their own purposes. The same double standard would be seen at Jesus' trial (John 19:12). Their questioning of Jesus was also hypocritical because the Pharisees faithfully paid Roman taxes. Who were they to generate controversy about the matter when they themselves apparently had no problem with it?

The Herodians were duplicitous in their questioning as well. They had no right to raise a stink about taxes. They had gotten rich off of Roman money! All in all, the ploy of the Pharisees and Herodians stunk of duplicity, hypocrisy, and double-standard living.

The problem with the Pharisees and Herodians is one that persists to this day. Many play the hypocrite in their approach to issues related to church and state. Take note that hypocrisy involves much more than being fake. Though it certainly involves the idea of pretense and a lack of genuineness, the main issue with hypocrisy is a matter of dual standards. Be careful that you don't fall victim to the same failure as the Pharisees. Don't have one set of standards for spiritual and religious matters while holding a different set of standards for political matters. Remember the admonition of Scripture – "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8, KJV).

After perceiving the hypocrisy of His opponents, Jesus asked, "Why are you testing me?" The Greek word translated "testing" was used back in 1:13 of Satanic activity. By trying to entangle Jesus in a political controversy, the Pharisees and Herodians unwittingly engaged in a devilish ploy. The Bible teaches that much of the interpersonal strife that plagues society is indeed of Satanic origin (Ephesians 6:10-12). Our archenemy loves to divide and destroy people (John 10:10). One of the chief ways he is currently doing this is through political stratagems. He has used such strategies for millennia. In the Bible, we learn that there are territorial spirits who wreak havoc within different geographical locations (Daniel 10:13). By entangling people in endless, profitless debates, Satan blinds people to the realities of the Lord.

To answer the Pharisee and Herodian's question, the Lord requested that they hand Him a "denarius." The coin was an everyday one used by the average citizen.⁹ According to Matthew 20:2, it was the equivalent of a day's wages.¹⁰ By requesting the coin, Jesus asked for the exact amount of the yearly head tax.

For first-century Jews, a denarius was a symbol of contention. It represented Roman domination. But it also represented much more. The inscription on the coin handed to Jesus would have read "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus."¹¹ Because Roman coinage proclaimed the divine right of the emperor, and because it made the emperor out to be a god, it was considered blasphemous.¹² In asking for a denarius, Jesus likely grabbed the attention of onlookers. He was about to speak about one of the biggest hot-button issues of His day. Can you visualize the dramatic pause as the

⁹ Ryle, 200.

¹⁰ Schnabel, 292.

¹¹ Brooks, 193.

¹² Schnabel, 293.

religious and political elite shuffled to find a coin? One can imagine the crowd was quite curious to see what would happen next.¹³

Verse 16

After His opponents came forward with a coin, Jesus showed it to them and asked, “Whose image and inscription is this?” (Mark 12:16). Typically, a Roman coin would have shown the emperor’s head on one side.¹⁴ Affixed underneath the head would have been an inscription that touted the ruler as being divine. The reverse side of the coin would have listed many of his family lineage and his achievements as emperor.¹⁵ At the time of the interaction in our text, Tiberius was the ruler of the Roman empire.¹⁶

Verse 17

After hearing His opponents’ response, Jesus instructed them, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). The word translated “give” was a compound word that literally meant “to give back.” As used in the context of our passage, it implies that one should regard his or her taxes as a sort of debt to the government.¹⁷ When the authorities that God has ordained provide services to society, constituents have a responsibility before the Lord to faithfully pay their taxes. If this was true in the days of the unjust Herodian dynasty (Mark 6:14-29), it is still true today.

Jesus showed that devotion to God and government are not always mutually exclusive, as some would assume. One can show loyalty to both at the same time, even though the demands of both are frequently juxtaposed to one another. Sure, there are exceptions to this rule. Sometimes loyalty to God will lead one to reject the requirements of the state (Daniel 1:8 and 3:16-18). However, such a scenario is certainly the exception, not the rule. One has commented, “Obedience to a secular power does not necessarily conflict with obligation to God. The lesser obligation may be included in the greater.”¹⁸ The truth presented in our text shows that the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ refusal to pledge to a flag or serve during a time of war is misguided.

