

Mark 12:13-17

April 28, 2019

Taxes, Taxes, Taxes. Now there's a word that is never fun to hear. All of us have to pay them but none of us enjoys doing so. It was only a few short weeks ago that we all had to file our income taxes with both the federal and the state government. Some of us had to pay. Some of us received a refund for overpaying.

But why do we need to pay taxes at all you might wonder.

Well perhaps this little interchange between Uncle Sam and someone we'll call Taxpayer Joe can help explain.

Sam: Hey Joe, you owe us money. It's called taxes!

Joe: How much? How much do I owe?

Sam: Oh Joe, you have to figure that out.

Joe: So then, can I just pay what I want?

Sam: Oh no Joe, my friendly IRS agents know exactly how much you owe. But you still have to figure out how much that is.

Joe: And what if I get it wrong?

Sam: Oh no problem Joe, if you get it wrong, you just go to prison!

That's right... prison!

When people don't pay their taxes. When they don't pay what they owe the government...very bad things can happen.

And that's what we will discover today as we rejoin our trek with Jesus on his journey thru the gospel of Mark.

What we owe the government is very important, but what we owe the One who established that government is even more so.

Please join me in the reading of Mark 12:13-17 in the English Standard Version

And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.

And they came and said to him, "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. Is it lawful to pay taxes to

Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"

But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." And they brought one. And he said to them, "**Whose likeness and inscription is this?**" They said to him, "Caesar's."

Jesus 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.

Now, it is important to remember where we are in the timeline of Mark.

It's been a few short days since Jesus first entered Jerusalem to shouts of "**Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**" Mark 11:9b

It's Passover time, one of the most important Jewish holidays of the year. And this go around Jesus seems to be the main attraction. After his "triumphal entry", Jesus has managed to cleanse the temple courts of all merchants and overturned the tables of all moneychangers (Mark 11:15). Up until now he has publically outwitted everyone who has challenged his authority. The first attempt to do so was from the

chief priests, the scribes and the elders (Mark 11:27). You can read about how that encounter went down starting in Mark 11:27. Essentially, Jesus exposed their true motives thru means of a parable. It became obvious to them and everyone listening that through this parable he was characterizing them as wicked tenants who were intent on killing the “beloved son” in order to usurp his inheritance (Mark 12:6-7). They perceived that he had told this parable against them and so they left him and went away (Mark 12:12) pondering what to do next.

They had to catch him somehow. They had to snare him in some sort of trap.

The Trap is Set

“Where is this rabble-rouser from?” the chief priests likely asked the scribes and elders. “He’s from Galilee, that territory ruled by Herod and his ilk.” “We’ve heard plenty of stories about him from the Pharisees. They don’t care much for Jesus, either. They’ve had Jesus in their sites for a long time, ever since he blatantly healed a man on the Sabbath right in front of them.

And Jesus said, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held council with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (Mark 3:5b-6)

So why not let the Pharisees and the Herodians at him? They've been scheming to catch him for a very long time.

And so the leaders of Jerusalem enlisted the leaders of Galilee (the Pharisees and Herodians) to do just that, to entrap him in his words (Mark 12:13).

But how would they lure him? How would they draw his attention? By flattering him of course. Listen to these words of insincerity,

"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." (Mark 12:14a).

Every sentiment of those words is true, but the fact that they come from a group of people intent on Jesus' demise, makes them ring hollow. Jesus sees right thru them and the gospel writer makes sure we do too.

Having buttered him up by telling Jesus what they think he wants to hear, they zing him with a pair of carefully crafted questions: (from Mark 12:14b)

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

Should we pay them or should we not?

Now how is this a trap? How can this pair of questions bring Jesus down? We'll in the minds of the Pharisees and Herodians there were only two answers to these questions, "Yes" or "No".

If Jesus answers, "Yes, pay your taxes", the crowds listening in to this very interchange would be rather disappointed and would certainly turn on him. For here was the one they had greeted with shouts of "Hosanna" just a few days before siding with their Roman overlords, and not plotting their overthrow. In fact if Jesus exhorted the crowd to pay their taxes they just might riot and kill him right then and there.

But if Jesus went the other way answering, "No, do not pay taxes", a full on revolt against Rome might ensue and the authorities would have something to hang on him. People who don't pay taxes go to prison at the very least and those who incite crowds to do so are likely to end up dead sooner than later.

So whether he answers yes or no, Jesus is trapped! The end of his ministry is at hand. Or so they think!

