

# Christ vs. Caesar

## Jesus' Last Days (Mark): Part 9

Mark 12:14-17 (Mt.22:15-22, Lk.20:20-26) 1/9/2021

In the jaws of a trap, Jesus utters 10 simple words that changed the world. If you're worried about what's going on in our government, this message is for you.

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**Mark 12:12 Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away. 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 you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, 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 taxes 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 to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.**

# Introduction

## Two Kingdoms

What happens when you have two kings who claim the same territory at the same time? And what do you do if you happen to live in that territory?

All through his ministry, Jesus has been preaching about the kingdom of God. That's been his one and only topic. Jesus came to establish that kingdom, and to reign as the king of that kingdom.<sup>1</sup> But if Jesus is king, what about Caesar? Caesar is claiming total authority over you and Jesus is saying things like, "No one can serve two masters." So what are we supposed to do? In these very crucial last few days of Jesus' life, he spends his time teaching about the most important issues regarding his kingdom, and this is a big one. Because running afoul of human government can cost you your life. And running afoul of God's government can cost you your soul. So we need instruction on how to live in two kingdoms.

## Context

Let me remind you of the context. The scene couldn't be more dramatic. Jesus finally arrived in Jerusalem for a showdown with the Jewish authorities. Jesus fired the first shot by ransacking the Temple and calling out the authorities as a den of robbers. They demand to know what authority Jesus has to do all that. Jesus says, "John the Baptist already answered that question. Do you accept him as a true prophet?" And after a quick conference, they come down with a sudden case of agnosticism. They tried to expose Jesus as not having authority, but instead Jesus proves his authority and eviscerates their authority and forces them to admit in front of everyone that they're hopelessly ignorant.

Then he tells a parable that exposes them as murders of God's prophets. And, of course, they aren't big fans of that parable.

**Mark 12:12 Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away. 13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.**

## The Trap

So the reader is thinking, *Uh oh. Look out Jesus—here comes the trap.*

## Not So Strange Bedfellows

Herodians were connected with the Roman government. The Pharisees were the opposite—very much anti-Rome, anti-Herod. Yet they join forces against Jesus, which tells you something about how much they hated him. When Nancy Pelosi, Donald Trump, AOC, and Ted Cruz all team up against someone, you know you're dealing with a really serious enemy.

It's a reminder that the different parties mankind divides into really aren't as different as they seem. They seem drastically different at first, but when you confront them with Christ, you find most people are pretty much the same. When Jesus makes demands on their hearts, they reject him. And whether you do that in the liberal Democrat way or the conservative Republican way, or the Communist way or religious way or secular way or academic way or Joe lunch bucket way, it really amounts to the same thing. Jesus has a way of getting under the surface of all our skin-deep differences and showing that most human beings are fundamentally the same. Seven billion peas in a pod.

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<sup>1</sup> As seen in Jesus' favorite title for himself—Son of man (a reference to the Son of man in Daniel 7 who reigns over the kingdom forever).

## The Dilemma

So the Pharisees and Herodians had that in common, and bringing the Herodians along was strategic because the trap they set has to do with taxes.

### 14 .... Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

It's the perfect opportunity for Jesus to deal with this question of how to live in two kingdoms.

Before asking the question, they piled on a bunch of flattery about how courageous Jesus is because they're hoping he'll take a strong enough anti-Rome stance that it will get him killed. "You're not afraid of anyone, right Jesus? So should we defy Caesar and refuse to pay the tax?"

They want him to defy Caesar, but even if he doesn't, their trap still works. Worse case scenario, Jesus says, "Pay the tax," in which case he loses all credibility as a potential Messiah or king of the Jews. The Messiah is supposed to be the great deliverer—what kind of deliverer says, "Yeah, just keep living under Roman occupation and continue to be exploited by your pagan enemies"? Nobody is going to want to follow him if he sides with the kingdom of man over the kingdom of God. So either answer will work, just as long as Jesus doesn't do what they would do and dodge the question altogether. So they ask him twice for a straight up, yes or no answer.

## Jesus' Answer

So how does Jesus respond? First, he lets them know he's on to them.

### 15 ... "Why are you trying to trap me?"

He strips off their mask and lets everyone standing there know they didn't mean a word they said, and this whole thing is a trap. It's always a bummer when you're a hunter and your prey says, "Nice trap. Did you think I would just walk into it?"

So he's on to them, but still, it seems like they've got him because they asked the question publicly, so Jesus is going to have to give some response. But then Jesus does something they really don't see coming.

