

Series: Being faithful disciples in a God-defying world. (A study of Mark)

Sermon Text: 12:13-17 (cf. Matthew 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26)

Kids Word: Image

We're studying the fast-paced book of Mark, which presents Jesus as the Son of God & Son of Man.

- So far, we've studied 2 of the 5 temple controversies from Mark 11:27-12:44. The controversy in today's text hits quite close to home. After we study, we should see this...

BIG IDEA: Being a good heavenly citizen requires being a good earthly one.

Let's consider some key ideas in our text.

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

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

***Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus.** (12:13-14)*

- After the parable of the vineyard, Israel's "temple mafia" decided to *send some Pharisees* and *some Herodians to trap* (hunt) *Jesus*. We saw these rival groups team up earlier in Mark 3:6. Their viewpoints could not have been more opposite. The *Pharisees* were ultra-rightwing, narrow nationalists, who resented Roman rule. The *Herodians* were ultra-leftwing, liberals, who had sold out to Rome and enjoyed a cozy relationship. Why did the *Pharisees* hate Jesus? He was disrupting the religious arrangement. Why did the *Herodians* hate Jesus? He seemed to be a threat to their political arrangement. What could possibly unite these rivals? Their mutual hatred of Jesus! They wanted to stop Jesus by getting Him in trouble with any group they could. This was a coordinated, all-out assault to maintain power and the status quo.
- Ironically, their flattering words were accurate! Jesus was a man of integrity, who cared about people without being a people-pleaser and who always answered according to truth.

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.

***Responsibility on earth as we have in heaven.** (12:14b-17; cf. Matthew 6:5-13)*

- A *denarius* was a small, silver coin equivalent to a day's wage. One side of the coin had a bust of Tiberius *Caesar* with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus." The other side of the coin had an image of Tiberius's mother Livia with the words, "Pontifex Maximus," meaning "High Priest." To a God-fearing Jew, it was idolatrous and blasphemous for a man to claim to be a god and a woman to claim to be a priest! Since the coin

symbolized Roman idolatry, devout Jews tried to avoid using it. Thus, asking Jewish leaders to produce one was meant to embarrass them and uncover their hypocrisy.

- They asked a question which had been burning in Israel for years. Remember, Israel was under Roman rule, and every *tax payment* to enemy Gentiles aggravated the wound. Would Jesus support *paying tax* to Gentile oppressors, whose leader claimed to be a god (see idolatry notes below) OR would Jesus defy Rome by not supporting the *tax*? The *trap* was set! All these hunters needed to take down their “big game” was to lure Him into a public slip up before either the Jews or the Roman government. However, Jesus let them know He was on to them!
- Instead of answering them, He made them acknowledge that *Caesar’s* image was on the coin. Then Jesus brilliantly answered, “*Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.*” Who could argue against returning property to its owner? Unless you were the tenants in the vineyard parable Jesus just told. His *answer* completely amazed them! It gave Caesar authority, but with clear limits. Also, it implied that God’s image is stamped on every person. So, not only do we all have both earthly and heavenly obligations; it matters how we treat people made in God’s image (cf. [Genesis 1:26-27](#); [1Corinthians 10:31](#)).

So, how do Mark’s 1st century writings help our discipleship in today’s God-defying world?
God’s people must navigate a two-kingdom tension.

- Jesus validated the strange co-existence of 2 governments: The rule of God’s kingdom AND the rule of a *Caesar* who viewed himself as a god. What’s stunning is that Jesus said this when He knew Rome was about to execute Him. How does a godly response look when one seems devoted to your destruction? THIS! We’d do well to study and imitate Christ’s responses.
- Of course, let’s not minimize the issue. ***First***, let’s acknowledge earthly powers were created by God, are subject to Him, and are an instrument to keep sin in check (i.e. a means of grace to slow humanity’s determination to tear itself apart). ***Second***, what makes things complicated is that God-ordained institutions are run by people who sin. Instinctively, we want to invalidate a broken institution, unless of course, we happen to benefit from it (e.g. our favorite political party, store, burger joint). As people who have dual-citizenship, God’s people must learn to wisely navigate the two-kingdom tension. While we’re called to honor earthly powers, we must never appear to support or ignore sin. Let me be clear, never offer God’s endorsement to

people who merely pander to your favorite causes but don't love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. The story of Moses teaches us that God uses ungodly rulers to accomplish His will, however Moses was instructed to speak truth to power. Like Jesus (who was crucified) or John the Baptist (who got his head chopped off), we must always be an advocate for truth.

- But I digress, Christ's point here is that man's corruption of a God-ordained institution does not invalidate it. Corrupt politicians don't invalidate our need for government. Corrupt cops don't invalidate our need for police. Corrupt pastors don't invalidate our need for the church. Corrupt baristas don't invalidate our need for some sweet Starbucks! It's true that, "A poorly run state is better than no state at all" (Daniel Akin, Author/Seminary President). For better or worse, God wants government to exist and wants us to find ways to relate to it according to truth--to obey God as we pray for and honor the "king." That's where things get tricky!

