

Render To God The Things That Are God's: Mark 12:13-17
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I was reading this week from a book entitled *Worship by the Book*, edited by D. A. Carson. And in one of the chapters I read some things about preaching that were very insightful and very encouraging to me. The author was making the point that “the experience of listening to the Word of God . . . [is] a participatory experience.”¹ The congregation should have their Bibles open and should be following along. There should be attentiveness and eagerness to learn from God’s Word, to be transformed by the Word, to apply the Word specifically to our own lives. The preaching event in a corporate worship service is not something you just sit back and observe. You actively participate by engaging yourself in the study and application of the text.

Then I read these words: “A faithful congregation will draw faithful preaching out of their pastor. Conversely, it is very hard to persevere as a faithful teacher of the Word of God to a congregation that does not want to have it taught to them. . . . [P]reaching is a two-way process: the attitudes of preacher and congregation must unite in a humble hunger for God’s Word.”² I think those comments are very insightful because the preaching of a sermon is not something that a preacher “performs.” The preaching of God’s Word involves not only the preacher, but the whole congregation. And we all need to do our part in order for this to strengthen the church week after week. I have to put in the time to think and pray and meditate and study the Word. I have to humble myself before the Word and prepare to expound the Word out of a love for God and a love for you. And you, too, need to think and pray and meditate and study God’s Word throughout the week. You need to humble yourself before the Word on a daily basis. And on the Lord’s Day you need to prepare your heart for the special privilege we have to come together in corporate worship to pray together and sing together and to hear God’s Word proclaimed.

I’m very encouraged by these statements, too, because I feel like I see this happening here. Your intense hunger for the Word spurs me on to go deeper into the Word. As I see you with open Bibles, listening attentively, and sometimes later asking questions or commenting on particular ways that the Word has impacted your life, those things are a tremendous motivation to me

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to serve up some hearty meat each Sunday. So let's all come hungry, and by God's grace, we'll feast together on God's Word.

As I've heard Allistair Begg say before, My part is to do the preaching. Your part is to do the listening. And we'll just hope that you don't come to the end of your part before I come to the end of your part. And if you do, just try to hang in there with me until I'm through.

Let's get started, then, by reading the passage we come to in Mark this morning, as we've been working our way through the Gospel of Mark.

It is fitting that we find ourselves on April 10th coming to a passage in Mark that talks about taxes. I didn't even plan it this way (not that I would have tried). And I'm not smart enough, anyway, to plan things out like this. But this goes to show us that the Bible *is* relevant to our lives today. Maybe you've been working on your taxes in recent weeks, and maybe you've been grumbling about them. Maybe you've been saying to Jesus the same thing these Pharisees and Herodians said to Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Obama or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" That question is intensified all the more as our government has been on the verge of a shutdown this past week. And I don't think that means we would stop paying taxes. It just means they would stop paying a lot of people, some of you included. So these things may be the source of quite a bit of frustration for you right now. Well, Jesus has something to say to us about it.

Money and government are two things in life that are almost always on our radar screen in some way. These are things that will determine, to a large extent, whether we will be able to do the things we want to do, or not. I remember as a boy trying to figure out money. Why do we use money? What's the point of money? Why doesn't everyone just share stuff with each other rather than using coins and pieces of paper to trade for stuff? And I remember pretty vividly (I must have been 9 or 10 years old) peppering my Dad with these questions. Why doesn't everyone just work their jobs, and the stores can have the things people need, and people can take what they need? And my Dad said, "Yeah, son, that's called communism. They tried it. And it doesn't work."

Of course, I realize now how good we have it here in the United States. But still the issues of money and government and taxes are hotly-debated topics around the world, and as we see in our text today, they have been throughout the ages. So let's see how Jesus addresses this.

We'll first consider the questioners, and then the question. And then we'll look at Jesus' response.

The Questioners

This whole section is about various individuals who want to challenge Jesus' authority. This is what we've been looking at already for the past two weeks. So this is beginning to sound like a broken record. They are challenging His authority.

