

## Mark 12:13-17 – Devoting Ourselves to God

### 1. Introduction

At the end of the bible, in Revelation 22:20, we hear the Lord Jesus say, **‘I am coming soon.’**

The response is one that resonates with all faithful believers in every age: **‘Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!’** The note of yearning is sharper in Revelation 6:10, where the souls of the martyrs cry out from under the altar, **‘Lord . . . how long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?’**

God is on the throne! But when will we see his rule, visible and glorious, over all things?

Although they were mistaken, you can understand why the disciples asked Jesus, after his resurrection, **‘Are you restoring the kingdom (Acts 1:6)?’** After all, he is the King! But after his return to his Father’s heavenly presence, his rule would be through the Spirit and the word, in the midst of the powers and peoples of this present evil age, gathering in believers from all nations and building them up in his kingdom until he returns at the end of the age.

In tonight’s passage from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus gives us perhaps his most famous piece of instruction for us as we ‘thread the needle’ of devotion to him as the King of kings, while living in obedience and service amid the authorities of this present world:

**‘Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’**

Often, when we hear this famous statement, we get caught up with what it means to give Caesar (or the Premier of Victoria, or the Australian Government . . . or Trump!) what is rightly Caesar’s. I would put it to you that the real challenge here is the second part: *giving God what is truly his*. As we pick through the minefield of different obligations, often competing with each other, ***there is nothing more necessary than our utter devotion to God, as he is known through Christ and his gospel***. As we know also from this passage, and from our own hearts, there is no more fatal enemy to this devotion than hypocrisy.

So I want us first to work through this encounter between Jesus and his opponents. Then we need to think through three key points:

- Confronting hypocrisy
- Giving Caesar his due
- Devoting ourselves to God

## 2. Explaining the passage

Opposition to Jesus has been growing, especially with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his cleansing of the Temple, and his grim assessment of the ruling authorities in the parable of the vineyard and its tenants (Mark 12:1-12).

This opposition takes an interesting twist in the passage before us. Have you heard of the grand diplomacy principle, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend'? That's what's happening here. Representatives of two parties bitterly opposed to each other – the **Pharisees** and the **Herodians** – were now united against the Lord Jesus.

- **Pharisees:** you're probably familiar with them already. Regarded (by themselves as much as by anyone else) as the guardians of the law of God and the piety of the people, they protested the Roman occupation of Judea, but kept respectable in terms of outward submission to their rule.
- **Herodians:** these were members of the Jewish upper classes that supported the Herodian dynasty, who were puppet-rulers under the Roman overlord. In that sense, they had made their peace with Rome.

These unlikely allies plotted to catch Jesus within a dilemma related to paying taxes to the Roman Caesar. The tax they refer to in their question to Jesus reveals the plot they were making. This was not any old tax, but literally, the 'census' tax, or a 'poll-tax' as it has been known in English.

What was this tax? *Everyone* under Roman rule, in all their provinces had to pay the poll-tax, which was probably about one silver denarius per person, per year. (One denarius was the average daily wage for a labourer). What's more, you *must* pay this tax with an imperial denarius, not local currency. The tax, and the coin you had to pay it in, sent a telling message: **you all belong to Caesar**. As such, in the eyes of many Jews, this tax was both a political and a theological challenge. It was essentially saying the land of Israel did not belong to the God of Israel, but to Rome. It was no longer covenant-land, but a lowly province of a distant imperial city.

In fact, in 6 AD, when Jesus was a young boy, Judas the Galilean led an armed revolt against the Romans over this tax, under the slogan, 'we cannot have mortal masters in place of God.' This became the mantra of the Zealot 'freedom-fighters' right through this period, leading ultimately to the Jewish war of the 60s that resulted in the total destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Now the dividing line between Pharisees and Zealots could get fuzzy – think of modern Islamist movements with their 'political' and 'terrorist' wings, or Sinn Fein/IRA. Nevertheless, having made an uncomfortable peace with Roman rule, the Pharisees thought they could join the Herodians in catching Jesus in the dilemma created by this poll-tax: is it lawful to pay?

