

Mark 12:13-17

¹³ Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in *His* words. ¹⁴ When they had come, they said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and care about no one; for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?

¹⁵ Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see *it*." ¹⁶ So they brought *it*. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription *is* this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and 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.

I like how John MacArthur titles this passage. He calls it the Pathology of a Religious Hypocrite. He makes several observations about these hypocrites from the passage.

- 1- They make awkward alliances against the truth
- 2- They will say anything to gain their ground
- 3- They falsely pretend to pursue truth.

Let's take a look at a parallel passage where this story is told. It gives us a few more facts.

Luke 20:20-26

²⁰ **So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous,**

Luke tells us that this was part of an ongoing process. They always had spies in the crowd. In this particular case the spies were sent with a task. And they were sent pretending something that was not true.

that they might seize on His words, in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor.

Luke tells us what the intent of the deception really is. The religious leaders actually had to accomplish a great deal in a short time. They had to sway the common opinion of the man on the street against Christ. And they had to come up with a reason, other than some religious reason, for the Roman government to have reason to kill Christ. The Romans are not going to crucify Christ for blasphemy. The leaders need to come up with an accusation of insurrection. So these questions were designed to accomplish the delivery of Christ to the Roman authorities with a charge for a Roman crime.

And there is one more thing Luke tells us.

²¹ **Then they asked Him, saying, "Teacher, we know that You say and teach rightly,**

Look at the flattery here. We know that You say and teach rightly. They didn't believe anything of the kind. They thought Jesus was just like them. That is what we usually do. We usually initially expect others to have the same motives for doing things that we would have if we were doing what they were doing. Of course we are often wrong. But if you watch what you suspect of others, you often learn a lot about yourself. Anyway, we see more flattery. Then the rest of Luke's narrative is similar to Mark's

So with those few more clues, let's look at our text in Mark.

¹³ **Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words.**

Imagine this in today's scenario. Imagine a third party candidate running for office that was a real threat of winning the election. Our story this morning would be similar to sending Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton together to trip up the third party threat. What we have here are very strange bedfellows.

Politically we could line up the Jewish political continuum like this:

Herodians	Pharisees	Zealots
Love Rome		Hate Rome

The Herodians were Jewish people who aligned themselves with the family of Herod. They backed Herod Antipas, the guy who killed John the Baptist. They were very secular. They would be the most politically and spiritually liberal. They would have hated the Pharisees and what they stood for on any given day. The Pharisees would have also hated the Herodians. Rome was a continual reminder to the Pharisees that the Jewish nation was not what it should be. Roman rule struck deeply at their national pride and their spiritual sensitivities. They wanted rid of Rome, and the sooner the better. Of course they are not going to say anything. And they certainly are not going to **do anything** that would jeopardize their own personal safety and profit. So they will try to remain in the middle and **pretend to be things** they are not. When with the common man, they will pretend to be **against** the government. And they will pretend to be **for the government** to the Roman leaders. They are skilled in the art of hypocrisy. The Zealots, on the other hand, tend to be radical purists. You would not have sent a Herodian with a Zealot to do this evil deed. The Herodian would never be seen again.

So here we see the Herodians and Pharisees in cahoots. Nothing brings people together quicker than a common enemy. And that is what we have here. The fact that they are together in this quest would immediately alert anyone who was

sharp that there is something very evil going on here. These guys would not be the type to go to a truth finding conference together.

And what was their intent? To catch. To trap.

This word appears only here in the New Testament, and refers to a hunter capturing an animal or a fisherman catching a fish.

There is nothing sincere in their motives. They only intend one thing to Christ. Harm. We should note here that very good questions can be asked with very evil intents. The question was not evil. The intent of the question was evil. A true follower could have asked the same question as was asked in our text with pure motive. It would have been fine.

So the quality of the question does not prove anything about the sincerity of the one asking the question. We don't need to be overly impressed by those who ask spiritual questions. But we can know that it is a miracle if they respond to real answers to their questions.

So these guys are asking very good questions for very bad reasons.

¹⁴ **When they had come, they said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and care about no one; for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth.**

Look at this. These guys have this perfectly correct. Everything they are saying is true. But they don't believe a word of it. Oddly enough, there are probably **true followers** of Christ who did not understand all these things about Christ. There are true followers of Christ who may have voiced some doubts about some of these points. But these **false followers** got every point of doctrine right.

We need to note something here. Charlatans often get the doctrinal points right. Even when they are fleecing the flock, they may talk grandly and correctly about the character of God. Proper doctrine does not always mean proper motives. Paul told Timothy to watch his life and doctrine closely. Not just your doctrine, but your life and your doctrine. We too need to do the same thing. We can easily **speak** the truth but **live** a lie. We can talk truthfully about God but live deceptively and selfishly. And as we see in this instance, all the truth **they said** did them no good whatsoever. Because in their heart of hearts, they did not believe a word of it.

