

Obeying God & Caesar

Mark 12:13-17

Halifax: 26 July 2020

Introduction:

This morning, we will continue our sermon series in Mark's Gospel.

- As we make our way through this Gospel, we have come to the week when our Lord will be crucified.
 - In chapter 11, Mark told us how He entered into Jerusalem in a way that was very different to the way He had done it before:
 - He rode in on a donkey, in a deliberate attempt to present Himself as Israel's Messiah, receiving honour and praise as David's son who came in the name of the LORD to bring salvation to His people.
 - We saw how the following day, He went into the temple courts and drove out those who were selling animals for sacrifice and changing money there, declaring that His Father's house was to be a house of prayer for all nations rather than a market.
 - We saw how the priests, scribes, and elders of the Sanhedrin came to inquire by what authority He did these things and how He shamed them by exposing their unwillingness to declare by what authority John had baptised.
 - And then in chapter 12, how He directed a parable against them, exposing how they are among those who rejected the prophets that God sent to them and at last rejected God's beloved Son... of course Christ is the Son...
 - And how the Son (though rejected by them as the official builders of God's house) will be raised up by God to be the very foundation of His house.
 - We saw how their response was exactly as the parable had shown—they sought to lay hands on Him, but could not do so because they were afraid of how the crowd might react.

So now we shall find repeated efforts on their part to discredit Him before the people.

- Today, we see how they raise the thorny question of obeying Caesar.
 - J. C. Ryle says: Of all questions that have perplexed Christians, none have ever proved so intricate and puzzling, as the class of questions, which the Pharisees and Herodians here propounded. What are the dues of Caesar and what are the dues of God? These are hard knots that are almost impossible to solve... Many are the evils which have arisen in the church of Christ, from a morbid and distorted view of the relative positions of the civil government and of God. Many are the rents and divisions which have been occasioned by lack of sound judgement as to their comparative claims.
- The present time is a time when we are right in the thick of such questions.
 - In the current pandemic, the civil magistrate has given orders that have restricted our worship in various ways in an effort to limit the spread of the Coronavirus.

- All across the world, churches wrestle with where the authority of the civil magistrate begins and ends in this matter. It has caused division among Christians.
- We might be inclined to wish that all of this would just go away—I know that I have wished that—but we must remember that God has sent this at this time because it is exactly what we need.
 - He makes no mistakes and He has given us this for our good as His church.
- And in God’s providence, we have come to this passage today.
 - Therefore, we need to look deeply and carefully at the principles that God has given to us in His word about these matters.
 - We need to look not only at the issue itself, but also at very important issues that are related to this issue
- Please listen carefully as I read this passage to you. This is God’s word.

Mark 12:13-17: 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.

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading and preaching of His holy Word.

A moment ago, I mentioned that we need to look not only at the question of when we are to obey the civil magistrate, but also at issues related to this question.

- The words we just read have much to say to us about the matter of division as it relates to this question.
- So let’s begin by considering this first, that:

I. The goal of the enemies of Christ is to divide His followers.

A. Take a look at those who brought this question to Jesus.

1. They are actually apostles of the Sanhedrin.

- You see how verse 13 begins with the words, “Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians.”
- The word sent is *apostello* in the original which means one who is sent on official business by someone in authority.
 - The twelve apostles of Jesus are called apostles because they were officially sent by Jesus to act in His name.