**Is it lawful?** Before the law of God, that is, not just civil law. With protestations of his love for truth and justice, of impartiality towards all, they mask all the compromises they themselves have made with the *status quo* and they instead fashion a trap out of a question of duty towards God.

- If it is not lawful, then Jesus must say **NO**. Then, the Herodians can denounce him to the Romans as a dangerous rebel and the Pharisees can offer their support, all the while protesting their own ‘resistance’ credentials to the people.
- If it is lawful, then Jesus must say **YES**, and the Pharisees can ‘cancel’ him as a sell-out to the people even as the Herodians get a free pass.

What does Jesus do? **‘Knowing their hypocrisy’** – he begins with their heart. He then uncovers their heart: **‘Bring me a denarius to look at.’**

He doesn’t have the hated coin – but they do! In this simple act, he reveals the extent of their compromise, especially the Pharisees.

He draws them in further to make his point with the next question: **‘Whose image (or icon) and inscription is this?’** They must admit not only ‘Caesar’, but **‘Caesar’s’** – it *belongs* to him.

Roman coins were roughly similar in form to our own, except that Roman claims of divinity for their emperors rendered the coins as idolatrous in the eyes of pious Jews.

Having drawn them in, Jesus then gives his devastating response:

**‘Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’**

The use of ‘pay’ and ‘give’ in our translation confuses things a bit. In the original, the word used for ‘pay’ in the question from the Pharisees and Herodians gives a choice – a choice they’re trying to trap Jesus with. But in Jesus’ answer the word in the original used for ‘give’ gives no choice to them. It would be better translated as ‘pay back’, or ‘render’ as in the traditional version.

There’s no choice. The coin – and the tax it will pay - *belongs* to Caesar, so it *must* be returned to him. They tried to trap him; but Jesus shows everyone the *obligation* that binds them.

But that’s not all that binds them. They are also bound to the true and living God. That’s a frightening challenge for hypocrites. Those who claim the side of truth, of God’s law, of impartial justice – must now meet the holy God of truth, the Judge of all. They must *pay* him what is his right. And so must we.

No wonder they were **'utterly amazed'**! Jesus had not only avoided the trap, but he had revealed the hearts of his opponents, confronted their hypocrisy, and driven them and his hearers to face what they owe, not just to Caesar, but to the true and living God.

### **3. Confronting hypocrisy**

This passage is not a neutral discussion of the relationship between God's authority and human authorities. Jesus is confronting his enemies, and most of all he pinpoints their **hypocrisy**: they are **hypocrites**.

Hypocrites prize appearance over reality. They love holiness of 'face' rather than holiness of the heart. God has always hated hypocrisy. As the Lord laments in **Isaiah 29:13**: **'These people approach me with their speeches to honour me with lip-service, yet their hearts are far from me.'**

This applies not only to their own lives, but their view of God and his word. Stripped of all spiritual reality, even the law of God becomes a plaything of their own desires, to be used and abused for another agenda – a political one in this case. Hypocrisy is therefore a terrible form of unbelief that treats the true and living God as a mere cipher, a 'cardboard cut-out' God. It's one of the most dreadful works of the evil one, the father of all lies. Jesus knew this: **'why do you test me?'**

Jesus gives no allowance to their hypocrisy. Rather, he exposes it. He doesn't 'steel-man' his opposition, but rips the mask off their compromise. There is a time to be gracious, to attempt to find the best in a sincere question or argument, however flawed they might be. But never with hypocrisy. It is good – it is necessary – that he catch his opponents out.

We can debate and discuss the duties we owe to Caesar and to God as much as we like, but hypocrisy has already hollowed out our devotion to God – **give to God the things that are God's**.

And so hypocrisy is the great enemy of our devotion to God – not Caesar. Yes, balancing our obligations in this present age is difficult and requires wisdom; but above all it requires an undivided heart, sincere love and desire for God, a willingness to submit to him and have him as our true reward.

### **4. Giving back to Caesar**

In opposition to hypocrisy, Jesus bluntly states reality. He describes this age of the world as it is. There are obligations to Caesar, to human authorities. We must pay back to Caesar what is his. There are things that actually belong to him.