Last Sunday after church we were sitting at the lunch table and I asked our 5 year old son, Noah, "What did you think of the sermon," to which he replied, "Oh, it was the same sermon as last week." And he was right, because I preached 2 weeks ago on 11:27-33, and I preached last week on 12:1-12, and it's the same message. They are questioning Jesus' authority, and Jesus is telling them that they're fools to do so. They are rejecting the stone that has become the cornerstone.

11:27 – 12:12 was all part of the same conversation. And it ended in 12:12 with the chief priests and scribes and elders "seeking to arrest [Jesus] but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away."

Then look at what they do in verse 13. "And they sent to him . . ." I think that's remarkable. It says something profound about what just happened in the previous conversation. These chief priests and scribes and elders were so humiliated by how Jesus stumped them with His question about John the Baptist. And they were so irate at the parable Jesus told against them, that they didn't even want to face Him again. They didn't want to risk another encounter like that one. So what did they do? They sent some others to go instead.

And who did they send? Some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians. Now you have to understand that this is a very odd couple. This is a case of, your enemy's enemy is your best friend. You would not find the Pharisees and the Herodians agreeing on anything, or cooperating with one another for any cause. But in this case both groups have such an intense hatred toward Jesus, and such a desire to get rid of Jesus, that the two groups find themselves shoulder to shoulder in their opposition to Jesus. They had forged this awkward relationship back in Mark 3:6, when Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. "The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." And here they are again, seeking a way to bring Jesus down.

This would be like a Pittsburgh Steelers fan and a Cleveland Browns fan cheering together against the Baltimore Ravens. Or to use a political illustration, it would be like Republicans and Democrats uniting together in their opposition to Ralph Nader, or someone like that.

The Pharisees were the conservatives. They were highly religious and wanted to protect the culture from the negative influences of Hellenism. They hated the Greco-Roman occupation of their land. They wanted to protect the Jewish traditions. On the other hand, the Herodians were supporters of Herod, and thus had come to terms with the Roman occupation. So you see that these two groups were fundamentally opposed to one another on some major issues, but they were allies in their attack on Jesus. They both saw Jesus as a major threat.

And therefore what was their purpose in coming to Jesus? It says in verse 13, “to trap him in his talk.” Just like what has happened before, they’re wanting to challenge Jesus’ authority. They want to somehow back Him into a corner and make Him look bad. They want to trick Him into saying something that will make Him look stupid. They want to con Him into making some statement that will make everyone hate Him. They want to be able to stand back and say, “See, we told you so. This guy is a fraud.”

They come to trap him in his talk. And how does one typically do this? Well, you start with flattery. And they’re laying it on thick. Verse 14, “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.” This is a really interesting statement for them to make. First, we have to be clear that, although this sounds nice, it is intended in a hypocritical, malicious way. Jesus saw right through this, as it says in verse 15, He knew their hypocrisy.

But still, what they say is entirely accurate. It would be one thing to say to a crooked politician, “we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion.” That wouldn’t just be flattery, it would be a lie. But these Pharisees and Herodians, even though they’re speaking with malicious intent and they don’t even believe the things they’re saying, they are proclaiming true and wonderful things about Jesus. Isn’t that awesome?! Doesn’t that show us something of God’s sense of humor, that He would choose to have Jesus’ opponents become the mouthpiece for extolling Jesus’ attributes?

Another interesting thing about this comment is that the ones who say it are the exact opposite. The last two weeks I’ve noted how the religious leaders are people pleasers. They fear man. 11:32, “they were afraid of the people.” 12:12, they “feared the people.” And now these Pharisees and Herodians come to Jesus and give a comprehensive definition of what it looks like NOT to be a people pleaser. Have you ever wanted a definition of people-pleasing? Well, you can find it right here. To be a people-pleaser is to be the opposite of what is said about Jesus here. To fear man is to care very much about the opinions of many people.

To fear man is to be swayed by appearances. And when that happens the truth will be compromised and there will not be accurate teaching of the way of God.

So the irony is that the people-pleasing, truth-degrading opponents of Jesus come to Him and try to flatter Him by saying, “You’re not a people-pleaser, and you uphold the truth.”