Notice too that they are attributing everything to Christ that **they were not**. In fact, they were there BECAUSE they were not. Why did they come to catch Christ?

They were false (they were pretending to be righteous Luke says)

They were afraid of the crowds. (the very opposite of not regarding the person of men)

They taught the traditions of men, not the way of God in truth.

So they came to flatter Christ.

Why use flattery?

I like what John MacArthur says here:

First, they were pretending to identify with the people who, for the most part, did believe that Jesus taught the truth. The religious leaders wanted to convince the people that they, too, were legitimate truth seekers.

Second, and more important, they wanted to inflate the Lord's pride, hoping that would keep Him from dodging the question they were about to ask Him.

MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Mark 9-16.

Flattery is insincere or excessive praise.

Now we could pray the same things these leaders said to Christ and be perfectly sincere. Then it would not be flattery. The flattery the bible condemns is the kind that seeks to gain an advantage over a person or God by extolling their virtues or their supposed virtues.

Let's take a look at a couple of verses about flattery.

Psalm 5:8-9

⁸ Lead me, O LORD, in Your righteousness because of my enemies; Make Your way straight before my face. ⁹ For *there is* no faithfulness in their (my enemies) mouth; Their inward part *is* destruction; Their throat *is* an open tomb; They flatter with their tongue.

So David's enemies were saying good things about David to his face. But they were only doing it to gain an advantage.

Psalm 78:34-37

³⁴ When He slew them, then they sought Him; And they returned and sought earnestly for God. ³⁵ Then they remembered that God *was* their rock, And the Most High God their Redeemer. ³⁶ Nevertheless they flattered Him with their mouth, And they lied to Him with their tongue; ³⁷ For their heart was not steadfast with Him, Nor were they faithful in His covenant.

Here again we see that the thing that makes flattery flattery is the insincerity. What they say is even true. But they do not really believe it. Their heart is not in it.

Flattery is not saying truthful positive things to a person, in and of itself. From time to time I think about some trait in Carla that I am thankful for. Eventually I tell her about it. When I do I usually get the look that says, "And what do you want?" Her flattery meter must be set on a pretty low setting.

Flattery is not simply telling a truth that is positive to a person. Flattery is telling it in an effort to gain some advantage. It has another motive. It usually involves some form of manipulation, trying to get something that you could not get through legitimate means.

Do you want a good test to find out if what you are doing is flattery? Ask yourself what result will I be **disappointed with** if I do not get it? That will help you to know what you are trying to accomplish. That will help you to know if it is flattery or simple truth.

As Christians, we should not flatter. And we should not allow our pride to be **seduced** by flattery. It will only lead to sin. I wonder sometimes if the positiveness of social media isn't very dangerous due to its tendency toward flattery. Anyone using it to tell the truth and nothing but the truth is going to be seen as an awful person. No one is ever going to be doing real business with us as a person in that venue.

OK

So the players are in place.

The façade has been carefully laid out.

Now, what is the trap?

Here it comes, in what might appear as a real truth seeker's question.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? ¹⁵ Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?"

Now based on the question we know which law these guys are talking about.

They aren't talking about Roman civil law. They are talking about God's law.

There are a couple of things you cannot tell about this text without looking at the Greek words.

First, the word "to pay" is most commonly translated "to give". That is how the KJV translates it. It insinuates something that is yours that you can do with as you like. In every instance of the word translated pay is this word give.

So when we read it with that word we get a different slant.

Is it lawful to give taxes to Caesar or not? Shall we give or not give?

The other thing we don't get is the specific word used for taxes. This word refers to a specific tax. And it was the one the Jews hated most deeply. It was a tax for simply existing. It was a poll tax. It was a tax assigned to everyone who showed up on the census.

Jewish people resented it so much because it wasn't based on any benefit that they got from the civil authority. In a sales or income tax, you pay for a privilege you are gaining by being under this civil authority. You get something and you pay a little to the government for the privilege. But this tax made the Jews feel as if the Romans owned them. And that was odious to them.

Incidentally, the Obamacare tax is similar to this kind of tax. It is the only tax we owe because we breathe. That might help us to understand a little more why the Jewish people would have disliked the tax so much.

The poll cost a denarius per year. So it was a day's wages per year.

This tax led to a later revolt.

Judas of Galilee led a revolt in AD 66 that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It was based on this same concern- the question of paying tribute to Rome.

The question Jesus was asked is very much a political one. It is designed to either get Jesus in trouble with the **civil government** or to make Him appear to be compromising in His **love for God** and His people.

Judas, (not the disciple Judas) who led the later revolt, called his fellow countrymen **cowards** for being willing to pay tribute to the Romans and for putting up with mortal masters in place of God. Josephus tells us this. He also says that the Jews “have an unconquerable love of freedom, since they have accepted God as their only leader and master.” The point Judas of Galilee made, and a common mindset of the people of this time, is that a Jew cannot be a **true Jew** and be submissive to **both God** and to **Rome**. True worship of God would require rebellion against Rome.

