

CHRIST & CAESAR

Gospel of Mark

Mark 12:13-17

INTRODUCTION:

It used to be the case that here in the South you didn't talk about two subjects. And those two were: religion and politics. Nowadays people still don't want to talk about religion—but everybody wants to talk about politics.

Well, today Jesus brings both of those topics to our attention: religion and politics. Christ & Caesar.

Here's my hope for today:

1. I hope to offend everybody a little bit. There is none righteous, no not one and that means a sermon ought to challenge everyone in the room—because Christ challenges us all.

2. I also hope to hold up Jesus as the all sufficient savior who rescues all of us from our sin.

3. I hope this sermon forges you—LWBC—into a formidable gospel-driven, Bible saturated, Jesus loving, truth wielding, humility pursuing machine. We're gonna need to become that if we're gonna shine as lights in this crooked and perverse generation.

4. I hope you begin to realize that your church isn't a political monoculture. Don't get me wrong—I don't think our membership are at odds or on different extremes. But, if you are a member and you think that everyone here holds the same

exact political opinions and expressions as you do then you have not done a good enough job of getting to know your brothers and sisters in Christ. And I hope you realize that while our members are called to agree on certain issues like the sanctity of human life and the divine institution of marriage—our unity isn't with a particular platform, or politician, or party. We do not ultimately follow the donkey or the elephant—we serve and worship the Lamb. Amen?

Alright. First sermon over. Let's start the real sermon.

CONTEXT/BRIDGE THE GAP:

Passion Week, or Holy Week

- Sunday – Triumphal Entry
- Monday – Cleansing of the Temple
- It's now Tuesday.
- Jesus will be crucified on Friday.
- Resurrection Sunday.

Between now and the end of ch. 12 Mark shows us 4 times that the Jewish leaders question Jesus.

- Authority – “Who gave you permission?”
- Political Alliances – “Taxes to Caesar”
- Doctrine – “Resurrection”
- Ethics – “Greatest Commandment.”

In each case they are laying traps for him. And, in each case he passes the test.

SIGNPOSTS:

So, first let's look at the text, and then we'll make some applications.

PART ONE: WALK THROUGH THE TEXT

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

- Notice WHO approaches:
 - Pharisees & Herodians
 - Pharisees were the pro-Israel, Anti-Rome hyper-conservative religious crowd.
 - Herodians were the liberal compromisers who supported the reign of the “Herods,” essentially, they sided with Rome.
 - Pharisees/Sadducees next week.
- But they are here together in a united front against Jesus.
- Notice the WHAT of the approach:
 - “to trap in him his talk.”
 - Trap = a word used of snaring a wild animal or hooking a fish.
 - And they seek to trap him in his talk, lit. “in a word.”
- They want him to make a single, declarative, and damning statement. A single word. A single tweet. A single, unnuanced, statement that will result in undermining his entire life's work.
- They don't come to have a conversation. They don't come to dialogue. They aren't there to understand their opposition. They've already condemned him in their heart, and they're hell-bent on bringing that condemnation into reality.

- Friends—a quick warning, early in the sermon: if the people you follow aren't interested in understanding and listening to their opponents; if instead they endlessly work to trap their opposition in their words, then you're being influenced by the kind of people who killed Jesus.
- Friends, we are called as Christians to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.” But we will fail in that task if we aren't pursuing it patiently, first with a passion to redeem and snatch people from the fire.
- This means that places like social media are far better suited towards trapping people in 140 characters than they are suited to dialogue, discussion, and winsome debate.

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.

- What's interesting: it's all true. He only spoke truth. His speech didn't change based on who he was addressing. He wasn't swayed by appearances, and he did teach the way of God.
- Yet, they certainly didn't believe a word of what they were saying. And we know this because they didn't believe Jesus when he called them “white-washed tombs, full of dead men's bones.” Matthew 23:27-28
- What are they doing? They're trying to flatter him.
 - They're trying to butter him up.
 - Flattery, in this case is like the mirror opposite of gossip. Gossip is saying behind someone's back what you'd never say to their face. Flattery is

saying to someone's face what you'd never say behind their back.