The final thing to say about this—yet another irony—is that because these things are true of Jesus, the flattery will never work on Him. This is the irony of the comment and the irony of the situation. They come to Him saying all these nice things about how He is a man of conviction and isn’t persuaded by popular opinion, and Jesus is like, “Yeah, and that’s exactly why your hypocritical flattery has absolutely no power over me.” Jesus sees right through them.

The Question

Ok, so now we come to the question, itself. They try to butter Him up with complements. And then they spring their trap. The question is, in verse 14, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Ceasar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?” They think this is an ingenious strategy. They think it’s foolproof. Of course, they think Jesus only has two options: either yes or no. And here’s the trap. If Jesus were to say, “Yes, you should pay the taxes,” then all the people would resent Him because they resented paying taxes. And the religious leaders could sit back in satisfaction to watch Jesus’ approval ratings plummet.

On the other hand, if Jesus were to say, “No, you shouldn’t pay your taxes,” then He would be seen as an insurrectionist, a rebel against the government. And the religious leaders could sit back in satisfaction as they watched the Roman authorities come in and arrest Jesus.

But Jesus will not be trapped. He will not be tricked. And even though His death is imminent at this point in the Gospel, this is not the situation that will lead directly to the crucifixion. Jesus will go to the cross exactly as He had planned, exactly as had been ordained from before the foundation of the world.

Implied in the question is the tension between one’s allegiance to God and one’s allegiance to the state. The Pharisees and Herodians are asking the question from the standpoint of a zealot, who would want to say, We cannot show any support for Caesar whatsoever, for in doing so we would be undermining our allegiance to God. For many Jews, the coins, themselves, were offensive. They were like little idols of Caesar, since it had his image on it. And the inscription read, *Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus*. Then on the other side there was the image of Tiberius’s mother, Olivia, and the inscription was,

Pontifex Maximus, the chief priest. To avoid using these idolatrous coins, the Jews actually minted copper coins without any image on them for their use in everyday commerce. This is why it would have been awkward for the Pharisees and Herodians when Jesus asked them for a denarius, and it turned out they had one.

So this was the nature of the question. They are pitting Caesar against God, and wanting to make Jesus choose a side.

Jesus' Response

Now let's look at Jesus' response. Just like in the previous passage, Jesus turns the situation around. Rather than playing defense, He plays offense. He puts the Pharisees and the Herodians on the defensive. He calls them on their hypocrisy and says to them in verse 15, "Why put me to the test?" And then He moves toward His profound response which is going to cause everyone to marvel at Him. But before He makes the statement, He asks for something. He wants to stamp this on everyone's minds with a visual illustration. And not only that, He also wants to show everyone the hypocrisy of these leaders.

They have come to Him as though they're asking an honest question, as though they are genuinely perplexed by this dilemma. But Jesus does something here to expose the fact that they already have an answer for their question. They were hoping to discredit Jesus by making Him appear either as a supporter of Caesar or an opponent of Caesar. But in response Jesus reveals something about where *their* convictions lie.

He asks for a denarius. Apparently Jesus didn't have one. But the Pharisees and Herodians did. This must have been very awkward for them. This is the tangible evidence of their hypocrisy. They're asking the question, but they have the coin in their pocket. Jesus says, "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." And they brought one.

They must have been thinking, Here we go again. They knew what happened in the previous conversation with the chief priests and scribes and elders. They had come to question Jesus, and instead Jesus questioned them, and made them look stupid, and then rebuked them with a parable. And now the Pharisees and the Herodians are in a similar predicament. They're thinking, Where is Jesus going with this? I don't like the sound of this. This is probably not going to go well for us.

And then Jesus asks them in verse 16, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" Whose likeness (*eikōn*) and inscription (*epigraphē*) is this? That word translated as "likeness" (*eikōn*) is the same word that's in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Genesis 1:26-27 where God says, "Let us make man in our image . . . So God created man in his own image."

That's important for our understanding of Jesus' profound statement that He's about to make.

