

The Pharisees and Herodians Question the Lord

Mark 12:13-17

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.”*

Background Notes

The Pharisees and the Herodians were two different parties within Judaism at that time. The Pharisees were a religious party. They were the Orthodox Jews of the day. The Herodians were a political party. They supported the “Herods” who were in political power at that time. And since the Herodian dynasty received its authority from Rome, the Herodians also supported Rome. The “they” who sent the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus (v13) were the Jewish leaders and authorities: the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (Mark 11:27).

Normally the Pharisees and Herodians were poles apart when it came to political and religious issues, but they joined forces against the Lord. Many times you’ll experience that same kind of opposition today. Your neighbors, or the people you work with, may be poles apart when it comes to political issues like welfare or healthcare or the environment - but you’ll find that they’re united against you when you try to share the gospel.

The Herodians and Pharisees approached the Lord with insincere flattery to set Him up: *“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.”* In other words, you don’t play favorites or compromise the truth for any special group of people.

When they thought they had set Him up, they asked Him, *“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”* They thought they had caught the Lord in a dilemma. If He were to say “Yes, pay your taxes to Caesar,” then He would alienate most of the common people, who hated paying taxes to Rome. Right then the common people supported the Lord, and the religious leaders wanted to drive a wedge between the common people and the Lord. Verse 12: *“They feared the multitude for they knew He had spoken the parable [v1-11] against them.”*

If, on the other hand, the Lord answered, “No, don’t pay taxes to Caesar,” then they could accuse Him of rebellion and opposition to Rome, and He would be arrested. So they thought they had the Lord in a dilemma, and they waited for His answer.

Well, the Lord saw through their evil plans, and He said to them, “*Why do you test me?*” You would think the Lord would have just walked away at this point, but He stayed and gave them an answer. In fact, He gave an amazing and wonderful answer!

He asked them to show Him a denarius – a Roman tribute penny. This was what was required of every person for the poll tax. I’m holding one of these Roman tribute pennies in my hand. On the front side it has the image and inscription of Caesar, an indication that ultimately it belonged to Caesar. So the Lord asked them whose image and inscription is on this coin, forcing them to acknowledge that it was Caesar’s. Then the Lord said, “*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” The questioners were amazed, and marveled at the answer! Their mouths were closed. They had failed in their attempt to trap the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.

What did the Lord mean by that statement? He meant that if you were living in the Roman Empire, and using Roman coinage, using Roman roads, and living under the protection of the Roman government, then you should pay your taxes - whether you liked it or not! Nobody likes to pay taxes, but if the government under which we live levies taxes, then we are to pay them.

Romans 13:1 teaches that we are to be subject to the governing authorities. And Titus 3:1 reminds us to be subject to rulers and authorities. So we are responsible to “*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.*”

A few years ago I met a Christian man who was not filing his income tax returns. He said that he didn’t think it was proper under the U.S. Constitution for the federal government to collect income taxes. He asked me what I thought, and I told him that he was disobedient to the Word of God. I told him that whether he thought the government was right or wrong in requiring an income tax, it’s illegal for him not to pay.

Now you don’t have to render to Caesar the things that are **not** Caesar’s! So if Caesar allows some legal loopholes or tax shelters, you don’t have to render what Caesar doesn’t demand. I don’t know what this Christian did with my advice, but God’s Word definitely says that we are to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.

But what if Caesar asks you to render something to him that is in direct violation to the Word of God? That brings us to our second doctrinal point.

2. Render to God the things that are God's.

Most likely our Lord was alluding to what was written on the denarius. On the front around the image of Caesar, it says in Latin, "Tiberius Caesar, the divine Augustus, son of Augustus." On the reverse it says in Latin, "Chief priest." This is an indication of the imperial cult of emperor worship, and the claim of the Roman emperor to deity. Acknowledging that the emperor was a god was part of the Roman pagan religion.

So when our Lord said "*Render to God the things that are God's,*" He was telling them that they should pay Caesar's tax - but they should not worship Caesar. We pay our taxes, in general we submit to the governing authorities.

However, we don't submit and we don't obey when the government makes a law that requires us to no longer be Christians. We don't submit if the government requires a woman to get an abortion, or that an elderly relative must be brought to a government clinic to be euthanized at age 90. No! We don't submit to dictates like that - we **must** disobey. We may have to go to prison for disobeying those laws, but we don't shoot the officers who come to arrest us. There is point where we don't "render to Caesar." We must render to God the things that are God's.

The examples I just used are clear-cut, but what about the not-so-clear cases. Most of us here live in Cook County. Did you know a certain percentage of our property taxes fund the Cook County Hospital, and Cook County Hospital is doing abortions again. So we are indirectly or directly supporting abortion. I don't like this, and I hope you don't either. So what do we do? We could refuse to pay a certain part of those taxes (and be prepared to suffer the consequences). Or we could move out of Cook County.

There does come a point where you do not render to Caesar, because you must render to God the things that are God's. But sometimes it's not easy to sort this out. The point for me would come if the federal government levied a specific "abortion tax." I would refuse to pay that. But sometimes the issue is not so clear. However, the Lord laid down the basic guideline for us to follow: we should render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but we must render to God the things that are God's.

Practical Applications

1. Let's try to give biblical answers to the critic.

If you're trying to live for the Lord in your neighborhood, where you work, or where you go to school, you're bound to get critics asking you questions and trying to trap you with a trick question – just as the Jewish leaders tried to trap the Lord. Back in my college days, a couple of critics of the Christian faith tried to trap me, and make me look like a Christian fool.

They said, “If you believe in an all-powerful God, and that nothing is beyond His power, then can God create a rock so big that He couldn’t lift it?” They thought that I had never heard this question before, and that I would be in a dilemma. If I said “No, He couldn’t do that,” then He is not all-powerful in His creation. On the other hand if I said “Yes He could,” then He is not all-powerful in His strength.

Well, I had already heard this question back in high school, so I knew about this trick question and I had a ready answer. I answered, “God never does anything that denies His character as He has revealed Himself in the Bible.” All mouths were closed!

Usually we don’t have answers like that on the tips of our tongues. And we certainly don’t have answers like the tremendous answer the Lord gave in response to this attempt to trap Him: *“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* Liberal critics of the Bible like to claim that most of the teachings of Jesus in the Bible were invented by the early Church. But even the most liberal critic has got to admit that Jesus said that amazing answer, because it’s just too **good** not to be true! And it’s just too wise to have been invented by someone other than Jesus.

But we usually don’t have good answers on the tip of our tongues. When critics ask us questions, we need to pray right then for the Lord’s help. Many times the Lord will provide an answer, right on the spot! He does give “help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16), and this would include answer to tough questions that a critic may ask.

It doesn’t hurt to prepare some answers for the critic ahead of time. We know a lot of questions and issues that the critic will bring up. If you’re a Christian seeking to live for the Lord, at some point you’ll face a question about “gay rights.” If you quote the Bible on that subject, you’ll be called a homophobe. Do you have a creative biblical answer? Let’s try to give creative biblical answers to the critic.

2. Let’s remember that we are “God’s coinage”!

The Roman denarius had Caesar’s image on it, and the Lord said, *“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”* As a human being, you have the image of God stamped on you, because man was created in the image of God.

Let’s remember we are “God’s coinage” – we are His property! We should render to God the things that are God’s. As God’s coinage, we are to represent Him well, and we’re to be available to Him for His service.

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