That can be confronting. It may offend our idealism. It may rub salt into the wounds of injustice and oppression. It may even outrage our sense that the honour of God should be upheld in all things. But in his wisdom and mercy, God has placed us in this present

age, with all the powers and authorities that he has set up, in order to be witnesses – even before kings (**Acts 9:15**). And as we do so, we must give them their due, even as we give ultimate loyalty to God himself.

Now, Jesus doesn't give much detail about what this looks like. But three things at least flow out from ***give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's***.

- Jesus is the king, but can still say his people must give Caesar what is owed to him. That means his rule and his kingdom is something entirely different.
- Jesus says to pay what Caesar *is owed*, not what Caesar *claims* or *desires*. Give him his coin, but not the idolatry of the icon and inscription on the coin. Human authorities often want to make themselves into little 'tinpot' gods – we don't play that game.
- Jesus commands a coin to be given to Caesar, not our hearts. Caesar may only demand things limited to our external lives, and even then only according to what is naturally right.

You see, as shocking as Jesus' words must have seemed to many of the Jews who heard him, he is actually strictly limiting what Caesar can demand here. He is putting earthly obligations in their proper place – and clearing a broad highway for us to rush onward and upward in our devotion to God.

Give Caesar his coin. Give the government their taxes, obedience to their laws, service in their courts, their agencies, their armies. But do not give Caesar ultimate love. Do not let your spiritual affections run out to these earthly powers rather than to the King of Kings.

Don't let your attention – or your fear – be enslaved to politics and governments. I was amused by a quote I read this week from a journalist's son: 'Why does Grandpa watch the news if he doesn't *like* the news?' Put the threats of government as well as their promises, their oppression as well as their benefits, in their proper place. Get up, go to your room, open the window, and pray three times a day!

## **5. Giving ourselves to God**

Here is the final answer to hypocrites – and a challenge to all who follow Jesus.

You give the coin to Caesar; now give yourselves to God. That is what he deserves, and what you owe to him.

A coin has an 'icon', or image of Caesar. But you are *the image-bearers of God himself*. You belong to him, body and soul, present and future. Caesar cannot compare as a rival – he owes God worship too.

And what does God require of you? Worship, trust and service. How can you give this, rebels that you are? Only in the Lord Jesus Christ: **'This is my beloved Son; listen to him (Mark 9:7)!**

How can you even begin to compare Caesar, or any earthly ruler, to King Jesus? The foundation of his kingdom is in his incarnation – in his own person, joining our human nature to divinity. God becomes man, humbles himself, defeats the worst of enemies – sin, death and the devil – at the cross, gains unparalleled victory in the resurrection, now rules all things by his Spirit. Have you ever thought that what you owe God – yourselves – has in Jesus been taken up into inexpressible glory! You must surrender yourselves to him, yet he takes you up into eternal blessing! He does not simply give you good things, but the Good. He is not only right and true, but the Truth. He does indeed sustain your lives, but only because he is Life.

And if God requires you to turn away from your sin and put your faith in the Lord Jesus for salvation, then how can you refuse what you owe him? Not a coin with an image of a king, but to receive the Spirit, to restore the image of the true King in you!

To pay God in faith and repentance is then also to take Jesus as your king right now, in the midst of this world. He extends his rule, by his word and Spirit, further and deeper into this present age. You were able to come here tonight because of the peace and order that 'Caesar', under God, has provided; but this time, this worship, this gathering, does not belong to Caesar. You came into a building that conforms to all the necessary regulations; but there is no Victorian legislation for the living temple of God being reared in this place – that is who you are. The word goes out tonight, and it is the word not of Caesar, but of King Jesus. The sacraments we celebrate are his signs. The fellowship we enjoy springs from his Spirit. The discipleship, the nurture of your children in the faith, the service of love flowing through your loves – none of this belongs to any earthly authority, but to the Lord Jesus alone.

Will you pay God what you owe him? Will you hate hypocrisy, be patient and faithful amid the powers of this present age, do good to all, pay your dues, but most of all, repent of your sin and believe in the Son of God, your true king?

May God by his Spirit, through his Son, give us new hearts, to serve him even in the complexities of this present world, and to devote ourselves utterly to his service.