

Intro - Open to Mark 12:13-17

I was away on vacation when the Dobbs decision came down. Striking down Roe vs. Wade was a victory for the recognition of life in the womb but with all of the noise around the decision, we are looking at a crisis of authority. I want us to consider on this Independence Day weekend, what is the proper authority of the government. We must be equipped to decipher the government actions, good and bad, that are to come.

God's ultimate authority guides how we understand and respond to every other authority.

Pray

One – Reality of Authority

Read Mark 12:13-14a

Since we have been in the book of John, we are hopefully pretty familiar with the conflict in Jesus' last week that led to his crucifixion. This encounter in Mark is on Wednesday of Holy Week. Tuesday, the day before, he had cleared the temple in Jerusalem of money changers and made even greater enemies of the high priests, the Jewish religious leaders. It is these priests, jealous and scared of Jesus' influence, who send some Pharisees and Herodians to trap Jesus in his talk.

Pharisees and Herodians are interesting partners here. Pharisees hated the Roman occupation. The Romans had stripped them and their fellow Jews of their power and ability to rule themselves. Herodians were followers of Herod Antipas, the governor of Judea who had been placed there by... you guessed it, the Romans. They were loyal to Rome, whom the Pharisees despised. So why are they working together? To trap, to ensnare Jesus like an animal, so they can kill him because they both hate him.

When they are coming to Jesus, they try to appeal to Jesus' pride. A lesser man, a lesser God could be caught off guard or grateful for the flattery they provide. They call Jesus "true", "impartial to human opinion", "not swayed by appearances", and "truly teaching the way of God." The irony of course is that most of this is true. Despite their hatred of Jesus, they speak the truth about his authority and his truthfulness but he does care about their opinion. He addresses them based on what he knows of them from his divine knowledge of their hearts. We will see that in just a moment.

But I hope you see what I see in this whole section, that authority, proper or not, is always present. Every person defers to another authority or assumes authority for themselves. The Pharisees are the spiritual authority, Herodians are the civil authority, and Jesus is the divine authority. Jesus just wields his authority differently. He wields it justly and perfectly. Pharisees and Herodians wield it with hypocrisy and with selfish intent.

We should expect worldly authorities, who are NOT submissive to God's word, to abuse their power and operate as if their authority stretches as far as they can get away with. The Pharisees and Herodians banded together because they saw a rival authority and wished to squash it.

Politics always does this to us humans. When humans seek improper authority, it leads to strange alliances. Take for instance that many who call themselves liberal Christians can somehow find more in common politically with an atheist than with a conservative Christian. How can that be? Because they have redefined the word Christian to make themselves the type of Christians that atheists are okay with. They make themselves the authority about what Christ taught and therefore what a Christian can believe. I think it is fairly obvious that if a theist and atheist agree on something, we must consider two options for how that is possible.

First, the Christian is standing in the atheistic worldview. A Christian could be abandoning God and his rule and reign to essentially act as if God does not exist or does not matter or does not speak to a particular issue. These are the liberal Christians that I have been talking about.

Second, the Atheist is standing in the Christian worldview. The Atheist is borrowing, maybe without knowing it, the benefits of a world ordered by God. They agree with the Christian not based on the coherence of their worldview but based on Christian truth, God's truth. They are acting like Christians in ethics or political reasoning but do not worship Christ as king. This is why when atheists or any other non-Christian join us in celebrating the end of Roe vs Wade, we can be glad for that partnership because they are stepping in to recognize the biblical truth that the unborn are humans and worthy of life and equal protection under the law.

I hope its obvious to see that for the liberal Christian to abandon God is where the Pharisees find themselves. The Herods were known for their evil and immoral lives. The Pharisees chose them over Christ.

The challenge for us, when navigating political discussions or political positions is to decide ahead of time that you will not do the former. You will not abandon Christianity, abandon Christ, for the sake of political gains. Yet, you might find yourself in the latter where you can partner with an Atheist or a Muslim or another unbiblical worldview because for this issue, they agree with God although they do not honor him as God.

For the Pharisees, the Herodians and us, we have to recognize that authority is real. God is real and he decides what is true and how we are to live. The Bible assumes this and so must we.

