

Paying Taxes

Mark 12:13-17

June 17, 2020

Read Mark 12:13-17

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

Happy Father's Day!

Karl Barth is famous for having exhorted pastors to “preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” I suppose we should update that to, “preach with the Bible in one hand and your smartphone apps in the other.”

It is tough out to follow this exhortation these days. Between the pandemic and the social unrest, it can be difficult to hear the gospel. Not seeing your faces, not hearing your voices, this sanctuary can feel set off and far away from the real world that we all are experiencing. And outside of this sanctuary, many people are acting as if God has abandoned his creation and has left it up to all of us to figure out how to manage things. For them, Jesus is a nice idea, but not particularly relevant when we get to talking about all the injustice, problems, and challenges of living in this world day-to-day.

Does God care about his creation? Do ordinary day-to-day things matter?

We pick up the narrative in Mark at a point where Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God seems set off and far removed from the real world that *he* was encountering. In our sermon a couple of weeks ago, these authorities confronted Jesus on the way into the temple, demanding to know who had given Jesus authority to do the things he was doing. Jesus engaged them, ordered them to answer a question he asked (which they refused to do), and he then refused to answer them. Then, in last week's sermon, he told a parable against the temple authorities – a work of judgment regarding their hard hearts – and those verses concluded, “they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

They went away, but they were not done.

This persistent hard-heartedness was what Jeremiah was describing. The leaders were literally reliving the attitude of “We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.” The conspiratorial efforts to destroy Jesus – their plots against him – sound exactly like what they said in Jeremiah's day, “Then they said, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words.”

Remember: the religious authorities were frightened by the revolutionary tone of Palm Sunday. They were furious about Jesus' overturning tables in the marketplace, cleansing the temple. He was not subject to their control. He did not play by their rules. He did not seem to be concerned about their authority or power. The longer he persisted, the more likely they were going to be drawn into

something that would have catastrophic consequences for their lives and livelihoods. The one thing they could not conceive – could not even entertain – was that Jesus was who he said he was. Thus, they were challenging and attacking Jesus, trying to lead him into an error that would de-rail the movement that brought him into the temple.

When we talk about the religious authorities and the players in this particular drama, we sometimes think of them as being of one mind. That was not the case. Yes, they all opposed Jesus; but that was about the extent of their agreement. In fact, their opposition was remarkable in that it truly was the one thing upon which they could find common ground.

Who were the players?

There are two different groups mentioned in these verses. There are the Pharisees and the Herodians. It might help to think of these two groups as political parties. Each was vying for power. They had foundationally different perspectives on what was best and how to achieve their best. The best way to illustrate the tensions among them is to use current American politics (with the explicit understanding that this is not intended as a one-to-one exact matching):

- **The Pharisees** were like the Democrats and protestors. Ordinarily, we would think of the Pharisees as ultra-conservative; but stylistically, in these events their political behavior is more recognizable in the Democrats. If President Trump or the Republicans suggest something, it is obviously wrong. No matter what Jesus said or did, it was wrong. If things do not meet the rules and regulations they have worked so hard to institute – and the President and Republicans seem focused on undoing those – then it must be wrong. For the Pharisees, if something wasn't their idea or specifically Moses' 613 commands, they were against it. That is, they were against it unless it was something out of their own tradition also called "the tradition of the elders" – in which case they were happy to follow their own rules rather than obey the commands of God. They were anti-Rome, and anti-authority that Rome had instituted. They were looking for a cataclysmic messianic kingdom to remove the rule of the Romans and Herod.
- **The Herodians** were more like the Republicans. Again, ordinarily, we would think of Herod and his allies as less conservative socially and more conservative politically. However, President Trump and Herod may have more in common than we would probably care to dwell on. Their morality shocked the conscience of many of the people they were called to govern. They both were prolific builders. The Herodians were the people who supported Herod. Whether they agreed with him or not, they desired his favor and were afraid of his wrath. They did not fight the Roman rule because Herod was dependent upon the Romans.

You might remember we talked about Herod and the Pharisees back at the beginning of May. In Mark 10, the Pharisees used the opportunity of being in Philippi – Herod's area – to ask Jesus a question about divorce. Then, like now, he saw right through their ploy.

Mark had reported how Herod married Herodias, who had been his brother Philip's wife. The problem was that Philip was still alive at the time. In other words, Herodias had deserted her husband and divorced him – presumably under Roman law, because women did not have that right under the Law of Moses.

Herod, for his part, had divorced his wife. Herod's divorce led to war. Herod's ex-wife was the daughter of the king of Nabatea. She went home, told her father what happened. Her father, insulted, got angry and attacked. If Rome had not intervened to stop the war over Herod's divorce, Herod probably would have lost the kingdom.¹

So at that point divorce was the presenting question, but there was something much more sinister afoot. The same thing is true in our verses today.