### 15 ... Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."

The denarius was a coin that was minted for the very purpose of paying the head tax that they were talking about. And instead of just giving his answer, Jesus adds to the drama by having them bring the coin. They hand it to him, and he looks it over, front and back. A denarius was the size of a dime, so it's a tiny little picture. Then he scoots up close to them, shoulder to shoulder and points at the image on the coin.

## Image Shows Ownership

"Quick question. Do you see this guy here?"

### 16 ... and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

Where is Jesus going with this? I think at this point their hopes are up. It was Caesar's image and the inscription identified him as a god. That's one reason the Zealots refused to pay the tax—because the coin itself was an idol, so even so much as handling it amounts to unfaithfulness to the kingdom of God. And so when Jesus uses the word "image"—the same word in the 10 commandments (no graven image), and he draws attention to the blasphemous inscription, they're rubbing their hands together. "This is perfect—he's going to side with the Zealots." So they're right on the spot with their reply.

### 16 ... and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied.

## Powerful Statement

And what Jesus says next is one of the most powerful, poignant, brilliant, trenchant, history-shaping statements ever uttered. Off the top of his head Jesus gives an answer that changes the world. 2000 years later, people who have never read the Bible know these words. In one sentence he answers their question, escapes their trap, redirects attention to what's really important, introduces a whole new way of thinking about human government, and, most importantly, teaches exactly how we are to go about living in two kingdoms. And he does all that in 10 Greek words.

**17 Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.**

## Give to Caesar

### Answer: Yes, Pay the Tax

Is that an evasive, sidestepping politician answer? Nope. His answer is as clear as it can be—pay the tax. He didn't hide his answer under a pile of complicated rhetoric, he didn't give a ten minute preamble, he didn't equivocate, he didn't say, "Well, yes and no—it depends." He didn't say, "Let me just acknowledge there are a lot of fine people in government. And some of my best friends are zealots ...". No. He said, "It's Caesar's coin—give it back." When they ask the question, they use the normal word for "give" (Should we give taxes to Caesar?). When Jesus answers, he uses a different word that means "to give back." That's the normal word used for paying a debt.

### Perjury

So their attempt to get Jesus to advocate tax rebellion failed. They end up having to revert to perjury at his trial a couple days later.

**Luke 23:1 ... they led him off to Pilate. 2 And began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar ..."**

They couldn't get Jesus to say it, so they just make it up.

What about the other side of their trap—getting Jesus in trouble with the people? That didn't work either. Why? Because even though Jesus gave a clear answer in favor of paying the tax, he said it in a way that no one could object to. How can you argue with, "If something belongs to someone, give it back to him"?<sup>2</sup> That's about as basic as it gets. You get that in kindergarten—if it's his, give it back. How could anyone argue with that?

### Superstition

And by the way, another implication of this is that it's fine to touch the coin, even though it has a blasphemous image on it. As long as you don't believe what's written on it, you can handle it all you want. We don't have to become superstitious about objects that are connected to evil things.

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<sup>2</sup> In those days, the currency really did belong to the king. That's not the case in our system, however the principle is the same. The government has a right to require taxes because of services they provide, such as providing currency.

## What Belongs to Caesar?

So how do you live in two kingdoms? Start with paying your taxes to the human government. If the government says 20% of my income is theirs, then it's theirs. If I cheat and pay 15% instead of 20%, I'm stealing. That extra 5% isn't mine, it doesn't belong to me, I have no right to it, and keeping it is no different than me stealing cash from someone's wallet. The government builds roads, provides police and military, prints currency—that all costs money. They have a legitimate, God-given claim on a portion of our income.

But what if the government uses that money for evil purposes, like funding abortions? Answer: We should speak out against that, but we still have to pay the tax. God will hold them responsible for what they do with that money, but he doesn't hold you responsible. Which is good, because if we were responsible for how our money was spent after it's out of our hands, we'd never be able to buy gas or a hamburger or anything from any secular company because they all use their money for sinful things.

If God held us responsible for how the government spends our tax money, Jesus never would have told his followers to pay taxes to Rome. Because as evil as the United States government is (and it is evil with a capital E), still first century Rome was worse by any measure. And yet, Jesus considered them a legitimate government. Why? What makes a government legitimate? The fact that they are in power—regardless of how they gained power.

Remember that when you think about voter fraud. How did Rome end up being in charge of Israel in Jesus' day? Through a free and fair election? No, through bloodshed. But still, Jesus recognized Caesar as a legitimate authority. God will deal with them for the way they took power, but once they're in power, they're in charge and we must submit and pay our taxes.