This assumption that authority is real and some authority is proper leads us to ask “Which authority is highest and where does authority come from?”

Two – Levels of Authority

Read Mark 12:14b-17

The question itself is the trap that Mark warns us about.

For Jews the mere concept of the tax was offensive. In particular the poll-tax is based upon the census and is a tax directly to remind Jews that they are subjects of Rome. It wasn't a tax on their labor or their purchases but just 1 denarius per person per year. One day's wages. By requiring a tax of this sort, it meant every person must be recorded with the government as a sign that you do not rule your own lives. Rome does.

Now here comes the political part of the question. Would Jesus side with the Jews in opposition to the poll-tax, the person tax, or would he side with the Romans and be a traitor to his own people?

Again, the Herodians are important witnesses to this question. They are the Romans who would report back if Jesus was teaching treason against Rome. The challenge to Jesus is like the trap questions asked of Christians today.

The most recent trap questions are that of same-sex marriage and abortion. Every vaguely Christian politician and for that matter, every true Christian must have an answer to these questions. Your answer determines who carries the highest authority in your heart and mind. Does the Bible and therefore God determine what is right and wrong for sexual and moral behavior? Or do current political platforms or political arguments, or court precedent carry more authority?

Notice how Jesus responds. First, he uses his divine knowledge to discern their hypocrisy. I prefer it translated as insincerity. He knew they didn't care about his answer or how true it was, or impartial it was because they were just trying to flatter him. So, he challenges them, “**Why put me to the test?**” He challenges the concept but will brilliantly play along.

He asks for a denarius. The same coin that must be paid in the tax. Jesus didn't have one because Jews didn't carry them. They had inscriptions of Caesar's claims to divinity and even to be the highest priest.

They, I would suspect one of the Herodians would have carried one, dug one out and give it to Jesus. He then does a classic Jesus move. He asks a question. “**Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's**”

Now before we even get to the final statement, I want us to notice what is instructive for us when we get these types of questions. We can't do like Jesus did and know their heart, but we can ask questions to dig into why the question is being asked.

Proverbs 26:4-5 says in two ways, **do not answer a fool according to his folly**. The first reason we don't answer a fool is it makes us foolish too. The second, it gives the fool a reason to be prideful.

When you are asked questions about the Bible's stance on homosexuality, gender or abortion or any other hot topic issue, it is right to consider whether the person is asking a legitimate question or they are trying to trap you. If they are asking honestly to consider your answer, you should answer with kindness according to the word of God. If they are trying to trap you, you don't have to answer according to their terms. Jesus certainly doesn't. Ask questions to find out if ANY biblical answer we give will satisfy them. It takes wisdom to figure out what response is right for each circumstance but you are not required to spring the trap. You cannot answer dishonestly but you don't have to answer just to satisfy them in their folly.

They want Jesus to pick one or the other. Are you a radical Jew or a Roman loyalist? He is neither. Jesus' authority is higher than any political scheming and this is WHAT we see in his answer.

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

First, notice that this is NOT a radical separation of secular authority and divine authority. It's not a separation of church and state. What it does separate is two levels of authority. The highest level is what is mentioned second. It is intended to bind the first. Caesar has his, but God has what is higher. This is both in the grammar and implied. Is God even God if someone is higher than him? If the government has authority that God does not, is he even God? The creator of government cannot be locked out of what he has created. The greatest possible being cannot have an equal. By his nature as God, he is greatest and first.

Romans 13:1-7, what we read earlier, is the clearest teaching on this as it states that there is no authority except from God. Those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Who gave Caesar his crown and coin? God. Who gives police or judges their badge and gavel? God.

This is what we cannot miss. God is the supreme authority in all the universe and whether it comes in a question about a moral legislation or political structures, God's authority reigns above it all. He structures the world and gives us the ability to order it on his behalf. That is what politics means, the ordering of society. So how shall we order it?

Three – Spheres of Authority

Read Mark 12:17

I read that verse again because it doesn't just speak to levels of authority but also the distinct nature of God and Government. God gives government its mandate, but government DOES HAVE authority over you and me. What Jesus does not do is side with one or the other. He upholds them both as legitimate authorities. This is why they are amazed at him! He finds a way out of the trap! We can even break it down like this.