But surprise, surprise, Jesus has an answer for them. "Why put me to the test? (Mark 12:15) he asks exposing their motives. Their flattery has not fooled

him. He sees their hypocrisy and is ready to expose it even more. Looking straight at them he says, “**Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.**”

That was a rather awkward request to make of Pharisees who were not big proponents of Roman rule. From their point of view the denarius was essentially an “unclean” coin and not something they would want to be seen carrying around.

But thankfully the Herodians were nearby to bail them out. The Herodians owed their very existence to Rome’s benevolence and their entire rule was built upon the collection of taxes and coins such as the denarius. So in short order, they produced one for Jesus’ to examine.

Whose likeness and inscription is this?



As Jesus took a look at both sides of the coin tossed his way he would have noticed several striking features.

- First there was a distinct image of the reigning Caesar, Roman nose and all.
- Second there was an inscription that translates "Tiberius Caesar son of the Divine Augustus"
- And on the back side there was another inscription that translates "The highest priest"

So with a pair of blasphemous inscriptions declaring this Roman ruler to be both the son of a god and the highest of priests, it would seem appropriate for the true Son of God and great high priest to publically denounce such evil proclamations. Or at least that was what his enemies were hoping.

But does Jesus fall for this trap? No. Rather than play into their hands he responds with another question and turns the entire interrogation back on them.

Whose image and inscription is this? (Mark 12:16b)

"Caesar's" they reply.

Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. (Mark 12:17a)

With one stunning statement he silences his enemies and puts them and everyone else listening in their place.

The blasphemous inscriptions of Caesar are no threat to Jesus. For Caesar owes his very throne, indeed his very existence to the one true God. Listen to what the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans.

For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Romans 13:1

Caesar's authority is a derivative of God's authority. God has instituted Caesar's very rule and reign. That makes Caesar subject to God.

And furthermore, Jesus, the very Son of God has authority over Caesar too. Caesar may not know it yet, but he too is subject to the God who has created him and to the Son of God through whom he and all other things were created.

And that includes Christ's enemies, especially the Pharisees and Herodians. Notice how Jesus has turned the tables on them. He is the one issuing the commands not them. He is the one telling them to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. He is the one left standing. They are the ones left speechless and amazed. Jesus has spoken with an

authority they know to be true and one they cannot resist.

For not “rendering to Caesar” is tantamount to not obeying God...and disobedience to God is not a good thing.

And this same command has application for us today. Just as the people of Jesus’ day were to submit to their governing authorities, so must we.

Pagan historians of the first century declared Tiberius Caesar to be cruel, wicked, full of debauchery and a total disgrace of a ruler. Some modern historians have made similar statements regarding today’s rulers. But that does not negate the fact that God has installed them and granted them authority over our lives “as God’s servant for your good” (Romans 13:4a).

Regardless of the character of our leaders, the clear command of Christ remains... “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and...”

Render to God the things that are God’s.

And it is to this often-overlooked follow-on command that we now draw our attention. For of the two “render to” statements this one is by far the most important.

When the Pharisees and Herodians posed their questions to Jesus they intentionally left all mention of God off the table. They just wanted to get Jesus to take a stand for or against Caesar's taxation so they could in effect take him out of circulation.

But here is Jesus bringing God into the equation, front and center. Not only are we to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's ... we are to render to God the things that are God's.

Note the parallelism here. The two statements are so similar and yet they are clearly not the same. Caesar is no God. He is a creation of God, a subject of God, a servant of God. But Jesus wants his audience to infer something about God from his statement about Caesar.

His logic goes something like this:

- Things exist that bear the likeness and inscription of Caesar, (namely coins).
- Therefore Caesar has the right to demand that those things be rendered (or given back) to him.
- Likewise, things exist that bear the likeness and inscription of God.
- Therefore God has the right to demand that those things be given back to him.

In other words, we must render (or give back) to God whatever these things are that bear God's likeness and inscription. Why? We must do so because just as Caesar's image bearing coins belong to Caesar, so God's image bearing people belong to God. They are his.

But who are these image bearing people?

The Pharisees would have known the answer to that question. As experts in the Torah (or law) of God they would have known the words of the creation story by heart. Words that read like this:

Then God said, let us make man in our image, after our own likeness.

So God created man in his own image,
In the image of God he created him,
Male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26a, 27

So according to Genesis every man and every woman has been created in the image of God. That makes every human who has ever lived an image bearer of the Lord God.

Just as Caesar's coins bear an image or likeness of Caesar, so

- Every human being bears the image of God.
- Every human being reflects the nature of God.
- Every human being has the capacity to recognize, acknowledge and worship God
- But at the most fundamental level every human being was created by and belongs to God.

And this is what Jesus was driving at when he told the Pharisees and Herodians to render to God the things that are God's.