And that's not all. Jesus says "Give Caesar whatever belongs to Caesar"—what else does that include besides taxes?

## Obedience

How about obedience to all the rest of Caesar's laws?

**Romans 13:1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. ... 2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted ... 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.**

Does the government have the authority to tell us how fast we can drive or whether we need to wear seat belts or masks or whether or not we can own a gun? Yes. If they make a law that we can follow without disobeying God, we must follow it, even if we strongly disagree with it.

## Honor

What else belongs to Caesar? Respect and honor.

**1 Peter 2:17 ... fear God, honor the king.**

We don't owe the government our fear—that's for God alone. But we do owe public officials honor and respect, even if they haven't earned it and don't deserve it personally. We show it because of the office that God gave them.

## Prayers & Goodwill

So, taxes, obedience, respect, and, 4<sup>th</sup>, our prayers and goodwill and well wishes.

**1 Timothy 2:1 I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.**

The idea is when they hear us praying for them, asking God to bless them, seeking God's favor on their behalf—that will show them that we're not their enemies, we are on their side, it will tend to win their favor, and we'll be able to live in peace. And that's a good thing. Can the church flourish under persecution? Yes, but it's better if we can find a way to be at peace with the government. And one way to accomplish it is by praying for God to bless them.

## **Give to God**

So Jesus' answer is clear. Should we pay taxes? Yeah, taxes and everything else that belongs to Caesar. So how does that help us with the two kingdom problem? It sounds like Jesus is deferring completely to the kingdom of man—where does the kingdom of God come in?

Jesus isn't done. Twice they pressed Jesus for a simplistic yes or no answer. He gave them an answer that's simple, but not simplistic. Sometimes the right answer to a question is "Yes, but ..." or in this case, "Yes, and ..." And in situations like that, if all you give is the yes, your answer may be technically true, but insufficient and misleading because it's incomplete. Jesus doesn't fall for that. He gives an answer that's very short, not one bit complicated—a child can understand it, but not overly simplistic. Yes, you should give Caesar his due, *and*, also give **to God what is God's**. That second part puts everything into perspective. If all you do is give to Caesar what is Caesar's you haven't done anything. If you do right by Caesar but don't do right by God, you're as wrong as you can be. But if you do right by God, you're as right as you can be regardless of your relationship with Caesar.

And once again, the genius of this is that it's so self-evident. Jesus says something that completely overturns both sides way of thinking about government, but he does it in a way that's impossible to argue with. No one can stand up and say, "Wait a minute, how do you know we should give to God what is God's?" The statement needs no defense, no argument, no proof—it's completely self-evident. And yet nobody can accuse Jesus of being seditious against Rome or unfaithful to the kingdom of God.

## **What Belongs to God?**

So we must give to God what is God's?  
What belongs to God?

**Psalm 115:16 The highest heavens belong to the LORD.**

**Psalm 95:5 The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.**

**Haggai 2:8 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty.**

**Psalm 50:11 ... The creatures of the field are mine.**

**Psalm 24:1 The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.**

Every place, everything and everyone belong to God. Even *Caesar* belongs to God.

**Romans 13:4 [The ruler] is God's servant to do you good.**

It's all God's.

## **Caesar is God's Servant**

And that's how we answer the question of how to live in two kingdoms without have divided allegiance. Everything belongs to God. So what belongs to Caesar? Whatever God says belongs to Caesar. Why do we pay taxes to Caesar? One reason and one reason only: because God says to. All the

money belongs to God. If he says to send some of it to Caesar, we send it to Caesar. We support Caesar because Caesar is God's servant, fulfilling a role in the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God is the only thing we care about.

Taxes belong to Caesar in the same way as my kids' bedrooms belonged to them when they were growing up. We used the terminology "Faith's room, Nikki's room, Josiah's room," even though legally it all belonged to me and if I decided the girls were going to share a room so I could use the other one for something else, I would have every right to do that. Their rooms belonged to them in relationship to one another, but not in relationship to me. And here on earth, the things around us belong to specific different people in relationship to other human beings, but in relationship to God, it's all his. That's how you live in two kingdoms at once. You give 100% of your allegiance to one king, and you only give the little king whatever the big king tells you to give him.

