

## Why Put Me to the Test?

- Mark 12:13-17
- Sometimes my mind works in mysterious ways, and as I was thinking about the questions in this text today, I was reminded of a game show years ago where a celebrity was given a question and the contestant had to decide whether the celebrity's answer was correct. The question was, if a truck driver's brakes went out when he was going down a mountain and there was a cliff ahead and a truck right behind him, what should he do? The celebrity shrugged and said, "Honk if you love Jesus."
- Well, these men who have been sent to Jesus by the Sanhedrin do not love him. In fact, they don't even love each other. The Pharisees and the Herodians were political enemies, the sanctimonious and the sacrilegious. Jesus stood against the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and against the worldliness of the Herodians, but because they both hated Jesus, they formed an alliance to get rid of him. We saw this early on in Mark's gospel, as he wrote in chapter 3, "The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." It's an example of, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Let's look at this story today under three main points: the trap, the questions, and the command.
- **The trap (verses 13-14)**
- In the last challenge, the Sanhedrin confronted Jesus head on, with accusation. He answered them with a question they could not, or would not answer: the baptism of John, was it from heaven or from men? So now they switch tactics and send people to him with praise and with pretense that they value his opinion and they want to know whether they should pay a certain tax. Luke calls them "spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said." Mark tells us that they came to "trap" him in his talk. The word is only used once in the NT, and it has the connotation for "violent pursuit." This is deadly sport but notice that they start with empty praise. They call him teacher. They tell him they know he is "true," and that he is impartial, not swayed by anyone's opinion or anyone's appearance. They top it off with, "(You) truly teach the way of God." Saints, every word of that is true, but what do you call it in this context? It's flattery! They are laying it on thick, and they must be thick to believe that Jesus doesn't see through their hypocrisy. Proverbs 29:5 says, "A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet." These men have not come to learn from Jesus. If they really believed what they had just said about him, then they would be following behind him, not conspiring against him.
- They finally get to their trap, er, question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" The tax they refer to is believed to be the Imperial Poll Tax which was levied against every adult male in Israel once a year, and it went directly into the imperial treasury. It was not used to build roads or provide aqueducts. It simply lined the pockets of the Emperor. This tax began in AD 6 and the payment was one denarius, a small silver Roman coin that represented one day's wages for a laborer. On one side of the coin was the head of Tiberius with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus." On the opposite side was the inscription, "Pontifus Maximus," or, "Highest Priest." It was such a highly unpopular tax that one zealot, Judas of Galilee, said,

“Taxation is no better than downright slavery.” The Zealots refused to pay taxes, because they considered themselves to be Israeli patriots, and they believed the overthrow of the Roman government was the will of God. This led eventually to an attempted coup in AD 66 by the Zealots, who took control of the city. That led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by future emperor Titus and the Roman army in April of AD 70.

- So, the question to Jesus could not be any more politically charged. And it seems like this is it for Jesus. There is just no way out of this dilemma. If he says “Yes,” pay the tax, then is he a friend of the common people? If he says no, then he can be accused of treason. There’s no way out!
- **The questions (verses 15-16)**
- Jesus answers his accusers, as he often does, with a question. Or two. I love Greg Koukl’s material on using questions in evangelism. He says, “Many people have never thought through their views and don’t know why they hold them.” So, if you ask them *why* they think something, it helps the other person clarify what they really believe rather than what they *think* they believe. Suggested questions include: 1. How do you know? 2. What do you mean by that? 3. How did you come to that conclusion? 4. Why do you say that? And more. Sometimes the person you’re talking to may go from argument to personal attack. They may say, “Well, all of you Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites and haters.” You can then ask, “I’m a little confused by your response. Even if you were right about my character, could you explain to me exactly what that has to do with the issue?”
- Jesus knows the hypocrisy of these men, so he asks first, “Why do you put me to the test?” They stare blankly at him, apparently, so he tells them to bring him a denarius. Interesting irony that they were able to produce one, which could indicate that they share complicity in the tax system themselves. But that point cannot be pressed. They give the coin to Jesus and he says, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” The question is simple, and the answer does not require a theological degree. Every child in the Roman Empire would be able to answer it correctly. *Whose image is this, little boy?* “Oh, that’s the Roman Emperor, Tiberius!” He might even be able to tell you that he is the divine emperor, and he is the highest priest. Worthy of worship, or so they claimed. These religious leaders who’ve come to trap Jesus know the answer as well, they know exactly whose image is on the coin: “Caesar’s,” they say. At this point, the drama has intensified. Everyone watching is holding his or her breath as they wait to hear how Jesus will answer. That’s when Jesus gives...
- **The command (verse 17)**
- I imagine Jesus handing the denarius back to whoever is leading the group, and then saying, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Oh, what an answer! They are stunned. In that answer, Jesus does two things.
- **First, he acknowledges the legitimacy of human government.** He distances himself from all forms of anarchy, best exemplified in that day by the Zealots who wanted to overthrow Roman occupation. Remember, Jesus chose as one of his disciples Simon the

Zealot, but it was not Simon who betrayed Jesus when he realized the Lord wasn't going to lead them into battle against Rome. Simon laid down his burning zeal for political freedom when he met Jesus. It was, as Thomas Chalmers wrote about 200 years ago, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." Chalmers, a Scottish pastor, was trying to illustrate the truth of 1 John 2:15, which says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Chalmers asked the question, "What is the best way to get all the air out of a glass beaker?" Well, you could try to pump the air out. But there's a better way to make sure the air is expelled. Fill it with water. So, what is the best way to get the love of the world out of my heart? It is a controlling affection, a powerful desire, this love of the world. Chalmers said one way is to try and demonstrate how the things of the world are not worth our affection, they will let us down in the end. But that's like trying to suck the air out of the beaker. The other is to show that God is vastly more worthy of the heart's attachment, awakening a new and stronger affection that displaces the former affection for the world. That's like pouring water into the beaker. Simon the Zealot had become Simon the disciple of Jesus when his heart was filled with Christ's love. His love of the world had been pushed out by a new affection, a love for Jesus.

- **Second, Jesus puts the question of living under Caesar in its proper place.** It is as if he hands the coin back to his accusers and says, "But I see another coin. I see another image." **Ask a child to come up.** "Do you know whose image is on this quarter?" George Washington. Our first president. Some wanted him to be our first king! He would not do that, for the good of the country, and we honor him with his picture on this quarter and on the one-dollar bill. **Hold mirror up.** Who is this? Do you know what the Bible says about you? You may look a lot like your parents, but the Bible says that you, and your parents, and everyone was created in God's image. So, who do you really look like? You look like your Father in heaven. **Thank you for being an image bearer of God! (And you can keep that picture)**
- Jesus speaks for God and as God when he commands everyone to "Render to God the things that are God's." As Sinclair Ferguson says, living under Caesar or under any form of human government is necessary but is a "distant second to the more important question of living in the kingdom of God." He also writes, "The man or woman who is devoted to God does not make the issue of his political freedom the number one priority in his life. He knows that he can serve God freely in his heart, under the most repressive regimes." The ultimate authority in life belongs to God.
- How did Jesus do in his answer? They came to trap him, and he could not be trapped. The result was, "they marveled at him." As do we.
- Isn't he worthy of our marvel? Our praise? Isn't he worthy of our undivided affection? He is!
- Prayer
- **Stand up and greet someone!**