



Speaker:
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Payment to Government and God

◀ Series: The Gospel of Mark • 42 of 42

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And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians to catch him in his words. And when they were come they say unto him, "Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man; for thou regardest not the person of men but teachest the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? Shall we give, or shall we not give?" But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, "Why tempt ye me? Bring me a penny, that I may see it." And they brought it. And he saith unto them, "Whose is this image and superscription?" And they said unto him, "Caesar's". And Jesus answering said unto them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marvelled at him.

Jesus is in the temple with the disciples. He's already met with opposition from the religious elite. They questioned his authority to do and say the things he did, and he calmly and wisely puts them in their place.

He then went on to deliver a parable about a vineyard. In it, he shows himself to be the son who was killed by the farmworkers. After the parable, he made reference to an Old Testament prophecy about a stone rejected as not fit to build with. Yet it became the most important one in the spiritual construction of an eternal temple, the worldwide church of God. And he laid claim also to being this great cornerstone.

This twelfth chapter of Mark's gospel is an interesting one. We see in it each of the three main groups that make up the Sanhedrin testing Jesus:

- The Pharisees, who we're looking at today, question Jesus about *taxation*
- Next week, we'll see the Sadducees question him on the doctrine of the *resurrection*
- And the week after, we'll see the scribes question him about scriptural *interpretation*

As we go through these, take note that in each case they address him as "Master" ("teacher"). Although their use of the title is insincere, he affirms the title by the authority contained in his responses.

Today, then, there's a short delay before the opposition continues. The Sanhedrin conspired to send a select group of individuals to test Jesus. They think this group, using a new tactic, will be the one to ensnare the Nazarene.

The group's made up of Pharisees and Herodians. You might recall way back in chapter 3 the two groups making an alliance in order to destroy Jesus. These two Jewish sects were not ordinarily the best of friends, but they put their differences to one side to attack a common enemy.

They'd already planned to eventually have Jesus put on trial. Their aim today is to entice Jesus to say something incriminating they can use in evidence against him in court. Despite Jesus teaching with such authority; despite his obviously genuine miracles; despite his great

kindness; despite his indications he was their Messiah; despite his warnings they were going to kill the Son of God; they remain hellbent on wiping this man off the face of the planet.

The deceptive approaches aren't limited to calling him *Master*. They also pretend to believe:

- He has authority
- He speaks truth
- He isn't influenced by thoughts of safety or reputation
- And he's appointed by God in heaven

When I said they wanted to ensnare him, it was a very suitable word. In verse 13, the word translated "catch" was used to describe catching animals in a trap. It's another indication of the contempt they held Jesus in.

The question's found in verses 14 and 15. *Should we pay taxes to Imperial Rome?* There were many types of taxes in those days, as there are today. This one was a kind of poll tax, or *per capita* tax. Everyone gave the same amount, and it paid for the benefits enjoyed by the citizens of Judaea.

The selection of small number of Pharisees with a small number of Herodians has been carefully thought out. The Pharisees paid these taxes, but they thoroughly resented doing so. The Herodian families were much more friendly with the Roman rulers, and they didn't mind paying tax.

You may have guessed then why these two groups are chosen on this occasion. They're not sure how Jesus is going to answer this question about taxes, but whatever way he answers they'll have him. If he tells them they *should* pay their taxes, the Pharisees stand ready to accuse him of being a traitor to the Jewish people. On the other hand, if he tells them they *shouldn't* pay their taxes, the Herodians are standing by to accuse him of being a traitor to Imperial Rome!

Verse 15 shows us Jesus clearly sees their hypocrisy. The words we have translated "hypocrisy" conveys the idea of someone acting in a drama or wearing a mask. Their pretence of acknowledging his authority shows us the suitability of that word.

Jesus's answer is unexpected. It's an answer they could never have predicted. *Pay your taxes*, Jesus says, *but give God what he's due also*. His message to the Pharisees is if they are happy to receive the benefits of the state, they should contribute taxes that pay for it. His message to the Herodians is they needed to make sure they didn't honour Rome too much at the expense of devotion to God.

The party had gone from being confident they finally had Jesus to being stunned at his wisdom. Their plan had failed.

