

Mark 12.13-17 – Discussion Notes
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Previously in Mark:

- Triumphant entry.
- Cursing of the fig tree.
- Temple clearing.
- Parable of the evil farmers (round one).

Welcome to round two:

- The next three episodes depict Jesus' run-ins with the various religious groups within the temple.
- First up, the Pharisees and Herodians.

Setting the scene:

- Jesus is teaching in the temple.
- The main characters are Jesus, Pharisees and Herodians.
 - The Pharisees were a strict sect within Judaism. They felt the outside culture was impure and ungodly, so they segregated and purified themselves by extensive legalistic, religious ritual.
 - The Herodians lived on the other end of the spectrum. Though they were Jewish they collaborated with the Roman oppressors and some even profited by sympathizing with their occupiers.
 - The Pharisees sought to remain loyal to God as their king by retreating into ritual-keeping and religious custom. The Herodians were in bed with the Romans.

13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.

- The temple leadership mounts a number of attacks on Jesus, sending different religious groups to test and trap him. This is the first of three.
- The Pharisees and Herodians would typically be at odds with one another religiously and politically, yet they are united in attack of Jesus in this instance. (Ironically, the Pharisees purity quests have led them to soil themselves in rebellion of God amongst them.)
- It was because of what Jesus proclaimed, “his talk”, that the temple leadership opposed him.

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.

- Even we, the modern reader, can sense the “buttering up” these people are trying to give Jesus.
- This is not mere flattery, however, intended to win Jesus over. They’re words are aimed to emphasize Jesus credible status with the people – that he teaches with pure, righteous motives, never catering to powerful or popular opinion.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?”

- The question, based on the preface, is intended to put Jesus between a rock and a hard place.
- The tension and drama surrounding taxation in Judea in the first century dwarfs the sensitivity around the subject today.
 - As an occupying force Rome taxed the peoples they oppressed. Judea was *paying* to be occupied – shelling out for the swords, sandals and supper of the soldiers who oppressed them.
 - Taxation was also a painful reminder for the Jewish person that they didn’t live in a Theocracy (God as sole king), as they believed was

their destiny, but instead under the Roman Imperial regime. The land God was supposed to have given them, the blessing they were supposed to be enjoying, was robbed of them. *Their world was wrong.*

- The words “Is it lawful” represent the vested interests of both parties, united in their attack against Jesus. *These words are carefully chosen.*
 - For the Pharisees “lawful” pertained to the Torah, their Holy Scriptures. If God was their true king, should they be paying for continued subjugation by the Romans? Wasn’t allegiance to Caesar, even if involuntary, treason against God?
 - For the Herodians “lawful” pertained to the Roman laws of taxation and general Roman rule (*Pax Romana*). Aware of the political-religious tension when it came to allegiance to Rome or God, the Herodians pressed the question with concerns that Jesus had arrived under the *Hosannas (the save us songs)* of the people with political intentions. Had Jesus come to lead a rebellion?
- The question puts Jesus in the most dangerous of pickles.
 - If he answers, “don’t pay your taxes” Jesus will emphasize God’s kingship over Israel and seem pious, perhaps becoming even more popular with the crowds. *But* he’d also be identifying with the zealots of the day and be making a clear statement about his aims to rebellion leadership. The Romans might do away with Jesus themselves, and the temple leadership won’t have to worry about him any more.
 - If, however, he answers, “pay your taxes” he’ll be siding with the Roman sympathizers and will lose credibility with the crowds. His reputation for teaching what is “true...un-swayed by appearances and opinions” will go out the window.
 - However Jesus answers puts him in hot water. If he answers, “I don’t know” (as the temple leadership had in the previous interaction, Mark 11.33) they will have exposed weakness and bias in this seemingly integral, unshakeable figure.