## **Context: What's Most Important**

That's why Caesar is no threat to Jesus' kingship. Caesar isn't a threat to Jesus' kingdom, nor is Jesus' kingdom dependent on Caesar because his kingdom is not of this world.<sup>3</sup> If Jesus' kingdom were of this world, you'd expect Jesus' #1 concern to be King Herod, Caesar, Rome, the military, the government, politics. But instead, he's almost dismissive about all that. "You want to know what to do with this coin? It's says, "Caesar" on there—give the guy his coin back. Now, back to the important stuff, namely, what you owe God."

Jesus has been preaching about nothing but the kingdom of God throughout his whole ministry, and this is the first time he's mentioned politics, and even here it only comes up as an answer to someone else's question. Jesus didn't focus on politics because the success of Christianity is utterly disconnected to what the government does. Is it good for us to be at peace with them? Yep. Does human government play a role in God's plan? Yes. Do Christians have something to say in the political arena? Absolutely. But we must not forget that our message is not mainly a political one because the gospel is far greater than politics. Questions like who should be President of the United States deserve some of our attention, but only a little bit of it because we're dealing with much, much bigger issues than that.

And people who talk to us should get the sense that we're all about something far bigger than the United States. That's how it was with Jesus. How did Jesus win a zealot *and* a tax collector and to follow him as disciples? You think we have acrimony between Republicans and Democrats? The zealots believed in literally killing any fellow Jews who sympathized with Rome. Matthew was a Jew who collected taxes for Rome. But they both followed Jesus because he focused their attention on something much bigger than politics or emperors or nations.

If North Korea nuked the United States off the face of the earth tomorrow, the kingdom of God would be just fine. The Church would suffer loss to be sure, but nowhere near debilitating loss. We always think it's so important who gets elected President and what laws are passed or not passed. But think about it, the church has flourished in the United States and the Church has flourished in communist China. It's flourished in the academic world and in the remote jungles of Equator. It's flourished in wealthy power centers, in poverty-stricken slums, under totalitarian governments, within democracies, in times of persecution, in times of freedom and favor. We did fine the last 4 years with a champion of religious freedom in the White house, and we'll do fine the next 4 years if they start throwing us in jail for preaching Romans 1.

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<sup>3</sup> John 18:36 Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

## **Jurisdiction: Behavior, not Conscience**

The kingdom of God is not dependent on Caesar but Caesar is a servant of God. Caesar has a role to play in God's kingdom whether he realizes that's what he's doing or not. And that way of looking at government completely re-shaped the whole concept of human government. Instead of thinking of the king as a god, we now have this concept of jurisdiction—limited governmental authority. Boundary lines that Caesar can't cross.

Caesar has no right to tell you to do anything that God forbids—ever. That's one boundary line. Another one is your heart. Caesar can regulate your behavior but has no authority whatsoever over anyone's conscience.

That's where the establishment clause in the United States Constitution came from. Congress shall make no law forcing you to worship in a certain way, nor can they interfere with worship. That's derived directly from Jesus' words here. If you want to summarize the establishment clause, it's very simple: Caesar needs to stay in his lane as God's servant.

And yet people want to try to twist it to mean some kind of concept of separation of church and State that means religious beliefs shouldn't have any impact on government, which is nonsense. Even if you say there is no God, or that God doesn't matter—that's a religious belief.

How about the statement, "You can't legislate morality"? That's one of those slogans that's unhelpful because it means completely different things to different people. Some people use it to say you can't pass laws that prohibit immoral actions. Pro-abortion people will say this—abortion is a moral issue, and morality has no place in legislation, therefore we shouldn't prohibit abortion. That kind of reasoning is nonsense. Of course you can prohibit immoral actions. Is rape immoral? Child abuse? Stealing, murder, fraud, libel, kidnapping? All immoral and all illegal. Of course you can legislate morality in that sense.

But if the person using that phrase means you can't legislate internal morality, that's exactly right. God gave Caesar the authority to regulate actions, but not the heart. The government has no authority over what goes on inside you. They can require you to drive 55, but they can't require you to like it. What you like or dislike, what you desire, what you think—passing laws regulating those things would be a waste of time because there's no way to even know for sure whether or not someone has broken the law.

Now, that hasn't stopped some lawmakers from trying. Ironically, those people who use the phrase "You can't legislate morality" to justify abortion or same-sex marriage tend to be the very ones who try to legislate internal morality. They call them "hate crimes." The idea of a hate crime is that if you murder someone with hatred in your heart, you're in deep trouble. If you murder them but not because of hatred, that's not nearly as bad.

