

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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Sermon title: God or Government, Mark 12:13-17

Date preached: October 23, 2016

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There are two points to my message today, but they are equally important.

1. Give to Caesar What is Caesar's.
2. Give to God What is God's.

SCRIPTURE: Mark 12:13-17 ¹³ *Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴ They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?"*

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

¹⁷ *Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."*

And they were amazed at him.

EXPLANATION: The passage in Mark we are addressing today is very timely as far as our country is concerned. We are in the middle of a messy, mudslinging, name-calling, and character-assassinating presidential campaign. You cannot turn on your television without being bombarded by a multitude of accusations the two political parties are hurling at each other.

Believe it or not, Jesus encountered much the same thing from the Pharisees and the Herodians as they attempted to trap him with clever schemes and questions and

smear him and his followers with slander and lies. Their stalking had started early in his ministry, but now had reached a high peak in the week prior to his crucifixion. They were the paparazzi and investigative reporters of their day, but they were not objective.

As you know, Israel was under Roman rule at this time. The big dividing question was what their stance should be toward Rome. And you also know, the Pharisees were a legalistic religious group, but are you aware that they were also a political party? They hated the pagan Roman occupation of Israel. They believed it was immoral and an affront to God. They did not preach blatant rebellion, because Rome would have crushed a rebellion immediately, but they held that all true Israelites should resist wherever and however they could. They were looking for a Messiah who would arise and overthrow Rome. Many of the common people embraced their patriotic message.

Who were these Herodians? The Herodians were Jews who took on Greek ways and collaborated with the Romans. Their stance was that in order for life to be comfortable and to get along, it was necessary to get along with the Romans. They believed people should just accept Roman rule and make the best of it.

The Pharisees were ardent nationalists, opposed to Roman rule, while the Herodians supported the Roman rule of the Herods. We can confidently say they stood on opposite sides of the political fence. Now, however, the Pharisees have enlisted the help of the Herodians to trap Jesus in his words. They feared Jesus would upset the apple cart for both of them. So they came up with a very clever question about taxes: “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

If Jesus had said: “No true Israelite who loves and honors God should pay the tax. Just look at the coin. It bears the image of Caesar Augustus with all of his titles claiming to be divine—it’s blasphemous. Don’t even touch that coin!” All of the common people would have agreed with him and cried, “Yes! What a patriot and godly man!” But then Jesus would have been arrested for sedition.

On the other hand, if Jesus had said, “Roman occupation is a political reality. It’s not necessarily bad. Rome brings stability and economic prosperity. Let’s just all get along and cooperate,” then he would have lost all credibility with his followers.

Instead, Jesus gives an answer they did not expect. He escaped the dilemma and exposed their hypocrisy once again. He silenced his enemies and amazed the crowd. In this passage, however, we see more than just a clever answer. Jesus had previously taught that we are to be in the world but not of the world. Here he demonstrates how to live a life of total allegiance to God, while at the same time navigating the tricky political waters. He avoids the two extremes of either ignoring the politics or putting our trust in them instead of in God.

QUESTION: What does it mean to give to Caesar (i.e. government) what is Caesar's, and what does it mean to give to God what is God's?

First, GIVE TO CAESAR WHAT IS CAESAR'S.

- Jesus, by implication, is instructing that God's people are to give the state—the government—all that belongs to it. The issue in his day was taxes. None of us relishes in the idea of paying taxes, but in Jesus' day it was a far more complicated issue. We believe the particular tax referred to in this passage was the poll tax which was used to finance the Roman army. They really hated this tax. Not only did the Jewish people have to pay land tax; they had to pay taxes for the very military men who oppressed them and ruled over them.
- Also the exact coin that was used, a silver denarius, was considered by the Jews to be blasphemous because it had Caesar on his throne in robes of a deity—indicating he was a god.
- I think most of us understand that as citizens in America we are required by God to pay our taxes. But, what is our obligation to the government politically? We live in freedom. As citizens we can be part of the political process by voting, campaigning for candidates and laws, petitioning officials, and even running for office if we should so choose.
- What does God require of us in terms of political involvement to our government?
- First, let's take a look at the kingdom of God: Jesus' kingdom is here and now, but his kingdom has not yet come. We know these Scriptures - ... "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand." (Matt. 3:2)

... “The kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21)

... “You are a kingdom of priests.” (1 Peter 2:9)

But then sometimes the Scripture says that Jesus’ kingdom is not yet here:

... “Pray, ‘Thy kingdom come ...’” (Matt. 6:10)

... “The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our God and Christ.” (Rev. 11:15)

- Both are true—the kingdom of God is within us, and the kingdom is yet to come. The Holy Spirit came to dwell within us and unleash the powerful spiritual forces of forgiveness, love and regeneration. We live by the Spirit. We have eternal life. But, we also believe that the kingdom of God is not yet here. This world is still broken, full of sin and decay and pain and sickness and evil. As followers of Jesus, we eagerly await the day when he will usher in the new heaven and the new earth, wipe away every tear, and right every wrong.
- Believing both of these truths influences the way we view ourselves and politics.
- So what stance should we, as Christians, take as far as politics is concerned? What would Jesus do?
- I see two extremes:
 1. We can take the stance that politics is a secular, worldly enterprise. We could say what really matters to God is the Gospel. It’s a waste of time for Christians to pour their energy into politics. This world is going to burn, and it won’t ever be right until Jesus comes back. Someone has said it’s like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. If we take this stance, we disengage from politics altogether.
 2. Or, we could say the kingdom of God is here and now, and as citizens of God’s kingdom, we are to use politics to set up moral and just social structures. Jesus came to set the captive free, feed the poor, take care of the orphan, and heal the sick. Christians must get involved politically to bring about changes. Politics can advance the kingdom of God.

- We are in a spiritual battle for the soul of America as I speak today. We might tend to believe if we just get the right people in office and get the right laws passed, we can bring this nation back to Christ. *That's just not true.* Only a spiritual awakening across this land can bring this nation back to God.
- If we have a proper understanding of the fact that the kingdom of God is here, but it is not here yet, we can develop appropriate boundaries for our political lives as Christians.
- The fact that Jesus has come and his kingdom is here and now alerts us that politics do matter. Every facet of life matters. We are to be active in pushing back the effects of the Fall through the power of Jesus in us. So in the workplace, school, the marketplace, and our social lives, we should be asking the following questions: How can I work as a citizen in Christ's kingdom here and now to counteract the effects of the Fall? What is the just society God wants? How can the moral law of God be applied to the government of our country?
- But we do these things knowing God's kingdom has not yet come. Political life will always be tainted, always be compromised, always struggle with dishonest politicians. There is no perfect government and no perfect political party to save the day. We live in a fallen world. We are sinners, and so are our candidates.
- Therefore, as Jesus taught in this simple illustration in our Scripture passage today, we owe a debt of political involvement to Caesar. We need to pay our taxes. We must vote and be involved as doors open for us to have a role. It's important. It matters. But it won't usher in the Kingdom of God.

Second, GIVE TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S.

- We owe God our ultimate allegiance. As Jesus held the coin with the image and inscription of Caesar, which validated his authority and claimed divinity, Jesus denied the claim of deity when he said, "Give to God what is God's." The message is this: we owe ultimate allegiance to Christ and his kingdom.

- Yes, we should be loyal to our country, and many have put their lives on the line for it, but our ultimate allegiance must be to Jesus Christ.
- Jesus taught the same thing about your family. “If you do not hate your mother and father, you cannot be my disciple.” Our ultimate allegiance must be to the family of God, not even to our blood families.
- Daniel was loyal to the king until he had to choose between bowing down to the king or to God.
- First and second century Christians who had been loyal citizens of Rome ... and interestingly enough many served in the Roman army ... were thrown to the lions for refusing to bow down to Caesar.
- America is a free nation. But we need to be careful not to equate patriotism with allegiance to Christ. Nations rise and fall. Jesus paid for the souls of people from every tribe and nation.
- Giving to God what is God’s means that we believe our hope for America is in Jesus, not in politics. Our problems go far beyond our social structures. We are born morally corrupt, and even with the best environment and the best education, we would still be corrupt.
- We should and must take political positions that come from the laws of God: Scripture says the state is to defend the innocent and stand against evil. You may have strong convictions that one party or the other would be better at accomplishing these goals, but we cannot put our hope in them. That would be giving to Caesar what is God’s.

CONCLUSION: Our hope for making America great again is not who is seated in the White House or in Congress or in the Supreme Court, but who is seated at the right hand of God ... our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Be active in politics, yes – campaign for your candidate – vote. But know that our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus.

[Prayer for the country.]

We may debate our political differences, but salvation is through faith in Christ alone, and this faith unites us. If you've never accepted Jesus, this altar is open. If you need prayer for any other issue, this altar is open.

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