- So these men were sent by the Sanhedrin, who, as we just saw in verse 12 last week, were eager to lay hands on Jesus.
 - These men were not just those who had a question—they were there to carry out the agenda of those who sent them.
 - 2. And that agenda is spelled out for us in the rest of verse 13.
 - We do not have to guess about it—we are told that they were sent “to catch Him in His words.”
 - The word “catch” here is used for fishing or hunting where you use bait to try to trap your prey.
 - 3. And look at these who are united in this effort—Pharisees and Herodians!
 - These two sects had little use for each other.
 - The Pharisees were hard line traditionalists who prided themselves on keeping their purity with reference to the ritual laws of God.
 - The Herodians were a worldly-minded political group that supported Herod who had been appointed by Rome.
 - These two groups had opposite views about the tax question they raise with Jesus.
 - As is often the case, although they were sharply divided with each other, they were united in their opposition to Jesus.
 - I remember when one of my daughters was with some Buddhists, Mormons, atheists, a liberal Lutheran, and some Catholics at a homeschool event and when the subject of the way of salvation arose, they all united against her.
 - Satan brings his own together when it comes to opposing Christ—they rejoice to see Him taken down—in whatever way it can be done.
- B. Look at their clever, carefully designed method for hurting Christ.
1. They begin with flattery.
 - Verse 14 says: **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.”**
 - a. Interestingly, what they say about Jesus here is actually quite true.
 - By admitting it, they actually condemn themselves.
 - If they believe that Jesus teaches the way of God in truth, they ought to become His disciples, yes?
 - b. Look how they lay on the flattery:
 - They call Him *teacher*—as if they had come to learn.
 - Then they emphasise that they are sure that He will tell them the truth without being afraid of what people will think.

- When they say that He cares about no one, they don't mean that He does not love others, they mean that He is not afraid of people's reaction against Him if He tells the truth.
 - They know from their own painful experience that no one can control Him—He truly is fearless and will say what He thinks.
- c. With this flattery, they have set Him up to answer their question definitively.
- That is what they want Him to do.
 - With this flattery, they put pressure on Him to speak fearlessly.
- Why do they want Him to answer them plainly?
2. The question they ask is carefully designed to divide His followers.
- a. The question is (from the end of verse 14): **“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? ¹⁵ Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?”**
- This has to do with a despised tax that the Jews were expected to pay.
 - Hiebert describes the tax like this:
 - *“Tribute*, a loanword, is a transliteration of the Latin *census*. It denotes here an annual head tax imposed by the Roman emperor, which went directly to the imperial treasury. It had been levied upon the population of Judea since A.D. 6 when Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, was deposed for his misrule and Idumea, Judea, and Samaria became one Roman province under the rule of procurators, appointed by the emperor. When first levied, it provoked a revolt (Acts 5:37) against the Romans. This tax continued to be extremely unpopular with the masses.”
- b. The men who asked this question knew that the Jews were divided about whether this tax ought to be paid.
- The Pharisees despised it, though they generally reluctantly paid it; while the Herodians were fully supportive of the tax.
 - Some of Jesus' followers were Zealots, and they strongly opposed the paying of the tax.
 - By asking this question of Jesus, the Sanhedrin hoped to turn many of Jesus' followers against Him.
 - If He said the tax ought to be paid, then the Zealots would look at Him as a weak compromiser.
 - On the other hand, if He denied it, it would get Him in trouble with the Herodians and they could report Him to the authorities.
 - It was the perfect trap.
 - Jesus' followers have unity, even though they have all kinds of different views.

- Some Pharisees were following Him at a distance, some Herodians, some just ordinary people who didn't have a strong views, some were Zealots.
 - But when Jesus was with them, they didn't talk about that stuff.
 - He was the focal point.
 - There's something beautiful about that.
 - All those other arguments take second place...
 - The little group wasn't where they found their unity anymore.
 - They found it in this one that they thought would somehow save them.

C. Look at how Jesus exposes these flatterers.

1. He calls them out plainly (v. 15): **But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why do you test Me?"**
 - He doesn't play along, keeping their motives secret.
 - Surely this was aimed at pricking their conscience... but that is not all.
 - He lets all who are listening know that these men are not asking a question so they can know the will of God—they are asking a question to trap Him.
 - This is helpful for His followers.
 - It shows them that there is an effort to manipulate them—and draws attention away from the issue about taxes itself (which was a hot one) to the goal which was to divide His followers.
 - Jesus had a former tax collector (probably a Herodian) as well as a former Zealot even among His twelve disciples.
2. My brothers and sisters, we need to see the grave danger that we are in with questions related to how believers should handle the Coronavirus.
 - Just this week, I saw articles by two men that I greatly respect, John MacArthur and Keith Mathison. They had divergent views. People were lining up.
 - We must be mindful of Satan's devices here.
 - He wants nothing more than to turn us against each other about whether we ought to wear masks or not, or if we can have more than ten...
 - Of course there are bigger principles involved, but I dearly hope that all of us hold to the bigger principles and realise that our difference on this is with specific application.
 - If we are in Christ and we are wrong, the Lord will sort that out soon enough.
 - We can have discussions about these matters with other believers, but we must be careful about judging one another—and charging each other with sins that we extrapolate from our neighbours' position.

