

THE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHRISTIANS IN A FALLEN WORLD - MARK 12:13-17

The string of trick questions continues as the leaders try to trap Jesus. As He cleared the temple, they asked Jesus about the nature of His **religious authority**. Now they come to Him with a question about **taxes and politics**. As with most trick questions, they raise a very complex moral dilemma and then ask Jesus to respond with a simple **yes or no answer** (15).

1) THE LOADED QUESTION ABOUT TAXES – MARK 12:13-14

“And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. [14] 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?"

The hand of the religious leaders is still working behind the scenes of this confrontation ("**Later, they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians...**"12:13). The religious leaders have united two groups of people who would have normally had very little to do with each other - **the Pharisees** and the **Herodians**.

Some background is helpful to understand the situation this question put Jesus into. **Palestine was not independent**. It was a colonized satellite of Roman imperial power. **Should the people of God put money into the hand of the oppressors?** There were **different answers** to that question. In fact, there were **three different parties** involved in this set-up:

The **Zealots** were a group of religious radicals who felt strongly that **Rome should be fought tooth and nail to the death**. No support should come willingly from the people of God. The **Herodians** were a group who felt strongly that Israel's national strength and security was best served by getting along with Rome. **They backed the support of Rome and Herod**. The **Pharisees** knew they could easily put Jesus in a tight spot. They were somewhere in the middle on this issue. In theory they supported the **religious system of the Zealots** but were also **very comfortable with the peaceful and prosperous marriage they had with the powers of Rome**.

So the issue is, **what side would Jesus take - or which group would He offend?** How easy it is to **use** Jesus for our own agendas and call it religious passion! How easy it is to name the Name of Jesus for some social agenda, or some earthly kingdom, rather than submitting to His Lordship on His own terms!

2) THEY FLATTER JESUS TO FORCE HIM TO ANSWER THEIR QUESTION – MARK 12:14

“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?"

This is their way of setting the stage for Jesus to answer **the way they want Him to answer**. They aren't just paying Jesus a compliment. They're trying to make sure that Jesus **won't dodge their question**. The one thing they don't want is a non-answer.

"Jesus, we know that you are a straight shooter. You aren't afraid of the opinions of men. You aren't afraid to be **direct and forthright!**" They want to make sure He will give the kind of answer they want. **Is it "YES" or "NO"?** As long as Jesus is that direct, they will have Him.

3) JESUS ANSWERS THEIR QUESTION IN A MANNER THAT HAD SOMETHING TO SAY TO EACH GROUP – MARK 12:15-17

"[15] But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." [16] And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." [17] 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."

Jesus knows that this is a set up ("**knowing their hypocrisy -15**"). He asked them for one of their own coins - a silver denarius (a coin especially minted for the purpose of paying tax to Rome). On the coin was inscribed the words, "**Tiberius, Caesar, majestic son of the divine Augustus**". This portable idol really offended both the Zealots and the Pharisees - **but it didn't offend them so much that they wouldn't use Rome's cash**. Their pockets were full of these coins.

Jesus' answer addresses both groups - First, there were certain responsibilities they all had to their government. The very fact that they had currency, roads, legal systems, etc. proved they owed government (even Roman government) the support appropriate for these things. **In this way Jesus addresses the Pharisees who tended to downplay loyalty to Rome.**

But Jesus also has something to say to the Herodians. While honor should be given to government, it was not unlimited honor. **If the first part of Jesus' response gave HONOR to the state, the last part put LIMITS on the state.** Yes, certain things are due to the state. But not our **conscience**, not our **worship**, and not our **absolute** allegiance. In other words, Jesus says that some people give the state too little. Others give it too much.

4) **Seeing this issue in other NT Scriptures: We are told that government is God's servant and to be honored by all: Romans 13:1-7**

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3] For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4] for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. [5] Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. [6] For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. [7] Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

And also **1 Peter 2:13-17** - **"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, [14] or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. [15] For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. [16] Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. [17] Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."**

One cannot be a good Christian without being a good citizen. We are not called to be that other-worldly in our walk. We must salt this present earth. Yet government can overstep its proper bounds. Knowing this, religious fervor that aligns itself too tightly with political structures and systems is doomed to be off the mark. When the principles of the kingdom conflict with man's political and religious systems the Christian must honor God and humbly face the music (**Acts 5:29** - **"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men....'"**).