- Friend, did you know that as much as the Bible condemns the sin of gossip and salacious talk, the Bible equally condemns the sin of flattery?

⁵ A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet. (Proverbs 29:5)

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

God loves it when we honestly compliment the various gifts, abilities, and virtues that he has given to us. But he hates it when we speak flattering words—words we do not believe about the person—in order to use them. Friends, guard your speech against flattery.

Truth is such a rare and valuable commodity today, and we need every ounce of truth we can muster in our church, our families, and our community. Don't make the mistake of thinking that even our small flatteries aren't apart of the larger break-down of truth-telling in our culture.

They're trying to trap Jesus, and they begin by flattering him. Now we come to the question they ask.

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

- They are asking Jesus if paying the tax levied by a pagan government is lawful according to the Mosaic law. In

other words, they want to trap Jesus in what they see as a conflict between Biblical law and civil law.

- They rightly know that nothing is quite as volatile as mixing religion and politics in one conversation.

The Tax:

- The tax was the annual imperial poll tax. It was basically census tax and was absolutely hated by the conservative Jews—not because the tax was particularly onerous. The denarius was only a day's wage for an average laborer. They hated the tax because of what it symbolized.
- The Denarius was a Roman silver coin bearing the image of Tiberius Caesar and was minted with the words, "Tiberius Caser Divi Augusti Filius Augustus" Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the god, Augustus. And on the reverse side it read, "Pontifex Maximus" – High Priest.
- And to levy the tax was an annual reminder that ultimately, you served and lived by Caesar's good pleasure.

Now, here's the part of the story that I never knew until I began studying this passage:

So hated was this tax, the historian Josephus tells us that:

- 25 years earlier, when the tax was instituted in A.D. 6 there was an armed revolt led by a man named Judas the Galilean. And three things happened:
 - First, Judas declared that God alone was to be king—not Caesar.
 - Second, he led his followers into the temple and cleansed it. He threw out all the Gentiles.

- And finally, he refused to pay the tax.
- The revolt was immediately squashed by Rome and Judas the Galilean was executed.
- And we know that this revolt was still remembered and talked about in Jesus day because Judas the Galilean is mentioned in Acts 5.

Now, do you see what's happening?

- Jesus has been preaching that the kingdom of God was come.
- He's cleansed the temple.
- All of Jerusalem, all of the Jewish pilgrims for Passover week have been watching and there's only one thing left to do: refuse the tax.

The Pharisees and the Herodians have laid the perfect trap:

- If he says "don't pay the tax, he's calling for a revolution. The Herodians will run to the Roman authorities and they'll kill Jesus.
- If he says, "Pay the tax," everyone who has heard him preach about the coming kingdom will know he's just been blowing smoke.
- It's a perfect trap. But Jesus is really good at springing traps.

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." **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." And they marveled at him.

- When Jesus says to render to Caesar the things of Caesar, you need to understand that the coin didn't just bear his image—the coin actually belonged to him. It was minted out of his wealth. It was actually was Caesar's coin.
- And, in the same way that the coin bore the image of Caesar, Jesus lifts his eyes and looks at a group of men who bear the image of God and says, "Give Caesar that which bears his image and give to God that which bears his."
- Mark ends by telling us they marveled. They weren't angry. They weren't excited. They marveled. He goes right between their false dilemma and challenges both groups.
 - To the Pharisees he says, "God created the institution of government, so pay your taxes."
 - To the Herodian he says, "God, not Caesar is Lord and therefore your allegiance to any civil government must have its limits."

So, what do we learn from this trap that was set and Jesus' response? 6 applications:

1. YOU NEED THE ENTIRE BIBLE TO SHAPE YOUR POLITICS

- No doubt this is one of those "go-to" passages when addressing politics. And if you want to be thoroughly Biblical in your politics—you need this passage.
- And you also need the entire Bible. Mark 12:13-17 gives you one piece of the Biblical picture—but church—hear me—in these challenging days we need all of the Bible for all of our political life. Not just a single passage. Not just a handful of prooftexts.