- Know that sowing discord among the brethren is an abomination to the Lord while getting it wrong about how closely we comply with government regulations is a passing error that can soon be corrected... unless...
 - we make such an issue of it that we harden ourselves and reject biblical principles that will be the ruin of our posterity if not of ourselves.

II. Our wonderful Lord speaks to both parties. Hear Him!

- There is something for His hearers on both sides of the issue.

A. First, to those set on defiance of Caesar in the name of the Lord:

1. He begins with an object lesson.

- He asks for someone to hand Him a denarius.
 - That was the coin that was used to pay this tax.
 - It was the coin that was valued at one day's wage for a hired man—so for us it might be like a one hundred dollar bill.
- Verse 16 tells us what happened: **So they brought it. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's."**
 - James Edwards describes these coins:
 - A denarius was a Roman silver coin bearing the semi-divine bust of Tiberius Caesar (A.D. 14-37) with an abbreviated Latin inscription that is translated: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus." The reverse side bore an image of Tiberius's mother Livia and the inscription, "*Pontifex Maximus* (high priest)."
 - The idolatry was, of course, quite offensive to the Jews.
 - It must surely have been painful for them to utter the answer to Jesus' question of whose image was on the coin to say, "Caesar's"
 - Alan Cole says, "There is a world of bitterness in the terseness of their one word reply."

2. Jesus' point was probably not lost on any of them.

- Caesar's image was on the coins because Caesar had authority over them.
 - They were under the authority of Caesar every day as they bought and sold with his coinage.
 - God had put this pagan king in authority over them.
 - They were certainly familiar with this concept.
 - Since the fall of Jerusalem, they had been under the authority of pagan kings and the throne of David had been fallen.
 - First there was Babylon.
 - Then there was Persia, under whose permission Zerubbabel, Nehemiah and Ezra were allowed to return to Judea and rebuild the temple and the city walls at Jerusalem.
 - Then the Greeks were over them, giving them much grief,

- And now it was the Romans who were their overlords.
- The Lord made it clear to them through His prophets that they had lost their liberty as an independent people because of their unfaithfulness to Him and His covenant.
 - Jeremiah and Ezekiel, along with other prophets of the Lord, had instructed them to submit to these pagan kings, not in their worship, but in civil matters.
 - Our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah had instructions for them to live in Babylon (Jer 29:7): **And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.**
- So the logic of Jesus is inescapable.
 - God has put the man whose image is on this coin over you.
 - Pay your taxes with this coin of his.
 - **Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.**
 - The word *render* is actually *pay back*.
 - They had all the privileges of governance, law and order, Roman roads, protection, and lots of other amenities. This tax was in fact the payment of a debt.
 - It did not matter whether they approved of all that Caesar did or did not do.
 - No Zealot could deny that God had placed Israel under Caesar's dominion whether they wanted to be there or not.

TRANS> Perhaps the secularists such as the Herodians were pleased for a moment... but then Jesus finishes His sentence.

B. He speaks to them (and really to all) when He says, **and to God the things that are God's.**

- The whole is, **“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.”**
- 1. The plain teaching? Caesar is not God!
 - Though his coins made divine claims, these claims were nonsense and lies.
 - Submitting to Caesar did not mean putting him in the place of God!
 - His image is stamped on the coins, but the image of God is stamped upon His people. We belong to Him.
 - We are all made in His image, whether we admit it or not,
 - And if we are redeemed, we have been bought with a price so that we are doubly His—first by creation, and then by purchase or redemption.
 - As our creator, we owe all to Him—as our Redeemer we owe more than all!
 - We are to gladly pour out our lives in the service of sacrifice to Him.