As we look at some principles today of our duty to both the state and God, I also hope we'll gain a better perspective so we'll be less inclined to focus on unimportant details and instead put the worship of God as the primacy in our lives.

OUR DUTY TO THE STATE

We're all part of a society. Wherever in this world we live, we're part of larger groups of people with civil rulers over us. Throughout history, people have found a greater advantage in being part of a wider community than living in isolation.

In the history of thought, there is the notion of the *social contract*. It describes how people enter into an arrangement with people who will rule over them. They agree to be considered as part of a society, and they forfeit some of their freedom. In return, the state provides them with security and other benefits.

We can see in Jesus's response an encouragement for believers to fulfil their side of the contract. While they're in this world, they're to sacrifice some of their freedom in order to submit themselves to rulers, and they must sacrifice some of their income to contribute to the benefits these rulers bring. Believers may have more important priorities, but they must still play their part in the situation they find themselves in.

You'll remember what Paul tells us in his letter to the church at Rome:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordained of God.

Romans 13:1

The apostle directed them in this way while they lived under the rule of a pagan empire, and the particular emperor running the show wasn't one of the good ones. Yet Paul, in agreement with the teachings of Jesus, reminds the believers **it is God who places rulers in their positions**.

This teaching has caused problems for many people, including me! It raises so many questions. Was Oliver Cromwell right to carry out a military coup and have the divinely appointed king killed? Were the Allies justified in toppling Adolf Hitler, a man ordained to that position by God himself? Was the Reformer Zwingli reasonable in waging war against the leaders of Roman Catholic states because they wouldn't agree to his demands?

We should count ourselves blessed if we find ourselves living in a country relatively free. We don't have to make such big ethical decisions. It's clearer for us: we have a duty to submit ourselves to national and local government.

And the lesson I've had to learn is I'm not to use the language I once did to describe leaders I didn't like. Now I won't risk alienating any of you by naming individual leaders and revealing which side of the fence I'm on! But I'll acknowledge that up to quite recently, I despised certain rulers and forgot they were put in those positions by God. And let's acknowledge this: *almost all the rulers God has ordained throughout history have been unbelievers, and many of those have had vicious streaks.*

But we submit ourselves to them as far as we're able. And this includes paying taxes. It's irrelevant how high the taxes are. The capital tax spoken about in our story today was very small. But there were many other taxes on top of this. Some have estimated the people of Judaea ended up handing over almost half their income in taxes.

This has a bearing on our society too. In the UK, we pay taxes on income, goods we buy, fuel, property, inheritance and many other things. In the US, people pay local, state and federal taxes, and are taxed on all kinds of other things like we are.

We can object to them. We can write to our elected representatives about them. We can start social media campaigns against them. But all the while, we must pay them.

It's interesting Jesus brings attention to the picture of Caesar on their coins. He tells them it's all effectively Caesar's money anyway. And if he wants some of it back, give it to him!

When you analyse the language used by both the Pharisees and Jesus, it reveals something about their attitudes. The question in verse 15 was phrased like this: *Should we hand over our money to the state?* They treated the money as theirs, and thought it was outrageous for the state to demand any of it. But Jesus replied, *You have a debt, so pay it!*

It's not as if they were unaccustomed to the idea of paying taxes for services received. They were happy to pay religious taxes, for example. They presumably begrudged paying taxes to Rome because they saw them as an occupying power. But the point is **they still received benefits from Rome.**

It reminds me of a scene out of a film years ago. I won't mention the name of it because I don't want to be recommending it to anyone. But it's a comedy, set in first century Judaea. There's a secret meeting of Jewish freedom fighters who want to end the Roman occupation. And as the chairman begins to vent against their Roman rulers, he asks the rhetorical question, *What have the Romans ever done for us, eh?* Then one of the insurrectionists puts his hand up and says, "Well there's the aqueduct." The leader grudgingly acknowledges this but repeats his question. Someone else pipes up, "Sanitation?" And this continues. After five minutes, the chairman ends up saying, "So: apart from the aqueduct, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, public baths, safety, health and peace, what have the Romans ever done for us!"

