

“Rendering Unto Caesar”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 8/4/19
Mark 12:13-17, at FBC of Newport, NH

// 13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. 14 They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” 16 They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

17 Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

And they were amazed at him. //

—Mark 12:13-17 (NIV)

I must confess, even though I’ve heard this a hundred times, I still get a certain sense of awe as I picture Jesus confounding the Pharisees and Herodians as he answers their question and avoids the poisonous results they intended. Most of you know this question was supposed to have no good answer for Jesus. If he said people should pay the imperial tax to Rome, then the Pharisees would have reported him to make the majority of Israel angry with him for they hated Rome and resented this tax. It wasn’t an ordinary tax that everyone pays equally. It was a tax only for the subjugated nations, not for the Romans. It was a way of squeezing the riches out of a nation and sending them off to Rome. But if Jesus said the Jews should not pay the tax, then he would have been reported by the Herodians for incitement against Rome—those Pharisees and Herodians were ready either way.

Yet Jesus amazes everyone, including his enemies. (And they are “enemies” for this is not an honest intellectual debate in pursuit of truth; this is a verbal assault in hopes of getting Jesus in enough trouble to get him killed.)

What is amazing is that Jesus answers their question by getting them to participate in the first part of it themselves by identifying Caesar’s image on the coin and that Caesar therefore should get what’s his. Then Jesus completes the invisible, most important part of the answer himself. He points to God as deserving to get what’s his as well. This is clearly greater than that of Caesar. In fact, Caesar himself would be owing God in the larger scheme of things. Like the old joke about the guy who said he could make a man out of dirt just like God did. So God says, “Go ahead, make my day.” The guy starts to gather up some dirt, whereupon God stops him and says, “Get you’re own dirt.”

End of that discussion.

And we could end the sermon right here as well. The story is clear. The Pharisees, the Herodians and even Rome are the losers here. Jesus wins. But of course there's more to consider, here and in the passage following this as well.

What I want us to focus on right now is to consider the frustration of the people in the crowd at the time of this confrontation. This question was not only raised before Jesus. It was a hot button issue of the day and nobody had a satisfactory answer for it. Let me list the main groups of people living in Israel at this time and how they handled this question.

We'll start with the easy one first. The **Romans**. They answered the question by saying it was absolutely right and they demanded this tax be paid or else there would be severe consequences. They backed up their position with the most powerful army in the world. Then again, they didn't really answer the question. They're the ones who started it in the first place.

After this there's the **Herodians**. Yes, they would say. It's right to pay this tax to the Romans. He would even help them collect it. This is how Herod got to be appointed by the Romans as king over Israel in the first place. It had nothing to do with the blood line of David. It had only to do with money and power politics. And staying in power by rewarding his followers with that power so long as they were loyal to him.

The **Pharisees** were of the opposite opinion. No. They did not think they should pay the tax to Rome, but they knew if they didn't they would be crushed by this superpower. So they paid it begrudgingly. Then they made their focus not so much on political power, but on influence among the common people. They just saw the tax as buying them time so the Romans would leave them alone.

They sought religious purity by way of the Law of Moses and the prophets. In their zeal they kept a fence of extra laws around Moses' laws figuring that way they would never come close to breaking the more important ones. But all that really accomplished was to create an impossible burden on the ordinary people, as well as on themselves. They were, however, the makers of these extra laws, so they could tailor them to their own benefit and keep up the appearance of righteousness. They believed in the resurrection, the afterlife, the spiritual realm of angels and demons and they saw all the OT scriptures as God's inspired authority. In a sense, you might say they turned the Law of God into a kind of tax on the people, burdening them and bringing benefits back on the Pharisees.

These are the two main representations of such groups in this passage. So it's interesting that it was the Herodians and the Pharisees getting together to present this question to Jesus. Normally they would be enemies. But here they could agree and be ready to trap Jesus from either way he answered.

But there are other groups to consider in the background as well.

The **Sadducees**. They would have said Yes as well, and been less begrudging than the Pharisees. The Sadducees were fairly well off financially and they had a lot of influence over Jerusalem and power over the temple. (The Pharisees' influence had more to do with the common people and the

Synagogues.) They held the majority in the Sanhedrin and all the chief priests and high priests were Sadducees. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, nor in angels and demons. Some say they didn't believe in an afterlife at all, but there's indication they at least believed in Sheol for all the dead. Their limitations of belief came in part because they only accepted the books of Moses as inspired. They also, being rich and fairly well off in life, didn't have as much concern for what came next. Life was pretty good for them now. That's what mattered to them. So, yah, they'd pay that tax and carry on.