- So, let me give you some passages. I'll post these later:
 - Genesis 1 – the first government that is set up is the government of the sovereign, independent creator over the dependent creation.
 - Genesis 2 – the second government God creates is the family.
 - Genesis 9, and Romans 13 – those are two of the foundation passages where we see that God institutes civil government.
 - And the entire New Testament tells us that God has established the government of the church.
- Each of these governments that God has instituted: the family, the civil magistrate, and the church have their own spheres of sovereignty and authority. You need to recognize all of these and get familiar with God's expectations and boundaries for them.
- You need to read Exodus 20 and Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 and 1 Peter and the prophets and Revelation. You need the entire Bible to shape and form your political opinions.
- You don't need a political science degree, or a theology major—but you need all of the Bible.

2. BE A GOOD CITIZEN, EVEN IN A BAD GOVERNMENT

- Rome wasn't a great government. They didn't recognize the true God, yet Jesus calls his followers to live as good citizens.
- According to the Bible, God gives the civil magistrate the authority to punish criminals and to levy taxes.
- And in this passage Jesus says, "Pay your taxes." Be a good citizen. Just because the government is isn't good doesn't exempt you from being a good citizen.

- You aren't held responsible for how the magistrate spends your tax dollars, God will hold the government ultimately accountable.

3. CIVIL GOVERNMENT HAS AUTHORITY, BUT IT'S LIMITED

- Having told us to be good citizens, Jesus turns right around and says, "But you can't give universal obedience to the magistrate." Give to God what is God's.
- I love what Pastor Mark Dever had to say on this point:

"Jesus' approval of paying taxes to Rome was revolutionary. By this, Jesus shows us that the legitimacy of a government is not determined by whether it supports the worship of the one true God, or even allows for it.

- In the past year so many Christians have tied themselves in simplistic knots over the restrictions placed on us throughout the pandemic.
 - Many have looked at passages like Romans 13 and said, "We must obey every restriction because God tells us to submit to the governing authorities."
 - Others have looked at passages like Mark 12 and said, "No, we actually have to disobey the restrictions because the government has overstepped its boundaries."
- On the one hand we must never forget that the Apostle Paul, who told us in Romans 13 to submit to the governing authorities was a fugitive. He disobeyed when the government tried to stop him from preaching.

- And on the other hand, we dare not forget that Jesus Christ, the truly divine Son of God—paid taxes to the false “son of the divine” whose government would execute him.
- All of this is to say that finding the balance between civil disobedience to a magistrate and civil disobedience to a magistrate isn’t always easy, it isn’t always clear. Christians will often disagree.
- But we are not called to be scofflaws. We are called to honor the authority God has given the government as a general rule so that when as an exception we decide to draw a line in the sand that we refuse to cross the onlooking world will marvel.

4. ALTHOUGH GOVERNMENTS ARE SUBJECT TO GOD, GOVERNMENTS CANNOT COERCE BELIEF

- Follow me here. The government is accountable to God, right? Yes. And God’s word is true right? Right! So, the government should force people to worship the true God, and should criminalize idolatry, right? WRONG.
- When Jesus says to render to God that which is God’s he’s saying that while God has given the government authority to punish evildoers—God has not given the government jurisdiction over the soul.
- God alone is Lord of the conscience, as the great Baptist confession reads, and that government honors God best which preserves the rights of its citizens to freely chose who they will worship.
- A government that can wield the sword to coerce all its citizens to claim Christ can force all of its citizens to deny Christ by the sword.

- Friends, one of the gifts of God’s common grace to us as American citizens are these words of the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof

- Friends as Biblical Christians we must defend our right to freely assemble as much as we defend that same right for Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Scientologists, and yes, even Presbyterians.
- The government cannot coerce belief. Coerced belief isn’t true belief.