It was a joke of course, but all those things *were* very real benefits of first century Roman occupation. And even if we're angered at the amount of tax we're asked to pay, or the sheer number of different types of taxes, we should pay up. For all their faults, governments are ordained of God, and they use taxpayers' money to benefit society as a whole.

Submitting ourselves to our rulers means keeping the law of the land. Christians should be seen as a law-abiding people. The only reason Christians should be in jail is for doing their Christian duty. There's already pressure on governments to ban the ownership and reading of Bibles. (You don't need me to tell you which groups in society are campaigning the hardest for this.) But if new laws come out forbidding the public reading of the Bible, we'll ignore them. We're just following in the footsteps of the apostles:

Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Acts 5:29

In other words, the church is to function as it's supposed to, regardless of the law of the land. It may have to adapt, by meeting in secret for example, but it'll do all it can to continue.

It's worth taking a moment to talk about other laws. I know some Christians claim to keep the whole law of the land. I mean, that's just not possible! No one's ever completely avoided breaking the law, even if it's in minor ways. But it's true some are extremely careful about these things, even to the point of it becoming almost like a Pharisaic burden. At the other end of the scale are those Christians who are too casual about keeping the law of the land. All I can recommend is this: keep the law. Don't pay so much attention to the minutiae that it becomes a burden. But don't flout it in such a way as to bring disrepute on the name of Christ. And in all things, pray for a lively conscience that's neither too sensitive nor too insensitive.

I want to mention just one other aspect of our duty to the authorities. It's about prayer.

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men. For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour.

1 Timothy 2:1–3

Rulers, even the most wicked ones, have been given that role by God. And as fellow creatures, they're made in the image of God just as much as us. No matter how you view them, there's no escape for the believer: **he is to love both his friends and his enemies.**

So we pray for those in authority. We bring before God local councillors, city mayors, members of Parliament, the Cabinet, ministers and of course the Prime Minister. Believers in other countries will be obliged to pray for members of Congress, or senators, or presidents, or supreme rulers, and so on.

I'm under no illusion as to how difficult this can be. The Christian feels outrage when a nation's leader advocates the killing of children in the womb or the destruction of the traditional family unit.

But remember this: *you believers are the only ones God listens to.* The only prayers for leaders that will be taken notice of by God are yours. If through laziness you don't pray for those in authority over you, you must share responsibility for any wickedness the country suffers at their hands.

So what is it we're to pray for?

- Pray for them to receive wisdom from on high
- Pray they'll make righteous decisions
- Pray they'll enact good laws, and repeal bad ones
- Pray we'll enjoy liberty as a society, and for the church to enjoy freedom of worship and expression
- And pray too for those rulers who are believers. There aren't many, and they tend to not last very long with the various godless influences wanting to ruin them. But as long as they're in those positions, they need our prayer.

OUR DUTY TO GOD

It's curious the first part of Jesus's response is quoted far more than the other bit. It's curious because this second half is more important than the first. Yes, it's important to obey the authorities. But far more important to obey God—to give him his due.

When Jesus says we're to pay God what's rightly his, he's also having a dig at the Sanhedrin. You'll remember he accused them of robbing God by denying him the honour he was due. They were to pay Caesar with money and pay God with the sacrifice of themselves.

Bible students have often wondered whether there's another layer of meaning in Jesus's response. Think about this verse from the beginning of our Bibles:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

Genesis 1:27

We could think of it this way. Jesus uses the fact of Caesar's image on the coin to show his ownership of it, and their responsibility to return it when asked. And you could also point to *man bearing the image of God*. Therefore they, being owned by God, have a responsibility to give God what's his—that is, give of themselves.

And you who are believers have a very particular responsibility, since you are the only ones who are able to give God worship acceptable to him. Remember: everything coming from you to God is only acceptable to him because you're united to Jesus Christ. It's the value of his righteousness that's the basis for God accepting all your praises and petitions. It's because of your involvement with Calvary all your offerings are sanctified.

So what exactly is it we're to give to God?