So we can see how charged this question was.

Jesus was not required to pay this Roman tax because He was not from a territory under direct Roman rule. Judeans were subject to the tax but Galileans were not. This question was designed to hurt Jesus no matter how he answered it.

If He answered, “**Pay the tax**”, the sentiments of the common Jewish person would be outraged. Jesus would be seen as a compromiser, a sellout to the Romans. He would fall out of favor with the common man. That is one of the goals the religious leaders had.

If He answered, “**Don’t pay the tax**”, then the leaders would have a reason to hand Christ over to the Roman authorities. They could show he was inciting the people to revolt. And that is something the Romans would not put up with. Jesus is in a spot similar to a man being asked the question, “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” The assumptions of the questions and the motives of the questioner need dealt with in the answer.

But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see it."

Now at this point in time, no law abiding Jew was supposed to have Roman coinage on their person. Along with this, this coin was often regarded as an idol that should be avoided. The coin would have an image of Tiberius Caesar who, since he was the adopted son of the deified emperor Augustus, was the son of a so called god. The Jews therefore considered the coins to be miniature idols. Many considered carrying them to be a violation of the second commandment’s prohibition of idolatry.

So Jesus wants to see one. They are probably licking their lips thinking that Christ was falling into their trap. They probably had no idea that they were falling into

His trap. So they are probably quick to produce one of these coins among themselves.

¹⁶ So they brought it. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's."

First off, the fact they had one of these in their pockets pretty much shows that they are part of the Roman financial system. They weren't too proud to take one of Rome's coins when it profited them. They were perfectly content to buy and sell in the system provided by the Roman law. So the fact they had the coin immediately proved their lack of sincerity. Had they truly been convicted that Roman rule was evil, they would have used the copper coins that were minted with no one's image on it.

Then Jesus looked at the coin and asked whose image and inscription was on the coin. They knew because it was their coin. Caesar.

Now, how would that image get on there? Did Jews put it on there? Did they take out their own silver and carve that image on it? Of course not. That silver started as someone else's. It was Rome's silver.

¹⁷ And Jesus answered and 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, remember the question from the leaders. Should we give tribute. Should we take what is ours that we can do with what we want and give this to Rome of our own free will.

Jesus chooses a different word. He chooses the word "render".

(render) means to pay or give back, implying a debt. It carries the idea of obligation and responsibility for something that is not optional.

MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Matthew 16-23.

By asking for a Roman coin, Jesus proves the motives of the questioners to be impure. By commanding that people render back Caesar's stuff, he proves the assumptions held in the question to be **untrue**.

The assumption is that God's people should only submit to a government that is going by God's law. In other words, if the Jews are not ruling themselves, if some foreign country is ruling them, they are violating Gods laws by submitting to governing power. Jesus destroys that logic.

Jesus is endorsing the right of civil government to charge for their services and to demand that charge is paid. When the civil government provides their services, those services come with a duty of those being served. And it is our duty to pay what is required of us. This isn't addressing the exceptions that come when the government requires something of us that is sinful. But in normal circumstances, citizens are to pay for the services of civil government. And they are to submit to that ruling authority.

Both Paul and Peter explain this in their epistles.

Romans 13:1-7

¹ Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

² Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. ⁵ Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. ⁷ Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

1 Timothy 2:1-4

¹ Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks be made for all men, ² for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. ³ For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Peter 2:13-17

¹³ Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and *for the* praise of those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- ¹⁶ as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. ¹⁷ Honor all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

It is much easier for us than for Jesus's audience to understand these truths. As Christians we know that we must follow what Christ said about our governing authorities.

It is interesting how the people responded in our text. It says **they marveled at Him**. Here was a man who couldn't be trapped. Here was a man who knew God's will about everything. Here is a man who could not be fooled. He was absolutely amazing. And what would the onlookers do? They would soon be yelling for Him to be crucified.

One application from our text this morning is that we should be very careful to consider what **we expect** from fellow Christians. The people in the crowd had simple expectations. They would have regarded them as common sense. They would have regarded them as patriotic even, and nationalistic. In this case the expectation was that a lover of God should not submit to a worldly government. They would have regarded that idea as simply true. And they would have evaluated “so called” followers of God accordingly. Most everyone probably believed it. And what they had in common was that **they were all wrong**. God’s law and His will were not as simple as they wanted to make it. It was different to how they would have preferred it.

What expectations do we have of followers of God that are simple, and even common sense, that we just assume, but **are wrong**? What behavior do we see and say, that is not behavior a Christian should do? The question is, are we sure? It is important that we get that kind of stuff right. We don’t want to make the mistake that this crowd was in danger of. We don’t want to reject Christ or His followers because they obey God in a manner different than we expect or understand. Sometimes the issues aren’t as simple or as clear cut as we like to make them.