Caesar's image is on the coin. The coin is owned by the government along with the proper authority to tax and provide services paid for by those taxes. All of their work done to punish evil and keep order.

God's image is on people. We are created in his image so therefore he owns us and our lives, physically and spiritually we are his. We must render to him, pay to him what is owed, our whole selves.

So let us consider 3 spheres of authority. The church, the government and the family. We won't discuss the family much because it falls outside of my purposes this morning but it is vital to God's plan for ordering humanity.

These spheres are meant to serve their role and bring order to our world, restrain evil, and promote the flourishing of humanity during this age. If one sphere abandons or fails its task, the others may take up the slack but will never fulfill it as intended. The foster care system is a great example. Parents fail, government steps in, chaos and brokenness are seemingly extended rather than alleviated. I don't expect this system to be fixed without the role of the church and gospel proclamation to be the means of restoring the family through the heart transformation of parents and children.

Let's consider these spheres quickly and then wrap up. The first to consider is the church. This is the institution that Jesus gave his authority to. We spoke of it a few weeks ago that the church is meant to bind and loose here on earth so that people know the truth of God and how to live. The church wields the sword of the spirit. The great commandment, **Mark 12:29-31** and the great commission, **Matthew 28:19-20**, might be the easiest way to sum up the task of the church. As individuals and as a church, **love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself** (the great commandment). **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.** (The great commission) We are the church.

The second sphere is the government. It is appointed by God from what Romans 13, or **1 Peter 2:14** says is to **punish those who do evil** and restrain evil by bringing terror to the evildoers. The government is to be a servant of God and minister of taxes to provide protection. The government wields the sword of the law. Now it must be said that no government on earth lives up to its God given mandate, but neither does any church. The church is to deal with sin. The government with crimes. Almost every crime is a sin, but not every sin is a crime. Pride is one of the greatest sins tolerated and proliferated in the lives of men. It can lead to crime, but it is to be addressed by the church primarily.

The third sphere I will just mention is the family. Parents are given authority by God to raise and discipline children. Its explicit in the 10 commandments where children submit to and honor their parents, but it is implicit throughout scripture that the family is to do what the government cannot and the church should not have to. Raise children and disciple them. The family wields the rod of discipline.

As I conclude I want to speak to teenagers and young adults for a moment.

If or when you are OLD enough you will bear the responsibility to vote in civil elections. Our country does not seem to be becoming more stable and trustworthy but less. The nation seems more divided than ever. What do we do? We remember that we only give to government what it is owed. Do not give it any of God's authority in your life.

When it comes to our specific context right now, I want to say that you must vote and advocate for candidates, platforms and policies that are compatible with biblical Christianity. We don't expect to have candidates or laws to vote on that perfectly upholds the righteousness of God in every respect. We get our instructions on voting from the Scriptures, and vote in ways that allow us to live out our Christian convictions in public and private. The issues that you should consider: We must recognize life in the womb, the ability for Christians to worship/evangelize freely, to stand against the sexual revolution and simple to allow us to live quiet lives like 1 Timothy 2 teaches us. To engage like that is to avoid the trap on both extremes that government can save us or that government should have no authority.

Today I believe there are faithful ways to vote for candidates that hold to biblical convictions. For now. I don't think it will stay that way. With recent events and some up-and-coming conservative thought-leaders, I think Christians may be pushed out as political movements shift and we will not bow to recognize homosexual marriage. Prominent "conservative" politicians may one day decide it is no longer politically viable to support Christian biblical morality in its members or candidates. This is again why government and political power is a trap for Christians. We can get suckered in and think that this party or candidate aligns with us when we need to be much more concerned with whether we are aligned with God.

But today and every day until the Lord returns, we cannot and will not render to Caesar what is not Caesar's. God is owed our whole selves, not just the parts of us that aren't politically engaged.

As we consider each election, each political moment and biblical living we must consider the proper reality, level and spheres of authority if we are to weigh the important issues that you will face in your lifetime.

Older adults, do not become jaded and begin playing the game that compromise or partnership with evil is the only way forward. Stand with conviction and provide a bold witness for future generations to look at and say, they followed Jesus when Caesar demanded to follow him.