- **PRAISE.** In praising God, we're telling him what we think of him. And we believe him to be the most high God. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Invisible, yet all-powerful. The one who has immortality. The one who not only created the world but governs it by his perfect wisdom.
- **THANKSGIVING.** There's so much to thank God for. There are the natural things, like friends and family, shelter, food and water, etc. More especially, there are the spiritual things, like our salvation, forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life, fellowship with the saints, freedom to preach the gospel, and so on.
- **CONFESSION OF SIN.** God is pleased when we acknowledge our failings. Each day, we're to freely confess the ways in which we've insulted God in the previous 24 hours. And this ability to admit sin is a mark of a believer. Fake Christians can be identified by their unwillingness to talk about how they sin against God and the church.
- **SERVICE.** We're to serve God in whatever ways we can:
 - **We serve God by worshipping him with other believers.** Again, those only pretending to be Christians will often neglect assembling with the saints.
 - **We serve God by ministering to the saints.** We make sure their material needs are met, and we help them with their *spiritual* needs through

encouraging them and praying for them. Remember, they're our real family, so they should always be in our thoughts.

- **And we serve God by testifying to others about what he's done for us.** We tell them he's had mercy on us. We tell them he's forgiven our sins. We tell them he's promised in his word there's a place for us in his eternal paradise. And at the very heart of all that we say about God is the cross of Christ—that Jesus took our sins on himself so that he could be blamed for them while we walk away scott free. We talk of Jesus as the best friend and brother we've ever had, and we urge hearers to find Jesus while they can.

In a week or two, we'll come across this verse in Mark:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

Mark 12:30

We're not to think we can EVER repay God for what he's done for us. But still, we use this language of repayment. And that last verse, expressed differently in different places, is meant to convey that we're to love God with every aspect of our being. We love him *sincerely*. We love him *emotionally*. We love him *intellectually*. And we do this with as much vigour as we can.

What we're to take from this today is there are duties to governments and duties to God. That is, we obey both the law of the land and the law of Christ.

When the law of the land is in conflict with our duties as believers, that causes a problem. In a way, it'd be an easier decision if there was a blanket ban on Christianity. It'd be clear to us all that we're to ignore the law in that case. Christians in the early church were put to death for refusing to simply take a pinch of incense and place it on some coals as a gesture of emperor worship. Protestants were killed by the Church of Rome for refusing to worship a mass wafer. Even today, believers are being imprisoned and killed for refusing to show reverence to pictures of leaders.

But as I mentioned earlier, there have been times in the past when believers have been in morally *difficult* situations. Just how do we draw that line in the sand?

As a small example, consider the situation in the UK today. The whole population has spent much of the last year in a kind of house-arrest. And this has prevented Christians from fulfilling their duty. So we've had some Christians flout the regulations and others stick to them strictly, with both sides arguing passionately on social media.

We've been prevented from meeting with the brethren. We haven't been allowed to visit lonely people, many of whom are unable to connect with others through the Internet. We haven't been able to break bread together. We've been hindered from much of our outreach. Those of us in ministry to prisoners and young people have been stopped.

The church has, for the most part, shown itself to be a group of good citizens. But our priority isn't how we look to others. **Our priority is trying to find out what is the best course of action regarding God and the worship of him.** I believe the church has co-

operated with the authorities so much because many have succumbed to fear-mongering. But others went along with it all because they assumed the lockdown would be a very short-term response. But it's gone on far longer than we expected. Where will we draw the line? How long should we hold back from doing our joyful duty to God? How do we know when to start disobeying the authorities? God forbid our motto would become, "We ought to obey men rather than God!"

My remedy won't surprise you. **We need to pray more.** We need to acknowledge to God that he's the one who put this government in power. He's the one who created this virus. He's the one who caused it to spread. And brethren, if we believe in God's sovereignty as we claim to, we must confess it is **God** who's taken the lives of these millions of people.

SO WE BOW THE KNEE TO HIM. WE PRAISE HIM AS LORD and beg him for mercy.

Justin was a leading figure in the early church. It was at a time when certain believers made what were called *apologies*. It's nothing to do with saying sorry for things! A Christian apology is an argument in favour of Jesus Christ. And these apologies were often addressed to rulers. The following was delivered to Emperor Titus in the second century:

Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment.

The first apology of Justin

As something to leave you with, I think that's a pretty sound attitude.

I hope the Lord blesses you as you figure out how to live in this present world, doing your duty to society and more especially, putting the worship of God at the very pinnacle of your priorities.

Amen.