But first of all, He's asking about the likeness and inscription on the coin. And they answer Him, "It's Caesar's." Now comes the direct response to their question about whether or not to pay taxes to Caesar. They had in their pocket a denarius with Caesar's image on it. So Jesus tells them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." So simple, and therefore so profound. And He totally avoids the trap they tried to lay out for Him. "And they marveled at him."

I marvel at Him, too. I love Jesus so much. He is so awesome. He's my hero. Nobody stands up to Jesus. Nobody challenges His authority without ending up looking like an absolute fool. And therefore the question comes back to us yet again, Will we submit to the authority of Jesus over our lives, or will we rebel against His authority and end up looking like a fool—and worse, end up in hell forever suffering the punishment for sin.

Don't you find Jesus so compelling? Everything about Him communicates authenticity and authority and affection toward sinners. I pray that if you are already trusting in Him that each one of these snapshots of Him that we find in the Gospel of Mark will cause you to trust Him and love Him all the more. And if you are not trusting in Him yet, I pray that God will work in your heart so that you do trust Him. I pray that the scales will fall off the eyes of your heart, and you will see what an awesome Savior He is.

Render To Caesar The Things That Are Caesar's

Finally, then, I want to comment on what it means to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and then what it means to render to God the things that are God's. And most of this I'm going to give you by simply reading some other passages of Scripture that address these things.

In terms of rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, we can look at, first of all, what Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-7. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of

conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

So, should you pay your taxes this week? Yes, you should. You should pay every penny you owe, even if you think it's unfair, even if you don't like the president, even if you think the government is too big and they shouldn't need this much of your money. You pay what you owe. Give Caesar his coin.

And don't do it just begrudgingly either. I know we may all have our complaints at times, but we should also recognize that government is part of God's common grace in the world. We have running water, we have our trash picked up each week, we have a sewer system that keeps the city clean. We have a police force and a military that keeps us safe. We have roads to drive on. After watching Roger and Cathy's video the other week about the slums of Nairobi, we should be all the more grateful for these things.

In terms of the roads we have to drive on, we may complain about the potholes that seem to appear everywhere this time of year in Pittsburgh, but the roads here are still far better than most other places in the world. I remember last year when I was in Romania, driving back and forth between Oradea and Beius, and the roads were horrendous. One afternoon, I had been teaching at the pastor's seminar in Oradea during the day, and I was going to preach in a church in Beius that evening, and I was riding in the back seat, feeling sick to my stomach as we sped up and slowed down and swerved to the left and swerved to the right. I felt like I was in the Indianapolis 500. Those Romanian pastors had learned how to make that 50 mile trip in record time in spite of the craters in the pavement.

So, in spite of our various complaints, we should be grateful for the common grace that comes to us through our government, and we should respect the government's authority as something that God has put in place for our good.

1 Peter 2:13-17 also addresses this. "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

So this is God's will for us. Just because we answer to a higher authority than the government doesn't mean we're free to disobey the lower authority. We are to submit to the government "for the Lord's sake." And we should also pray for those who are in positions of civil authority, as Paul instructs us in 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

"I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."

Some of you, as you pray these things, God may incline you to pursue one of those high positions. God may lay it on your heart to serve in a political office of some kind. And that is a wonderful thing. It's a much-needed thing—for godly Christian men and women to seek out these positions of influence, to promote justice and defend the truth and work for the good of all.

A question that comes up in this discussion of the Christians' relationship to the government is, Should a Christian ever disobey the authorities? Are there any exceptions to the rule? And the answer is yes, if the government is requiring you to do something that God clearly commands you not to do, or if the government is prohibiting you from doing something that God clearly commands you to do. If obedience to the state would mean disobedience to God, then you must obey God rather than the state. This is the situation that the apostles faced, when the high priest said to them, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men." (Act 5:28-29)

But that's the exception, not the rule. The general rule that is God's will for us is that we would be submissive to the governing authorities, recognizing them to be instituted by God, appointed by God, ministers of God, for our good. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Pay your taxes. Be a law-abiding citizen. Pray for your leaders.