- As those who bear His image, we are to reflect His wisdom, His goodness, His justice, His truth, His power, His holiness, His mercy, His love.
 - We were made to serve each other and to serve Him in love and purity.
 - There is to be a giving of ourselves to bless others—with our words, with our labours, with our prayers.
 - We are to restrain our own sinful desires for sex outside of marriage, for money, for self-exaltation, for revenge, for drunkenness, for gluttony, for all our sinful passions and desires, and instead receive God's gifts with thanksgiving.
 - This we owe to God.
2. And besides this, we are to be His worshippers.
- As such, we are to bring to Him whatever worship He requires of us in whatever way He requires it.
 - We are to sing the praises that He has given us in scripture.
 - We are to pray according to the directives He has given us in His word, and we to pray with sincerity and only in the name of Jesus.
 - In fact, our worship is to be not through idols, but through Jesus who was crucified and raised again to reconcile us to the Father—we must come to God only through Him or we are not rendering to God what He requires.
 - And we are to give thanks to Him, to read His word, and to listen to those that He has set apart in the church who preach His word.
 - We are to receive the word, to shape what we believe and how we live by it.
 - And we are to receive baptism and the Lord's Supper as He has directed, without adding our own ceremonies and embellishments.

TRANS> So Jesus sets things in order.

- Those who say that we ought to obey our civil leaders are right... and so are those who say that we ought to obey the true and living God.
- It is not that Caesar has his turf and God has His separated by a fence.
 - It is rather that God has set Caesar over us and sustains him in that place and that our service to God includes our service to Caesar in things that pertain to his rule.

C. Notice the response to Jesus' answer.

1. It says, **And they marvelled at Him.**
 - What irony there is here!
 - These clever men had set out to entrap Jesus with His words, to discredit Him and divide His followers,
 - but instead they had brought it about that they were all the more impressed with Him!
2. Truly, His words rang true to them all.
 - Those who claimed zeal for God that made them reject the civil magistrate were convicted that God had put Caesar over them.

- And those who were so busy with their secular affairs and temporal goals that they had forgotten God (in more than a formal nod) were called to repentance.
 - Truly, they had heard the voice of God.
- 3. See that you also marvel at our LORD.
 - There is no one like Him.
 - When we hear Him, we are not warped and twisted—we do not have that bitterness of spirit and that guilt and arrogance.
 - We have a life laid down at His feet with respect and honour for those that He has placed over us.

III. Let us consider how all this speaks to us in our present time.

A. First, we need to see to it that we are not divided from Christ and His people.

1. We are not ignorant of Satan’s desire to divide us over petty matters that we make into mountains.
 - It was wrong for the Zealots to refuse to pay taxes—Jesus made that clear.
 - But this was not something that should have caused them to turn away from Christ and His people... that is the division that Satan desires.
 - It was also wrong for the Herodians to pander to the Romans—to forget about the world to come, and live for this world.
 - Under the sun—when we live without reference to God—all is vanity and chasing after the wind.
 - To such persons, the Zealots are extremely irritating because they keep pointing those who have forgotten God back to Him again—to look not at the things that are temporal, but the things that are eternal.
2. We need to pray earnestly that we will all hold to Christ our head.
 - That we will be able to sit at His table, even when we have our differences, and find our unity in Him as crucified for us and as the one who gives us life.
 - We live for the hope of the resurrection—this world is not our home.
 - Guard your heart from pride and pettiness and pursue peace with all men.
 - And yes, pray for wisdom that we might understand the will of God, and that we might wait patiently.

B. Second, let us pursue “family obedience” with those who are in authority over us.

1. What do I mean by “family obedience?”
 - I mean family obedience as opposed to servile obedience.
 - Servile obedience is the obedience you render when you are hired to work for someone else, but family obedience is the obedience you have when you are working for your own “household.”
 - Take a family.
 - Suppose your father wants to have a house that honours the Lord—where the love and wisdom of Christ is seen.