Another one has to do with the LGBTQ revolution. Norway just passed a law that says if you're found guilty of criticizing the LGBTQ community, you go to prison. Three years in prison if you do it publicly, one year in prison if you do it privately. In the privacy of your own home, you say something negative about those sins and you go to prison for a year. They are trying to govern thoughts and attitudes. Those are examples of government veering way, way out of their lane. We give Caesar only what God said we have to give to Caesar, and that does not include our hearts.

## **Giving to God**

That leaves us with one last question. If everything already belongs to God, what does it mean for us to give him? How do you give to God?

## **Offerings**

Well, one way is through worship offerings. Jesus will bring that topic up a little later in this same chapter with the widow's mite. The pages of Scripture are permeated from front to back with examples of giving gifts to God as expressions of worship.



**Philippians 4:18 ... I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.**

So they gave missionary support to Paul as an act of worship toward God, and God was pleased with that. That's one way we give to God what is God's.

## Service

Another way is through service in his kingdom. God doesn't need our service in any way, but it is something he requires of us.

**Romans 12:7 If [a man's gift] is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.**

We tend to think we have the freedom to say yes or no to the prospect of serving in ministry with our gifts. But I don't see how anyone could say it's okay to sit on the bench in light of Romans 12. Spurgeon had a good comment on this. "There is no man in the Church of God who has ability to speak who has any license to be silent. ... I shall not ask any young man whether he ought to preach, but whether he can prove that he ought not."<sup>4</sup> And he went on to apply the same principle to other gifts. Whatever your gift, you have no license to sit on it. And that applies to spiritual gifts or any other kind of gift. Like your past experience. Whatever experience you have—that's a gift, and a tool you must use in God's service. The same goes for physical ability, mental ability, writing skill, artistic skill, the ability to endure suffering or to work with children or to make money. And for those who say they have no gifts, just think of what you would think if your boss cut your pay. And you ask him why, and he says, "Because you can't do anything." Most of us would drive home from that meeting with our minds spinning with examples of all the things we contribute to that company. We all have gifts, we all have plenty to offer, and God requires us to find a way to offer it in his service.

## Yourself

So you give God offerings, you give God service—what else? Let's go back to the text in Mark. What was Jesus' reasoning for why the coin belonged to Caesar? It was clearly Caesar's because it bore Caesar's image. What does that say about us? We're just like that coin, aren't we? The word Jesus uses for image here is the same word used throughout Scripture for the image of God in mankind. We have our owner's image stamped on us.

Jesus held up the coin and asked, "Whose image is this?" I'll ask you the same question. When you look in this mirror, whose image are you seeing?

God's face is on you. You bear his image, and his inscription is written all over you. You were forged in heaven in the divine mint. Give to God what is God's—what does that include? The most obvious thing we owe God in the context of this passage is ourselves. That's been Jesus' message throughout the book. He hasn't spent a lot of time picking around the edges like typical religious people, saying, "I want you to follow this rule and that rule ..." No, he tells the disciples—leave your career and family and follow me. The rich young ruler—sell everything you have and follow me. To the crowds, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." And in just a couple paragraphs he's going to say down in v.28, love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.

We could say that's really the one thing we need to give God. Because if you give God yourself—your whole heart, you've given everything. If he has my whole heart, he has all my money, right? He has my house and my family and my aspirations and hopes and dreams. He has my fear—I fear him alone and not man. He has my attention, my thoughts.

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<sup>4</sup> From Spurgeon's sermon on 2 Tim. 1:6 titled "Our Gifts, and How to Use Them."

That's what it means to give to God what is God's. I already belong to God, but there is a very real sense in which I could choose to withhold it from him. My heart isn't like Jupiter. I couldn't hold Jupiter back from God. I can't withhold gravity or sunrises or history or the wind. But there is a very real sense in which I can draw a line around my heart and say, "No God. This far you may come and no farther." God has given us that choice.

He didn't have to. He could easily force us into submission like robots. But it was his good pleasure to give us something nothing else in the creation has—the ability to willingly give to God what is God's.

## **They Were Amazed at Him**

**17 Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.**

As much as they hated him, they couldn't help it. Who appreciates the strength of the heavyweight champion's punches more than the challenger who gets knocked out by one? I mentioned last time that their conspiring together against Jesus was a fulfillment of Psalm 2.

**Psalm 2:2 ... the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.**

**That psalm goes on to say 4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.**

What's he laughing about? He's laughing about how ridiculous their lame effort to overthrow him is. It's a joke. Jesus defeats their best and brightest off the top of his head, without breaking a sweat.