Render To God The Things That Are God's

So, then, what does it mean to render to God the things that are God's? First of all, as I already mentioned, Genesis 1 reveals the awesome truth that we are made in God's image, in His likeness. And Jesus' profound point is, "Caesar's imprint is on the coin; give Caesar the coin. God's imprint is stamped upon your very being; give yourself to God." Give your life to God. Give Him everything: your hopes, your dreams, your occupation, your marriage, your family, your possessions and resources, your gifts

and talents. Recognize that it all belongs to Him. You belong to God. You are not your own.

Your name may appear on various official documents, claiming that you have ownership of certain things: a bank account, a car, a house. But let these things that we're learning this morning be a reminder to us that we are mere stewards. God is the owner, and we must render to Him everything, because everything is His.

I got an email from Aaron Ashoff last week, and he shared an inspiring story about this. He and his wife, Aimee, are serving as missionaries in Liberia, which is right next to Cote D'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast). And because of the political unrest and fighting that has been going on in Cote D'Ivoire, there have been tens of thousands of refugees who have fled into Liberia. Aaron was meeting with a large group of Liberian pastors in an area where these refugees were relocating, and he was amazed by the eagerness of these Liberian pastors to reach out and help, even though they have very little themselves. And the really interesting part of the story is that not so long ago the roles had been reversed. Liberia had been in the midst of civil war, and people were fleeing into Cote D'Ivoire. And the pastors Aaron was speaking to told him that many of them had been refugees in Cote D'Ivoire during those years, and that was when they became Christians.

So now they find themselves with the opportunity to give. They understand that everything they are and everything they have is God's, and they are generously giving of themselves and their possessions in order to help those in need. Aaron said that the generosity of these pastors (in spite of their limited resources) had quite an impact on him, and I hope it will have an impact on us as well.

What is your life all about? Is it mainly about you: who you are or who you hope to become, what you have or what you hope to get. If that's our mindset, then we desperately need God to reset our focus and priorities.

Some of you may be pushing back at this in your minds right now. You may be thinking, I'll give God His due, but I still rule my life. I'm still going to do what I want to do. I'll come to church, and I'll put some money in the offering basket, and maybe I'll even serve in the nursery from time to time. But I'm not going to do something insane like become a missionary or witness to my co-worker or head up some kind of outreach ministry in the church that will consume much of my thoughts and energy. I'll do my share. I'll put in my time. But the rest is mine to do with as I please.

That's not what it looks like to be a Christ-follower. Because when Jesus says, "render to God the things that are

God's," that means everything. Everything is God's! You belong to God! And if you're a believer, He doubly owns you. He created you, and He redeemed you.

So I want to encourage all of us to think radically this morning about what God would call us to do with the gifts and talents and resources He has entrusted to us. Let's examine our lives. What has God gifted us to do well? What passions has He put in our hearts? What resources has He given to us? And how might all of that be used to glorify Him and draw others into an enjoyment of Him?

Don't come to the end of your life and say, I gave to Caesar what is Caesar's, and I gave to the American Dream most everything else, and I gave to God some leftovers. That's a wasted life. Don't live a life that's going to be filled with regrets later on. Render to God *everything*. I pray that this may be a significant turning point for some of you. Maybe you're discontent with some of the things you're investing your time in right now. Maybe you're disgusted with your apathetic attitude. Repent and change. And ask God to guide you into the work and ministry that He wants you to do, that He made you for and redeemed you for. Jesus died on the cross for our sin. He redeemed us from the pit. He has given us new life in Him. And He calls us to be about His work of calling many more to Himself. Let's not waste our lives on anything else.

A couple other verses I'll read in closing. These are some statements that directly address the question of what it means to render to God the things that are God's. We could ask the question like this: what does God require of us? And the important thing for us to meditate on in these verses is that it's not as simple as doing more or giving more. Rather, it's a question of, What do you love? Whom do you love the most? Deuteronomy 10:12-13 says, "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good?" And Micah 6:8 says, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

And then right here in Mark 12 we have the most important commandment of all (verse 30), "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'"

Let's meditate on these things, brothers and sisters, and let's examine ourselves and pray this week about how, practically, we are to render to God the things that are God's.