

# Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”  
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,  
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”  
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

## **Render Unto Caesar**

**March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**Mark 12:13-17**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Mark 12:13; that's on page 848 in your pew Bibles. Once you have your Bibles open I think you will see that this passage is part of a set. In this chapter Mark narrates three consecutive confrontations that Jesus has with the Jerusalem authorities. There is a confrontation with the Pharisees and the Herodians in Mark 12:13-17 that we are going to read today and then there is a confrontation with Sadducees in Mark 12:18-27 and then a third and final confrontation with the scribes in Mark 12:28-34. Mark ends this section by saying in verse 34:

And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:34 ESV)

Things did not go according to plan for this odd coalition of authorities. They were hoping to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the crowd and to gather evidence that they could use to get him in trouble with the Romans. They didn't accomplish either of their goals. In the end they discredited themselves and they gave Jesus an opportunity to show again why he is the light of the world.

The meaning of the passage that we are going to look at this morning is fairly straightforward – but the church has been wrestling with the implications of this teaching for nearly 2000 years. It is a passage we have to wrestle and it a passage we have to bow before because this is the Word

of the Lord. So hear now the reading of Holy Scripture from Mark 12:13-17.

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?” 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. (Mark 12:13–17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

As I mentioned this text isn’t terribly hard to understand. Jesus is in Jerusalem – this story takes place after the Triumphal Entry and before the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. This is a Holy Week story and it shows the Pharisees trying to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the crowd and gather evidence that they can use against him with the Romans. The Sanhedrin did not have the right to exercise capital punishment independently of their Roman overseers. They know that if they want to kill Jesus and get away with it they will need to present a credible charge that will make sense to Governor Pilate. Pilate isn’t going to care about Jesus’ theology but he is going to care about his politics. So they ask him a question about taxes.

The issue of taxation was a live political issue at this point and time in the Province of Judea. Judea – unlike Galilee – was under direct Roman rule therefore taxes had to be paid by citizens to Caesar and they had to be paid with a certain coin. The people of Judah found this requirement to be doubly irksome. It was irksome first of all because it was a constant reminder of their political subjugation. It was irksome secondly because the coin that was used was explicitly blasphemous in its affirmations and ascriptions. The coin had a picture of Tiberius Caesar engraved upon it with the inscription: *Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus*. In the minds of many Jews to even have such a coin put one at odds with both the first and second of the 10 Commandments. If that weren’t bad enough, on the back of the coin there was an image of Tiberius’ mother Livia and the inscription *Pontifex Maximus* which means “High Priest”.

So this was just not a coin that pious Jews wished to have any association with; it was a bad coin and it was a bad tax and it had already been the cause of a serious insurrection a generation earlier. In AD 6 a fellow by the name of Judas the Galilean founded a protest group that came to be known as The Zealots. Josephus tells us that Judas:

“called his countrymen cowards for being willing to pay tribute to the Romans and for putting up with mortal masters in place of God.”<sup>1</sup>

The Zealot movement gained momentum and in AD 66 they plunged the nation into the revolt against Rome that led to the destruction of the temple and to the nation as a whole. This was the issue that the Pharisee tried to get Jesus to wade into. If he said, as they suspected he would, that they should not pay the tax, then they could denounce Jesus to the Romans as a rebel and they could have him executed for sedition. If he said that they should pay the tax well then they would have separated him from the goodwill and protection of the crowd.

Either way they win.

Or so they thought.

The answer Jesus gave was beyond their expectation. It was beyond the sort of wisdom and perspective that one would anticipate from a merely human teacher. And of course that’s the point. Mark has been trying to convince us from the beginning that Jesus is far more than a merely human teacher.

He is the Son of God.

What he says is that people should render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and render unto God the things that belong to God. Meaning, he says that there are multiple spheres to which a person belongs and therefore multiple obligations that must be attended to and that the two obligations are not necessarily contradictory. As R.T. France summarizes usefully:

“Instead of setting loyalty to God and to Caesar in opposition to each other, the straightforward meaning of Jesus’ words is that both may be maintained at the same time.”<sup>2</sup>

So that’s what this text means – but as I mentioned the church has been wrestling with the implications of this teaching for nearly 2000 years. Let me tease out for you 5 implications that

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus as cited by R.T. France in *The Gospel Of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 465.

<sup>2</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel Of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 466.

lie fairly close to the surface and around which there is broad and general agreement.

## **Implications:**

The first one I'm going to mention is foundational to the four that follow. The first implication is this:

### **1. The New Covenant community will exist inside various other legitimate political entities**

Jesus clearly steers a different course than the Zealots. The Zealots want to defeat the Romans and reestablish the political theocracy of Israel. In the Old Testament the church and the state were one and the same – that's a theocracy and the Zealots want it back. They assume God wants it back but Jesus does not appear to hold that view.