He was reminding them to whom they belonged. They were image bearers who belonged to God, and as such they owed God something...something much more important than what they owed to Caesar. They owed their very lives, their very souls, and their very hearts to the one and only Creator.

When you stop and think about it this is a rather remarkable demonstration of grace on the part of Jesus. Here he is being challenged by two groups of people who are conspiring to trap him in his words and put an end to his ministry. They are literally bent on his destruction.

And how does he respond? Does he cut them off at the knees and waste them on the field of battle. No. Rather he exposes their hypocrisy, corrects their faulty ways of thinking and offers them a chance to change.

Render to God the things that are God's Oh Pharisees.
Render to God the things that are God's Herodians.

Jesus is pleading with them to repent before it's too late.

And so it is with us.

We too bear the image and inscription of God. We too are called to render to God the things that are God's.

So how about you?

What of yours have you been holding back from God?
What have you not rendered to him?

Is it your anxiety?

Are you worried about things beyond your control?

Do they wear you down, exhaust you and make you sad? If so render to God the cares that are God's for he cares for you.

What about your anger? Are you irritated by your circumstances? Have life's injustices made you bitter and resentful of God and the people he's put in your path? If so render to God all the wrath that is God's and experience the peace that surpasses all understanding.

What about your cravings? Are you addicted to things that lead you astray, that waste your time and hasten your destruction? If so render to God your cravings that aren't God's and experience how much he loves you.

Yes, we belong to God because we bear his image. But like the Pharisees and Herodians before us we have difficulty giving ourselves whole-heartedly to God. That's because the image of God that we bear is a tarnished one. It has been corrupted by sin. Like our father Adam before us, we have all gone astray. We have each chosen to go our own way. In fact, we are unable to render to God what is rightfully his. If left to our own devices, we like the Pharisees and Herodians, would rather marginalize Jesus than submit to him. We would rather do it our way than give back to God what is rightfully his.

But there is another way, one right there in front of us, one that the Pharisees and Herodians apparently could not see, although they got a pretty good glimpse.

Marvel at Him

For at the very end of our text, after Jesus evaded their trap and turned the tables upon them, the Pharisees and Herodians had only one response:

“They marveled at him” (Mark 12:17b)

What were they marveling at? The one whom they had sought to destroy had just outwitted them, outsmarted them and outmaneuvered them.

Perhaps they were marveling at his remarkable wisdom. For just as Isaiah had prophesied so many years earlier, Christ’s understanding and spot-on knowledge were certainly on display.

**And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit of council and might,
The Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
Isaiah 12:2**

But recognizing the phenomenal wisdom and knowledge of Christ alone does not rescue us from our predicament. We are still unable to render to God all the things that are God’s simply by acknowledging Jesus’ superior wit and wisdom.

There is much more to marvel at. There is much more to be amazed by. Do you see it? Do you see him for who he really is? The Apostle Paul tells us that:

“The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”
2 Corinthians 4:4

Did you see that? We are not the only ones who bear the image of God. Jesus does too! But his image is far superior to ours.

- Our image of God is tarnished. His is pristine.
- Our image of God is corrupt. His is perfect.
- Our image of God is stained by sin. His is pure and blameless.

Whose image and inscription is he?

He's the spotless image of the invisible God, the exact representation of his nature. Yet he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philip 2:6-8)

Yet he did not stay dead. God raised him up and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places where he always lives to make intercession for us.

Oh...Do you see it church? There is so much to marvel at, so much to be grateful for and so much reason to put your trust in Jesus.

And not only that:

When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. And all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

(2 Corinthians 3:16,18)

Do you see it? Gazing upon Jesus transforms our tarnished image of God into Christ's perfect image.

When Mark 12:17 says that the Pharisees and Herodians marveled at him, did they really see him in this transforming way?

Mark gives no indication of any further response. For this is the last time he mentions either the Pharisees or the Herodians in his gospel. For both groups it is their end game.

But Jesus will go on to willingly die on a cross in a few days, and a few days after that he will rise from the dead and start building his church.

That's where we come in. He's given us a chance to marvel at him in a transforming way.

Those of us who are anxious can rest in the fact that we can truly cast all our cares upon him because he is close at hand and will take care of it.

Those of us who are angry can rest in the assurance that God will right all wrongs at the proper time and most especially forgive the ones that we have caused.

And those of us who are caught in the trap of craving bad things can discover someone far more desirable... someone who is better than any treasure and worth selling out for...indeed, someone to love above all else.

...For this one worth loving is Jesus. He is the one who has given us the way to render to God all the things that are God's.

-PRAY