- And suppose as a child, you are with your father—you want that too.
 - Then you will cheerfully submit to your father’s wisdom and leadership. You will do all that you can to contribute to the family.
 - But if you see your father as trying to control you... or push you out of the way...
 - It will be easy for you to be like a slave—just doing what you have to do to get by—having no interest in bettering the household.
 - But did you know that when God is in the picture, it doesn’t matter what your father’s goals may be...
 - you are called to pursue the betterment of the household on your part by cheerful submission and obedience.
 - You are to strive to be united with your father as much as you can in your service to the Lord.
 - This is what the Bible means when it calls children to submit to their fathers and wives to their husbands, even if they are disobedient.
2. Now carry this obedience over to the civil magistrate.
- It applies to your employment and your church life as well... but we are talking about our relationship to the governing authorities, so let’s focus on that.
 - The Bible teaches that you are to honour and obey them in all things—
 - with family obedience where you are seeking to promote the society and its leaders and do good to them rather than to tear them down.
 - Regarding the pagan Romans who were persecuting Christians, supporting the killing of children even after they were born, calling for idolatry...
 - Paul says: **Romans 13:1-8: 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. ⁸ Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.**
 - And Peter speaks to us even about corrupt leaders—that we should also honour and obey them as much as we can:

- In 1 Peter 2:13-17, he says: 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.**
- Yes, ungodly rulers will act in pride, they will overreach, they will make foolish decisions, sometimes they will have excessive fear, and at other times they will be reckless.
 - They may even persecute you to the point of death—as the Romans did Paul and Peter—but if God has placed them over us, we are to honour and obey them unless obedience involves YOU in sin.
 - There is a difference in them ordering you to sin and them treating you in a way that is sinful. You are to obey unless what they require of you is sinful.
 - When they sin against you, patience is called for.
 - When they order you to sin, you must obey God rather than them.
 - I might mention as well that in our society, sometimes there are so many rules that you can't possibly keep them all...
 - but the rule is that you seek to be a good citizen and obey what they enforce.
 - For example, if they set the speed limit and you go over a little, it is not a big deal because it is not a big deal to them—and if you get caught, pay your fine.
 - The goal is to show honour to them.
- 3. The Larger Catechism on the fifth commandment is very helpful in this whole matter.
 - Examine yourself by these:
 - Question 127: What is the honor that inferiors owe to their superiors?
 - Answer: The honor which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defense and maintenance of their persons and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love, that so they may be an honor to them and to their government.
 - Question 128: What are the sins of inferiors against their superiors?
 - Answer: The sins of inferiors against their superiors are, all neglect of the duties required toward them; envying at, contempt of, and rebellion

against, their persons and places, in their lawful counsels, commands, and corrections; cursing, mocking, and all such refractory and scandalous carriage, as proves a shame and dishonor to them and their government.

4. All of this is to be done in service to God.

- With the coronavirus, the civil magistrate has the difficult task of trying to promote public safety in a pandemic that little is known about.
 - We may question their wisdom and their motives, but we cannot deny that the Lord has put them over us and given them power to enforce their rules.
 - We have to be careful about our attitude toward them, even though they obviously do not understand the importance of worship—especially in a church culture that often puts sports and recreation over worship.
 - Some of you in this congregation have at times been slack about public worship—and inasmuch as you have, that has contributed to the whole problem.
 - If you bag church for no good reason, should it surprise you that God would deprive you of the assembly for a season?
 - If it is not important to us, the magistrate will not think it is either.
- Nevertheless, as those who know the importance of public worship in the assembly (be it a large or small assembly),
 - it may come about that we will not be able to comply with the limits that the civil magistrate may place on us.
 - It will be up to the session to decide when that is and what to do about it, and of course not all of you will agree with our decisions, (nor have you).
 - But be sure in any case that you pray for us and that you apply also Question 127 and 128 toward us before the Lord.

C. Above all, our goal as believers and as a local church should be to be blameless before the Lord.

- All is God's
 - He has given us the civil magistrate that we have and He has given you the elders that you have and He has given us each other in this congregation.
- Our goal must be to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.
 - If Christ and His apostles could command obedience as the default mode toward Caesar in their day, how much more can we command it today?
 - Our lives are to be lived for Jesus Christ.