We've talked about this before – this is what the crowds didn't get about Jesus. Do you remember in John 6 after the feeding of the 5000 the Bible says that the crowd wanted to make Jesus King by force? But Jesus didn't want to have anything to do with it. John 6:15 says:

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:15 ESV)

Jesus was not interested in theocracy. He didn't want to merge the church and the state – that wasn't his game – he didn't come for that and he wasn't willing to fight for that. When Jesus was before Pilate he said:

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” (John 18:36 ESV)

Jesus did not come to restore theocracy to Israel. Jesus came to begin building a Kingdom that would draw citizens from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth and that would for a season exist inside every other country on planet earth – that is the change that Jesus is signaling here.

D.A. Carson puts it this way:

“It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus is announcing a fundamental change in the administration of the covenant community. The locus of the community is no longer a theocratic kingdom; it is now an assembly of churches from around the world, living under many “kings” and “Caesars”, and offering worship to none of them. And that is why many Christians around the world trace the history of the non-establishment of a particular religion to this utterance of the Lord Jesus himself.”<sup>3</sup>

This is so incredibly important! This is why we have to be careful in how we apply some of the laws of the Old Testament. The Old Testament assumed a theocracy. Meaning in the Old Testament the church and the state were one and the same. So for example, in the Old Testament having sex with your father’s wife was punishable by death. In Leviticus 20:11 it says:

If a man lies with his father’s wife, he has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Leviticus 20:11 ESV)

But then in the New Testament – which is not a theocracy – when this exact situation comes up in 1 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul doesn’t say – but them both to death. No! The church doesn’t have the sword anymore – now that authority belongs to the secular state. So what does Paul say? God doesn’t care anymore about incest? No. He doesn’t say – the principle remains in effect – but the punishment has been radically transformed. Now Paul says:

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5:4–5 ESV)

Now he says, you just kick him out of the church. You excommunicate him and pray that he would repent so that he could be restored.

Do you see that? Now that we are not a theocracy, execution has become excommunication. But the same things are considered moral and immoral. God is still holy and he hasn’t changed, but the church has changed. The church is not a theocracy anymore. The church is a gathering now of people from every tribe, tongue and nation – INSIDE every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth. So some of the rules and parameters of our communal life have been adjusted.

That is one of the most important implications of this teaching and the next 4 that I am going to mention flow logically out of it. The second of those 4 is this:

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<sup>3</sup> D.A. Carson, *For The Love Of God* Volume 1 (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), February 6<sup>th</sup>.

## **2. There is no essential clash between the legitimate claims of government and the claims of God upon the believer**

Now of course the key word there is “legitimate”. William Lane says usefully here:

“There is always inherent in civil authority a tendency to reach beyond its appointed function, a tendency which leads to self-transcendence.”<sup>4</sup>

How true that is. Government has a tendency to want to be more than it is. It wants to be the church, it wants to be the family, and it wants to be God. The school system used to warn us about that tendency – do you remember when *Brave New World* and *Animal Farm* were required reading in the School System? Now the School System is *Brave New World*. They are the voices whispering into the minds of our sleeping children.

We live in an era of MASSIVE GOVERNMENT overreach. The Ontario government wants to replace the family, it wants to repress the church and it wants to retire God. The government seeks “self-transcendence”<sup>5</sup> – thankfully, in this country, we have elections every 5 years through which the governed have their say. You can cede to the government self transcendence or you can apply the brakes. That is the blessing of living in a democracy.

Nevertheless, the government has legitimate claims. The Apostle Paul details those rights in Romans 13. He says:

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 because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. (Romans 13:2–6 ESV)

So the Apostle Paul was obviously familiar with the teaching of Jesus on this matter and under the influence of the Holy Spirit he further fleshed out this implication. He says that God appoints

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<sup>4</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 424-425.

<sup>5</sup> Defined by online dictionary as “the overcoming of the limits of the individual self and its desires in spiritual contemplation and realization.”

human government – and not just Christian human government – Paul said this when Nero was Caesar of Rome. Paul is speaking in general terms – he is saying about secular government in general – that it has been appointed by God. So we are not to fight against it. It has been put in place for a reason. He lists two reasons in particular. To resist the evil doer and to approve or commend that which is good. For this end he or it has been given extraordinary authority – even lethal authority. For the King does not bear the sword in vain. He bears it for a purpose and that purpose is to punish the wicked and to protect the good.

So the government can collect taxes towards the end of maintaining the sort of society where good can flourish. That extends to things like building schools and hospitals and roads and bridges – those things facilitate human flourishing. And the government can hire police officers and judges and prison wardens and soldiers to punish and restrain evil doers. Those are legitimate claims and they don't in any way conflict with the claims of God upon the believer.

A believer can be a police officer and can if necessary exercise deadly force in the process of restraining evil. A police officer is the sword of the king. He or she is the duly authorized agent of evil resistance. You can be a police officer and you should respect police officers. A Christian person does not abuse the police – verbally or physically or via Social Media. He or she is God's minister for your good.

And a believer can serve in the military. You can be the sword of the King – or in our case – the Queen – in the process of restraining evil and protecting good in the world. It is no sin to serve as a soldier. And it is no sin to serve as a magistrate. These obligations and terms of service in no way contradict with our essential Christian commitments.