And even his enemies stand amazed. But as we've seen throughout the book, amazement at Jesus is never enough. We need to go beyond amazement to wholehearted, unreserved, absolute devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth, Caesar's master, and our Lord.

Jesus became far more powerful than Caesar and took over the world without firing a shot. Without ever drawing a sword, Jesus became the greatest revolutionary of all time because he revolutionized the hearts of the revolutionaries. Will Durant was a famous historian who wrote the massive, 11-volume work titled *The Story of Civilization*. Durant was an atheist, but one whole volume of that work was titled "Caesar and Christ." "There is no greater drama in human record than the sight of a few Christians, scorned or oppressed by a succession of emperors, bearing all trials with a fierce tenacity, multiplying quietly, building order while their enemies generated chaos, fighting the sword with the word, brutality with hope, and at last defeating the strongest state that history has known. Caesar and Christ had met in the arena, and Christ had won."<sup>5</sup>

## **Summary**

The trap was set by Pharisees and Herodians, political opponents, but like all unbelievers, essentially the same. They hope to get him to oppose Caesar so he'll be killed. If not, then to support taxes and be rejected by the crowds for not being loyal to God and his people. Jesus' astonishing answer changed the world. Jesus said to pay the tax but did so in a way no one could object to. We must pay Caesar not only taxes, but also obedience, honor, and goodwill. But much more importantly, we must give God what is his (offerings, service, and our whole heart). Caesar has a role in the kingdom of God as God's servant, but the kingdom is not dependent on human government and flourishes under any kind of human government.

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<sup>5</sup> Will Durant, in *The Story of Civilization: Caesar and Christ*, Chapter 30, Part 1.

**Matthew 22:15** Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. **16** They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.

"Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.

**17** Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" **18** But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? **19** Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, **20** and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" **21** "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." **22** When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

### **Mark 12:13**

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 you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, 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 taxes 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 to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

**Luke 20:20** Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. **21** So the spies questioned him: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

**22** Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" **23** He saw through their duplicity and said to them, **24** "Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?" **25** "Caesar's," they replied. He said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." **26** They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

## Excurses on Caesar's Coercive Power

God uses the church and State for different purposes. God never gave the sword to the church. But he did give it to the State. All State power is coercive power. No matter how minor the issue, every law carries behind it the threat of deadly force. If the law says you can't jaywalk, and a police officer sees you jaywalking, he can detain you and write a ticket. If you resist him, he can respond with however much force is required to detain you. If you refuse to pay the ticket, they can put you in jail. And if you refuse to go to jail, they can use however much force is necessary to get you in there. And depending on how much force you use to resist, they can use more force, all the way up to killing you. That's what we mean by coercive authority. It's not like the authority your pastor has. He has authority you must obey, but it's not coercive authority. If you disobey, he doesn't have the right to force you to comply. But the government does—that's what it means that God gave them the sword.

This is an interesting principle for us because in a democratic republic—a country where there is voting—every individual carries a tiny bit of governmental power. And anyone with governmental power needs to make sure they don't become corrupt. What would you think of a government official who used his power for his own financial gain. That's corruption, right? So what about a voter who uses his political power for personal financial gain? Isn't that just as corrupt? When you vote for a politician because he promises to take money from other people and give it to you, that's corruption. Ben Franklin said, "When the people find that they can vote themselves money that will herald the end of the republic."

So voting on taxes is not just a political issue; it's a moral issue. If I go into your garage and take your lawnmower, that's stealing. If I hire someone to take your mower, that's also illegal. But if I vote for the government to take your mower and give it to me, that's legal. It's legal, but it's every bit as immoral as the first two. It's taking something that belongs to you for myself—that's stealing. The government has a God-given right to tax my income to run the government. That's not stealing. But when politicians talk about taxing the rich, or they vote for a politician who promises, "I'll require forgiveness of your student loans" or "I'll give you free college," free healthcare, free anything—if you're voting for any kind of tax that applies to others but not to you, that's immoral. It's political corruption.

We don't see it as corruption because we forget about the fact that all governmental authority is coercive authority. If you resist, they will overpower you or kill you—whether it's treason or jaywalking. The government has a gun to your head with all law enforcement. If a Sheriff was elected and then used his power to put a gun to someone's head and demand money for himself, we would all agree that's a corrupt politician, right? The same goes for you as a voter. R.C. Sproul says it this way: "Your ballot is a bullet." It's legalized force. If you use the coercive power of government to take from others for your own benefit, you're corrupt.