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."*

- Jesus, without hesitation, strides boldly into their trap. He sees right through both their intentions and logic.
- "bring me a denarius" - this was a roman coin, minted with Caesar's face on it, and an inscription including the words "son of god". It was the currency accepted to pay the Roman tax and had to be handled by everyone. Caesar's face and the inscription on the coin was a painful reminder of the political and religious reality Israel lived under.
- Jesus doesn't shy away from the painful reality. They've opened the wound and Jesus pours salt on it.
- *(It is curious that Jesus didn't have a denarius on him and many have wondered if this is a meaningful note. Most is conjecture as its not Mark's main thrust).

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."*

- The sheer renown and universal recognition of Jesus' pithy retort are testament to its brilliance. We know these words so well *because* they are so wonderfully clever. *But what do they mean?*
- Jesus doesn't set himself up as a pretender to the throne, a rebellion leader. He refuses to be put in that box – "give to Caesar what's due him". This would have been disappointing for some. Maybe Jesus isn't going to start a revolt. *Maybe he's not about raw power and force. Is he different?*
- Jesus also doesn't taint his "lawful" reputation when it comes to his righteous standing and Israel's devotion – his statement poses the question, "what do we owe God?"

- So, Jesus both avoids political jeopardy and stands firmly on Israel's belief that God rules over all as a sovereign deity. He doesn't dethrone God.

And they marveled at him.

- The Lord of the temple has again shown his supremacy. As Mark has stated previously, everyone was amazed.

The Implications of Jesus' words

- These are famous words. But why are they famous?
- Well, Jesus' doesn't simply outwit his opponents. His words have *dramatic* implications for how his new kingdom will grow, how his vision for this new world will unfold.
- Remember at the very beginning of Mark, Jesus comes announcing what would have been heard as a decree – an official statement from God that things have changed. "The kingdom of God is here". (Mark 1.15) What will this kingdom look like?
- What are the implications of Jesus' words here?

First implication we don't have to serve *either* God *or* Caesar – sometimes we can serve God *while* serving Caesar. Why? How?

- *Because* truly God's kingdom is over all other kingdoms, systems and governments, *but* it's subversive, transformative nature means it is not only *above* but *throughout* all other kingdoms.
- In other words, this new kingdom will permeate and transform all others. *The world won't change by God simply forcing it to.* It will change from within. You could say, like a tiny seed that is planted and grows slowly.
- Peter and Paul pick up on this and more fully unpack how this happens for us in daily life (Rom 13.1-7, 1 Tim 2.1-6, 1 Pet 2.13-17).
- This means that you and I don't have to trade in our keyboards, shovels, aprons and diaper bags for palm branches in order to follow Jesus. In his

kingdom our everyday tools are transformed into instruments of worship and story – we can praise as policewomen, paralegals and parents, worship as waiters and warehouse workers.

- In doing so, God will change the nature of where and who we serve.

Second implication – the even better news – Jesus reminds us that God ultimately is above every ruler, every kingdom and we can trust the one who made us and rules – even when find ourselves in terribly difficult situations.

- Caesar may have put his face on some things. Give them to him – they’re his. God put his face on you. Give him yourself – trust him, you’re his. And this God is a much kinder, gracious, loving God than we could possibly imagine. He’s a better God than Caesar.
 - That, in the words of Gandalf the Grey, is an encouraging thought.

Some of us have only ever served tyrannical, oppressive regimes. We’ve served the god of money, the god of approval and validation from others, the god of power. These gods tax us to death. In our good friend Rikk’s words, today is a good day to become a Christian, and begin to serve a God who’s dedicated to loving you, serving you, is concerned with your wholeness and has your best interest at heart. Not only is he worthy of your allegiance, since he made you, allegiance to this God (as seen in Jesus) is the best life possible.

In other words, render to Caesar what is Caesars – but remember whose rendering you truly are. That rendering, that face (strong, but humble and kind) is your true image, your true identity, your true self, and living out of that image will transform the world.

Discussion Questions

- What interested you about this story? What did you learn?
- What challenged you about this story?
- What comforted or encouraged you about this story?
- How do you see God’s kingdom practically permeating your life and work?