### **3. Christians are not morally responsible for what the government does with their tax dollars**

I get asked this all the time. Is it immoral to pay taxes in Canada when we have no laws limiting abortion and when a portion of that money goes to support sex education that is directly contradictory to what the Bible teaches? The simple answer to that question is NO. It is not immoral to pay taxes to a sinful government; on the contrary, it is immoral not to. Jesus said:

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17 ESV)

Give him the coin, Jesus says. Paul says the same thing:

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. (Romans 13:7 ESV)

To state the obvious Jesus and Paul said this in a context of sinful government. Paul said this when Nero was persecuting Christians. Jesus said this when Rome was persecuting Jews. They both could have made the argument that since the government was doing sinful things with the money then the money shouldn’t be given – but neither of them did. You are not responsible for the decisions made with the tax dollars that you surrender – elected officials make decisions for which they will be held accountable. In a democracy you are responsible for who you elect to make those decisions – but then they are responsible for the decisions that they make.

So you should vote for whichever candidate you believe will do the best job of restraining evil and facilitating good – and then you go home, pay your taxes and sleep like a baby. You are not morally culpable for the decisions made by wicked leaders. If you were then Jesus wouldn’t have said what he said.

#### **4. Christians will only rarely be forced into acts of civil disobedience**

The Bible isn’t saying that you will never have to choose between obeying the government and obeying God. The bible is just saying that obeying the government is not in and of itself disloyal to God. There may well be times when you have to disobey the government in order to obey God. The Bible talks about that. In Acts 4:19 when the Sanhedrin tells Peter and John to stop preaching in the name of Jesus they reply:

“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:19–20 ESV)

So Peter and John disobey the government in order to continue preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ – and they were subsequently punished for so doing. When they were re-arrested in chapter 5 for continuing to preach despite being commanded not to, the text says:



they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 5:40–42 ESV)

So there is a place for civil disobedience. If the government ever tells you to stop preaching Jesus Christ – you can disobey that command – but you have to be willing to pay the price. Notice that the disciples do not leave the council and immediately launch an on-line protest. Rather they rejoiced to have been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Christ. And they did not cease teaching and preaching about the Lord. They did their thing and they paid their fine and they got on with it. Less whining – more soul winning. That is a good example for Christians to follow.

Civil disobedience should be rare. The government does not often tell us that we can't preach in the name of Jesus – it does happen from time to time – but that kind of direct opposition is rare. So civil disobedience should be correspondingly rare. Most of the time Christians should be known as the best citizens in the realm – but if the government ever tells us not to worship or preach in the name of Christ, well then prepare yourself to suffer. Because day after day and week after week we will do that very thing. And we will pay whatever price is deemed necessary – so help us God.

Fifthly, lastly and relatedly we note that:

## **5. A Christian's ultimate hope is in the soon coming Kingdom of God**

Jesus says that the claims of Caesar and the claims of God are not necessarily contradictory – but he does not say that they are equivalent or corresponding – not by a long shot. He asks for the coin and he says:

“Whose **likeness** and inscription is this?” (Mark 12:16 ESV)

He uses the Greek word *eikon* which means “image” as in God created them male and female in the **image** and likeness of God he created them. Then he says:

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” (Mark 12:17 ESV)

Do you hear that? He says, give the coins to Caesar, but the men and women belong to God.

That's a very good answer and it is a very good reminder of the disparity that exists between the significance of the state and the significance of God; the state can have the coins but God claims all the people. I love what the French commentator A.F. Loisy says here; he says:

“Jesus emphasized the lawfulness of political power and of tribute much less than the insignificance of these things in comparison with the kingdom of heaven. . . . Let the things of this world be esteemed according to the smallness of their value, and let these duties be discharged as necessity may arise; but let men know above all that the greatest thing lies elsewhere, in fidelity to the heavenly father.”<sup>6</sup>

That is excellent counsel. Discharge your duties to the state as necessary. Pay your taxes. Sit on the jury. Pull over when you see the flashing lights. Serve in the military if drafted and run for public office if you wish. Participate to the extent that you are obligated and permitted within the system of government that you have.

But keep things in perspective. The government is not the answer. It's not always the problem either – most of the time it is a relatively insignificant good. So treat it as such. Do not hope in political figures – and do not despair in them either. Donald Trump is not the devil and he is not the Messiah. Kathleen Wynne is not Jezebel and Doug Ford is not Jesus. These are people serving as ministers within a passing kingdom. They deserve a measure of respect because of their position. They have the right to make certain claims upon us but they do not have the right to our worship. They do not have absolute authority over us and we ought not to look to them as if they were the Saviour.

They are not.

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. At is through his life and death and resurrection and present intercession that all people may be saved. Until he returns and reigns upon the earth, government will be a mixed blessing. They will do some helpful things and they will inevitably overreach. They will be checked by political protest and by democratic action. There will be progress and improvement followed no doubt by forgetfulness and regression. Sometimes there will be

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<sup>6</sup> A.F. Loisy as cited by Dennis Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Penguin New Testament Commentaries. (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 316.

harassment and persecution. So will it be until the end of the age. Therefore:

3 Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save.

4 When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.

5 Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. (Psalms 146:3–5 NIV11-GK)

That is good counsel; that is wisdom and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.