To appreciate the scale of their concern, it is worth noting that the Pharisees and Herodians were sent together. Realizing how odd that arrangement was, let's go to our text and look at what happened. The plan devised for the Pharisees and the Herodians was to trap Jesus with a question that could *only* get him in trouble.

Before they asked, however, they tried to butter him up, as if they were seeking information. "Teacher," they said, giving him a title of respect, "we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one" – in other words, you are not beholden to anyone. They went on, "[You] teach the way of God in accordance with truth." Really? That was what they believed? That was what they thought? That would not pass the straight-face test – no one standing nearby would have believed they meant a word of it; least of all, Jesus. Nonetheless, with that setup, they then lowered the boom (or so they thought) with the big question, "Do we pay tribute to Rome, or not?"

How could Jesus answer? If, on the one hand, he were to respond by saying not to pay taxes, he would have followed in the footsteps of another revolutionary years before who had protested paying taxes to Rome. The Romans mercilessly put down that protest, leaving crosses all over the country with dead men as a warning to others that paying taxes to Rome was not negotiable. On the other hand, if he were to say, "Pay the tax," Jesus would be siding with Rome and – for all intents and purposes – would be saying that there was no power in the kingdom of heaven he was proclaiming. Nifty trick question, eh?

Look at what Jesus did. Jesus responded by not answering. Instead, he asked for a coin. When they produced the coin, they were showing that they themselves handled the currency for paying taxes. Second, he asked them, "Whose image is on this coin (that you had yourselves)?" They had to admit, "The emperor's." and showed their hypocrisy, "Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor; give to God what is God's." In other words, if the currency is so odious, why do you have it and would you not be better to get rid of it? Give Roman cash to the emperor; give your heart, soul, mind and strength to the Lord.

What Do We Do With Jesus' Answer?

It was a great answer. It stopped the Pharisees and the Herodians in their tracks. It confounded them. It diffused their potentially dangerous scheme. It showed Jesus' wisdom; and it showed that he was not blind to the act his opponents were using to fool him. And, all of that said, we have to wonder, is there anything more to this that Mark wanted us to see?

I think there is more to see.

¹ Craig Evans, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 34B, *Mark*, p. 82.

Jesus asked for a coin. He did not pretend that the question of taxes was not important. He did not dismiss it as too worldly. He did not treat it as if it were beneath his dignity to answer. He did not deny its reality, as if the Kingdom of God he had been teaching was ethereal and spiritual but not material. In short, Jesus' request for the coin was an affirmation of the material world in which we live. It was a validation that what happens here and now matters.

Give to the emperor the things that belong to the emperor.

The first part of Jesus' response was that abiding by the law of the State was not necessarily inconsistent with obedience to God. Paying taxes could be a part of that.

God's creation includes the things we consider mundane and unimportant. It includes the things that annoy, frustrate, and impose. We are part of a culture and part of a society that has a government. Yes, governments can seem mundane and unimportant. They can annoy, frustrate, and impose. Yet, Jesus affirmed the right of governments to exist and the right of governments to make demands on individuals. By the way, the question was specific about paying taxes to Rome; the temple leaders had no hesitation about the validity of requiring Jews to pay the temple tax.

Our faith does not eliminate our participation in the day-to-day things of our world. We are not exempt from community life because we belong to a family of faith. We are not relieved of our mutual obligations of voting and taxes and compliance with local statutes because we are citizens of the kingdom of God. There are things that worldly governments do that do not violate the law of God. There are things that worldly governments do that benefit us. There are things that worldly governments do that we disapprove and condemn, but the point is that Jesus did not cast good citizenship as automatically disloyal to God.

I am phrasing things carefully here because Jesus' response was not really an answer to their question, but a continued expression of judgment. We are going to get to that in a moment, but Jesus' response was notably ambiguous in its application. He said there were things that belonged to emperor, but he did not specify what or to what extent. Thus, he made an affirmative statement, "Give to the emperor the things belonging to the emperor," but I can only really apply it using a double-negative, "Paying taxes is not dis-loyal to God."

Mark may have included this episode in the gospel – remember, he did not include *everything* Jesus said and did, but picked and chose things that would teach and proclaim Jesus – Mark may have included this episode in the gospel for the benefit of his first readers in the early church in Rome. How should they understand the requirements of living in the capitol of the Roman Empire? To what extent were they obliged to conform and to what extent were they obliged to defy? One commenter put it this way,

If Caesar asks for what belongs to God, not to Caesar, they could not give it, for conscience sake. So Christians died for refusing to give a pinch of incense to Caesar's statue. In the same way, Christians suffer in our day for refusing to bow before pictures of emperors and dictators and presidents. We cannot worship person, party or state, but only God himself.²

² Alan Cole, *New Bible Commentary, Mark*, p. 967.