The **Zealots**. These guys would shout No! No one in Israel should be paying that tax. They probably didn't have much to pay it with in the first place, but it was the principle of the whole thing that bothered them the most. Israel should simply not be under such domination by the Romans. And people should fight in every way possible to get out from that domination. Not only did they hold this view, but they would hold knives as well. They would kill Roman soldier every chance they could get. They were the terrorist organization of the day.

It is noteworthy that one of the apostles was a Zealot. (The other Simon besides Simon Peter.) Luke identifies him as such in both his Gospel (6:15) and in Acts (1:13). Though I'm sure he no longer endorsed or engaged in that kind of political campaign.

Then there's the **Essenes**. They aren't mentioned in the scriptures, but they were around in Jesus' day. They would have answered the question put to Jesus by saying nothing at all. For that is exactly what they did. Oh, I'm sure they had to pay that tax. The Romans were not big on exceptions when it came to money. But the Essenes did their best to have nothing to do with the entanglements and corruption going on in Jerusalem.

They were a reclusive, apocalyptic group. They were an example of just how radical the questioning of Jerusalem's and the temple's corruption was in Jesus' day. They hated what was going on there and so they separated themselves from it. They declared themselves to be the true Israel and sought to stay pure by having nothing to do with the rest of them. They originated in 100 BC, but they only lasted until Rome crushed them in AD 70.

They were expecting the Messiah to come soon. And he did. But they didn't accept him as such. Some think John the Baptist came from that group. There are some similarities: both being in the desert, both used Isaiah 40:3 to describe themselves as a "voice in the wilderness," both employed baptism for indicating a repentant heart.

But John was also significantly different from them: he was very engaged with the public; his diet was even more strict than was theirs; and he clearly pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. The Essenes never did.

And then there's the group without a name. We'll call them **Everybody Else**. These would be the common people. The fishermen, carpenters, shepherds, tax collectors, prostitutes, the crippled, blind, lame, and even the demon possessed. Everyone else, most of whom would be easily categorized as sinners. They would have been answering this question in a variety of ways.

The fishermen and the tax collectors would not exactly see eye to eye. But it's not like they would each have a supporting community of other fishermen or tax collectors or a congregation of prostitutes or blind men to fall back on. These were the leftovers. Politics was something that went on without their permission one way or the other. They were just trying to survive day by day. They would answer by paying if they could or by losing their home if they couldn't, or by going to prison. Their opinion hardly mattered one way or the other.

So then, put yourself in one of those groups and then put yourself in the crowd listening to Jesus as he faces that trick question. Prior to this time you would have been paying more than just that tax. You would have been wondering about your nation as a whole. What a mess! Just who do these Romans think they are? And who does Herod think he is? This is Israel, God's people, back from the 70 year exile in Babylon. But to what? To this? There is no real king. The temple is run by people only interested in themselves and their pocketbooks. The righteousness of the Pharisees looks good on the outside, but when you get up close it looks just like all the other problems. Isn't God going to do something about this situation?

This is in the minds of the people listening to Jesus. Some of them have heard him preach. Some have only heard about him, but are interested. Some have been touched by him and healed. Some have eaten their fill of bread and are curious about more. The crowd is favorable toward him, but they're also looking to the authorities to give them direction. Are the Herodians and Pharisees actually getting along? Are they asking Jesus a sincere question? He says they're trying to trick him.

But you see there's actually one more group to consider. **Jesus**. He is unlike all the other groups. He doesn't seem to be bothered by the Romans either way. He seems to be concerned with Israel and with God. He confronts these authorities head on, like with the incident at the temple and with his public teaching and his healing on the Sabbath. And he seems to have more authority than all the Sadducees, Herodians and Pharisees put together.

But will he be able to keep going? Will he disappoint everyone like all the others? Will he have to bow to the Romans? Will he have to give in to the Sanhedrin and the rules of impossible purity?

Jesus is not just another group among groups. He is in a category all by himself. He is Messiah. He is the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. He forgives sin and heals the sick. He's the hope of Israel and all the world.

So when he says, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's . . . you might wonder if he's just another politician like everyone else. But when he says, ". . . give to God that which is God's," you know he stands for nothing less than the kingdom of God.

Is our world all that different today? Through the eyes of what group do you view the hot button issues confounding and dividing us? Have you considered the name of the One called: "Jesus"? He is in a category by himself. And he is the only option that saves us.