Even in Jesus’ day, and even with the injustice that was rampant amongst the Romans, our Lord called Christians to show a form of submission to the authorities. At the time of the incident in our text, the Romans allowed the Jews to worship freely; thus, there was no need for zealots to refuse to pay taxes. Indeed, Rome would eventually

¹³ Ferguson, 193.

¹⁴ Schnabel, 293.

¹⁵ Schnabel, 292.

¹⁶ Schnabel, 292.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.

¹⁸ Brooks, 193.

become hostile to the Church because of its refusal to engage in emperor worship.¹⁹ When such a time came, the Church would stand up in resistance (Acts 5:29). However, when the Pharisees and Herodians approached Jesus, there was no need for such a stance. Jesus demonstrated that Christians, under most circumstances, should be subservient to their government. Ryle has commented on our need to remember Jesus' teaching on this matter:

Let us learn from this masterly decision the great principle, that true Christianity was never meant to interfere with a man's obedience to the civil power. So far from this being the case it ought to make him a quiet, loyal, and faithful subject. He ought to regard the powers that be as "ordained of God," and to submit to their rules and regulations so long as the law is enforced, though he may not thoroughly approve of them. If the law of the land and the law of God come in collision, no doubt his course is clear — he must obey God rather than man...Let us often pray for a larger measure of that spirit of wisdom which dwelt so abundantly in our blessed Lord. Many are the evils which have arisen in the Church of Christ, from a morbid and distorted view of the relative positions of the civil government and of God...Happy is he who remembers our Lord's decision in this passage, understands it rightly, and makes a practical application of it to his own times.²⁰

Interestingly, Jesus' instruction condemned and confounded both the Pharisees and the Herodians simultaneously. It rebuked the Pharisees because of their disrespect to the authorities God had established. It corrected the Herodians because of their low view of God.

The application for us is two-fold. First, we should respect governing authorities. Romans 13:1 says, "Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God." The Bible is replete with examples of saints like Joseph (Genesis 41:1-57), David (1 Samuel 26:9-11), Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:3), Daniel (Daniel 2:27-31 and 4:1), and Peter (1 Peter 2:13) who valued respect toward government. Such men knew that a reverence for civil authorities can be used as a powerful witness for Christ (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Secondly, our passage teaches us that we should maintain an utmost devotion to the Lord. The word translated "give" in our text carries the idea of "to be pay what is owed."²¹ Just as we are to give the government its due, we are to also give God His due. Interestingly, the image of Tiberius on the Roman coin has special meaning for Christians. When Jesus asked "Whose image and inscription is this?" (Mark 12:16), it seems that He made a subtle reference to Genesis 1:26-27, a passage that teaches all men and women are made in the "image" of God.

¹⁹ Machen, 24-25.

²⁰ Ryle, 201-202.

²¹ Brooks, 193.

Our Lord meant to convey the idea that we, as beings made in His image, are to live devotedly to Him. One has said, “Coins have the image of a ruler, and they may be returned to him. Human beings are made in the image of God; they and all they have belong to him.”²² The Bible encourages us in this regard. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, we read, “Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.” Paul told the Romans, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship” (Romans 12:1). The teaching of the Westminster Catechism is really true — it is our chief end in life to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever!

When the crowd saw how Jesus handled the Pharisees and Herodians, they were stunned. Mark says, “And they were utterly amazed at him” (Mark 12:17). The language of the text involves the perfect tense. It could be translated “completely astonished.”²³ Why were they amazed? The people stood in awe because Jesus didn’t give the run-of-the-mill answers most people gave. While most fell on one of two sides of the fence, Jesus exhibited wisdom that transcended human paradigms.

Know this — Christ can’t be reduced to manmade distinctions, divides, and debates. Scripture says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways. This is the Lord’s declaration. For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). In a world of black and white arguments and left versus right thinking, may we be careful to not sell out to one human ideology. Let’s be on guard that the Lord and His Word are our guiding lights. May we be able to proclaim with the Psalmist, “Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105).

²² Brooks, 193.

²³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.