This can be confusing and complicated. (cf. Ephesians 6:10-20)

- A few things occurred to me while studying our text: ***First***, Jesus wasn't lured into "political flattery" or some sterile "should we/should we not debate." In fact, it seems things are rarely "either/or"; they are more often "both/and" (e.g. OT/NT; Law/Grace; God's love/God's wrath; Baby Jesus/Crucified Jesus; Jews/Gentiles; Heaven's beauty/Hell's fury; a woman's right to choose/a baby's right to live; freedom to love whoever we want/God's ideas of what is best for us; responsibility to work/mercy toward the poor; a safe country/compassion-human dignity).
- ***Second***, Jesus was not proclaiming "the separation of church and state." Separating God from any part of life is neither Jewish nor Christian. This ridiculous idea, invented in the eighteenth century, has proven to be one of the worst ideas humanity ever schemed up! I agree with NT Wright, who said it is "*at best inadequate and at worst dangerous. It would prevent, for instance, any Christian critique of public policy, including economic policy, which is sometimes sorely needed in our world. Jewish thought, and Christian thought as it emerged within Judaism, have always seen the entire world and everything in it as created by the one God. All aspects of it fall under his sovereign and saving rule.*"
- ***Third***, Jesus came to address a more fundamental evil than being oppressed by pagans and offered a more eternal solution than picking a fight with government (revolution). In other words, you and I have deeper issues to deal with than corrupt human institutions. The source of

corruption must be eradicated, and the only solution is the cross of Jesus Christ! We must fight only using the gospel and the armor of God! Some history--200 years before Christ, the Jews had revolted against Syrian rule using the slogan, “*Pay back the Gentiles what they deserve, and obey the commands of the law*” (1Maccabees 2:68; see Britannica link below). Since Jesus mentioned the coin’s idolatrous picture and writing, revolutionaries in the crowd could have taken “*render to Caesar*” as code for “*send the filthy coin back where it belongs.*”

- **Fourth**, this passage is NOT the “final word” on how Christians should relate to earthly authorities (governments). It’s a sharp answer, given in a specific context, designed to make everyone think. God wants us to think! While God demands His people “be subject to governing authorities”, there are at least 3 areas where we must humbly and graciously resist: **1)** When a law commands us to violate a command of God (Acts 4:19-20, 5:29). **2)** When an authority commits immoral or unethical acts (i.e. sin is always wrong). **3)** When an authority compels us to compromise our Christian convictions (cf. Daniel 1; Romans 14).

We must study and walk in God’s wisdom. (cf. **Galatians 5:16**)

- According to Scripture, being a good heavenly citizen requires being a good earthly citizen (cf. **Romans 13:1-7; 1Timothy 2:1-2; 1Peter 2:13-17**). Maybe the issues seem less confusing and complicated when we live in a democracy or when politicians are making laws and policies we prefer (despite how they might impact others). But what if you live--as many of our Christians brothers and sisters do--in a totalitarian context or are subjected to a cruel and tyrannical dictatorship? What if your free democracy decides you need to violate Scripture or conscience to be a good citizen? Truly, we need the wisdom of Scripture, prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit to navigate these choppy waters. While it’s not easy, things get clearer as we constantly ask ourselves the question Jesus implied here, “***Whose image*** do I bear?” We can balance our obligation to human government and God’s rule by realizing that while government deserves our obedience, only God deserves our worship.

So, what’s your NEXT STEP?

- Remember, our next step always begins with faith in Christ. Either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Either way, His Spirit will help you. It may help for us to pray this prayer written by the theologian NT Wright, “God grant us wisdom to see to the heart of things, and to give ourselves wholly to our true God and King.”

Quotes/Additional thoughts:

- **Roman idolatry:** “At that time in Jewish history, the Caesar whose image appeared on the denarius was Tiberius, who reigned after Augustus, from AD 14 to 37. His image was pressed on the surface of the coin along with an inscription: Ti Caesar Divi Aug F Augustus, which meant, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” On the reverse side of the coin was the inscription pontif maxim, that is, “High Priest.” The emperor was not only the supreme political ruler of the Roman Empire, he was the supreme religious leader, seen as a deity. It is noteworthy that the name of Tiberius’ father, Augustus, was not a name at all but a title, “August One,” that was conferred on him by the Senate. This was a religious honor, indicating that he possessed transcendent majesty. However, it was a term the Jews used only for God; they believed that calling any creature “august” was an act of idolatry. So, the denarius displayed the full depth of the arrogance of the Roman Caesars.” (Pastor RC Sproul)
- **Governmental validity:** “To be sure, men will abuse and misuse the institution of the State just as men because of sin have abused and misused every other institution in history including the Church of Jesus Christ; but this does not mean that the institution is bad or that it should be forsaken. It simply means that men are sinners and rebels in God’s world, and this is the way they behave with good institutions. As a matter of fact, it is because of this very sin that there must be human government to maintain order in history until the final and ultimate rule of Jesus Christ is established. Human government is better than anarchy, and the Christian must recognize the “divine right” of the State.” Richard Halverson, former chaplain of the United States Senate
- **Two institutions:** “In Romans 13, the Apostle Paul explains that God created two institutions in the world, the church and the state. They have separate responsibilities, separate missions to perform. The church is charged with proclaiming the Word of God and administering the sacraments. The power of the sword to wage war and keep the peace is given to the state. Government, therefore, is legitimate, and Christians ought to support it. For this reason, Paul writes, “Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor” (Rom. 13:7). Paul wrote these words at a time when the government, the Roman Empire, was corrupt and godless. Obviously, therefore, the moral behavior of the state is to have no bearing on whether Christians pay their taxes. Christians are called to a special level of civil obedience, which includes paying taxes no matter how burdensome or oppressive they may be. Of course, our commitment to civil obedience does not mean we cannot speak out against taxes or anything else the government does, but we do not have the right to refuse to pay.” RC Sproul, Pastor
- **A potential pledge:** Author and Seminary President Daniel Akin suggested we consider this mentality, “I pledge the following to the governing authorities, which are ordained by God:
 1. I will be a good citizen living in subjection to governmental authority, even a pagan one (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). I will responsibly engage the political process. If allowed, I will vote, seeking to bring my Christian convictions into the public arena (see Prov 14:34).
 2. I will live internationally like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, and Jesus Himself on earth. My ultimate allegiance is to Christ and His kingdom.
 3. I will obey the state but worship only God. And I will thank God for all the good He does through the government, praying always for all who are in authority (1 Tim 2:1-5).

4. I will acknowledge that all governmental authority is established by and comes from God (Mark 12:17; Rom 13:1,4,6).

5. I will acknowledge that all government serves in some measure the purposes of promoting good and punishing evil (Rom 13:3-4). Bad government is almost always better than no government.

6. I will pay all taxes levied upon me by my government, recognizing its right to do so (Mark 12:17; Rom 13:6-7).

7. I will engage in “civil disobedience” only when my government prohibits me from doing what the Bible commands, or when it commands me to do what the Bible prohibits. This last point, while true, needs some further clarification. (1) The law being resisted must be unjust and immoral, clearly contrary to the will of God, and not just inconvenient or burdensome. (2) Legal means of changing the unjust situation must have been exhausted. Civil disobedience is a method not of first resort, but of last resort. (3) The act of disobedience must be public rather than secretive or hidden. (4) There should be some hope of success, as my intent is to produce changes in laws and institutions. (5) As I consider civil disobedience, I must be willing to accept the penalty for breaking the law.”

- **Anarchy or Passivity:** “The fact is, [we] will never like any human government because it’s always going to be corrupt in some way or another. So, when is insurrection or outright defiance against a government appropriate? After all, no Christian should ever support anarchy. We’re not to be engaged in burning buildings, or taking justice into our own hands, or harming people we oppose politically or socially...It is not enough to refuse participation when a government harms innocent people. We must actively intervene on behalf of victims of institutionalized abuse.” Chuck Swindoll, Pastor

Articles:

- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Maccabees/Jewish-resistance>
- <https://cngcoins.com/>

Songs/Videos:

Helpful thoughts for discussion leaders:

1. Go for a single, not a home run...don’t drag the night out; realize more people = less deep sharing.
2. Keep discussion around 30mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.

Challenge Questions

Review the BIG IDEA: Being a good heavenly citizen requires being a good earthly one.

-Simple questions...What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Preparation questions for Mark 12:13-17.

- How did Pharisees and Herodians feel about one another? What united them? (12:13)
- What do you notice about their question? (12:14)
- What do you notice about Christ’s response? (12:15)
- What was a denarius? What did it symbolize? (12:15)
- What was so impressive about Christ’s answer? (12:16-17)

Application questions from Mark 12:13-17.

- What is God's legitimate purpose for human government?
- How might we temper patriotism with Christian principles?
- What specifically makes you mad about certain human institutions?
- How have Christ's responses helped you develop more godly responses?
- List examples of sins Christians tend to overlook for personal benefit.
- Can you offer some better ideas than overlooking these sins?
- Read Romans 13:1-7; 1Timothy 2:1-2; 1Peter 2:13-17.
- What needs to change in your approach to two-kingdom living?

Here are some great resources for digging deeper into community group life...

How life together looks <http://austinstone.org/stories/film/item/140-missional-community-lukes-story>

Rethinking what we do https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvWnXYSELF4&feature=player_embedded

Numerous articles to provoke thought <http://tod dengstrom.com/archives/>

What groups of 2-3 might look like <http://tod dengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LTG-Overview.pdf>