This ambiguity is at play right now in our own situation. Are congregations bound to abide by the government's restrictions on gatherings? Some congregations are holding in-person services in defiance of the government's restrictions because they are insisting on asserting their constitutional rights. They argue that our First Amendment constitutional freedoms are not subject to State rule. Further, they argue that the standards are being inconsistently applied because protests are allowable. Now, both of those things are accurate; but are either really the point?

Friends, the question about the government's role in restricting and/or allowing church worship is *not* the primary driver of our determination of if, when, and how to resume in-person Sunday morning services. We are not being asked to worship the State. We are not being prohibited from praising God and presenting the gospel – as I hope and pray these videos are doing. Evangelism and outreach remains the personal work for each of us – in our phone calls, texts, e-mails, video-conferences, and all the other ways we are connecting, are we bearing witness faithfully and loving others as God has loved us? For us the driving question regarding in-person services is, “How is the LORD leading us to shepherd this congregation at this time?” The church has never been about the building. For this time period, we are shepherding this flock over some unfamiliar terrain, but it is not permanent and we will find pasture to enjoy together.

In other words, it is not dis-loyal to God to act consistently with the State's Phase 2 guidelines.

Give To God What Is God's.

The back part of Jesus' response is actually the more important and the more convicting. **“Give to God what is God's.”** On paper, that seems simple. We agree. On paper, that seems like a terrific response for Jesus to give to his opponents because it deflected both sides of the horns of the dilemma upon which they were attempting to hoist him. Yes, we should give to God what belongs to God.

But what belongs to God?

Does this mean tithing? Not exactly. If it meant tithing, the Pharisees could put a dollar figure on it. No, giving to God what belongs to God means *more* than tithing.

In context, the parallel Jesus was drawing was this: if the things that bear the image of Caesar belonged to the emperor, then the things that bear the image of God belong to God. Giving to God what belongs to God is more comprehensive than tithing. Humans are created in the image of God. We belong to God. Therefore, we are to give ourselves to God. We are not to focus on our rights; rather, we are to focus on what is right in God's eyes.

A different commenter noted this:

In a world dominated by sectarian divisions Jesus announced a decidedly inclusive principle: whatever bears God's image belongs to God. This would have been a particularly troublesome idea for the Pharisees, who were obsessed with keeping the Promised Land holy. The basic meaning of holiness is belonging to God, and their passion for it was evident in the countless things they did to keep themselves, their temple and their land pure and undefiled. The Jesus we meet in this Gospel, however, defined holiness in terms that come from the creation of the world. For him holiness was not fundamentally a

matter of personal, ethnic or cultic purity. **It was essentially a commitment to extend the rule of God to everyone and everything that belongs to God.**³

Think about the implications of that understanding in today's world. We live in a time of upheaval, where the issues of injustice and unrighteousness are forefront. Yet, there seems to be an absence of answers – due to the unwillingness of humanity to heed God's call in this respect, "Give to God what belongs to God." Our efforts at autonomy are failing and dividing and destroying. The issues are being cast in categories: race, sexual orientation, economic disparity. None of those are ultimate. No resolution will come based on these categories in a world of scarce resources and self-interest. We can and should improve, but cannot grant any of these things ultimate importance. The only – and I mean only – solid rock foundation is Jesus. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. There will come a day when every knee will bow – every knee; believers and non-believers alike – every knee *will* bow and every tongue *will* confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Giving to God what belongs to God means striving to extend the rule of God to everyone and everything that belongs to God. It means righting wrongs. It means addressing injustice. It means feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner. It means intentionally living, working, acting, and speaking to fulfill the commission Jesus gave, "Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Giving to God what belongs to God means extending the rule of God to everyone and everything.

Does God care about his creation? Do ordinary day-to-day things matter? Yes. They matter deeply to God. God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have eternal life. If it matters that much to God, it matters that much to us.

Amen.

Questions:

1. Is there a difference between being a Christian in America and being an American Christian?
2. How do you discern between: a) giving the emperor what belongs to the emperor; and, b) giving to God what belongs to God? How do you decide? How far are you willing to be pushed or challenged on that?
3. How are you "extending the rule of God to everyone and everything" in your daily life? What are the ways you are doing so? What are the ways you struggle? What would help move from struggle to conformity with God's call?

³ Ronald J. Kernaghan, IVP New Testament Commentary, *Mark*, p. 232.