5. POLITICS IS A BATTLEFIELD OF GODS

- By that I mean that the political arena is a battleground in which the false gods of the world array themselves against the true God.
- Let me be clear—I don’t intend to imply that the false gods are represented by any particular party, or that the true God is perfectly represented by a particular party. If that’s what you get out of this then you are missing my point.
- My point is this: modern Americans have bought into the erroneous view that the political realm ought to be devoid of religious beliefs, or religious claims.
- Another way of putting this is to say that modern Americans have bought into the erroneous view that the political realm CAN be devoid of religious beliefs. We’ve come to think of the political sphere as naked, or non-religious.
- We’ve all heard statements like, “Believe what you want in the privacy of your own home, but you can’t bring

private beliefs into discussions on public policy.” The shortened version is, “You can’t legislate morality.”

- The problem is the only thing we can legislate is morality. Every person who enters the political realm enters it with their own understanding of the nature of the world, human beings, history, ethics, how we can know, and what our purpose is. All of those are deeply held religious presuppositions and we all have them and we can’t not have them.
- So, when it comes to politics it’s not “whether,” it’s “which.”
- It’s not “whether” privately held beliefs will influence public policy, it’s “which privately held beliefs will we codify into law.” No one comes to the political table with a blank slate. Everyone comes to the political table with a set of precommitments.
- As Christians, we might argue over which of our beliefs we ought to codify into law and policy. For example, while we agree that lustful sexual fantasies are sinful, we may find it difficult (impossible) to adequately criminalize such thoughts. But what we must reject, whole-heartedly, is the idea that public policy can be conducted apart from the worldview presuppositions of those creating and enforcing the policies. It’s just not possible. Worldview matters.
- Friend, if you want to think more deeply about worldview—get a copy of James Sire’s book *The Universe Next Door*. Read it and discuss it with me or another member.

6. WE OWE GOD EVERYTHING

- Caesar had minted the coin in his image and therefore they were to give to Caesar what belonged to him.

- And in the same way, Jesus says that God has minted us in his image. God is our creator, and we bear his image. This is the teaching of the very first chapter of the Bible:

26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

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

- Friend, maybe you have never realized this, but when God made human beings, he made them as much like himself.
- You are the crowning achievement of his creative work, and he has stamped his likeness on you. he has made you higher than all the animals. He has crowned you with glory and honor. That’s Psalm 8.
- You possess an inestimable dignity—not because of your talents, not because of your utility to society, but simply by the fact of your existence because you are a reflection of the divine creator.
- Male and Female, Black & White, Rich & Poor, we all bear the image of our God.
- And therefore, we all owe God everything. Love, worship, and faith, and obedience.

The problem is that we also bear the image of our first father, Adam. And it is an image that is defaced by sin. We are no longer capable of rendering our hearts and love and obedience fully to God.

Henri Blocher:

We must state both that after his revolt mankind remains mankind, and also that mankind has radically changed, that he is but a grisly shadow of himself. Mankind remains the image of God, inviolable and responsible, but has become a contradictory image, one might say a caricature, a witness against himself.

- We are like a car windshield that has shattered. All of the glass is still there. It's still a windshield, but it can no longer serve properly in the function it was designed for.
- As the Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:8

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

The good news of the gospel is that even though we are unable to give the creator his due, God the creator is also God the redeemer. He is the God who buys back those who have rebelled against him. And he does so by sending his own Son, Jesus Christ not just to restore the righteousness that Adam lost—but to give us his own righteousness.

- In his earthly life—do you know what the Son was doing? As a man he was rendering to God the things that are God's! Love, worship, faith, obedience. He gave God his due!
- And then suffered and died the death that we deserved because of our sin.
- Friends—Jesus Christ rendered to God that which we owed him, so that God could render to us that which we had not earned.

- And, by his grace, when we put our faith in Christ—when we turn from sin and trust in the death and resurrection of Christ—God begins to restore his image in us.
- Those who come to Christ hear the echo of Genesis 1:27 in the words of 2 Corinthians 3:18:

18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

How do you render unto God the things that are God's? You begin by trusting in the one he sent—Jesus Christ—and you continue by daily looking to him in faith. By following him in faith and obedience.