

The Memoirs of Peter
Render to Caesar: Jesus on the Role of Government
Mark 12:13-17
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Well, if you are reading the papers or watching the news, you know that the current political climate in the world is highly charged. Whether you are talking about the Arab Spring, the uprisings in many of the Arab and Muslim countries that happened this year; or the worldwide protests and riots staged by anarchists around the world; or whether you are looking inside of our own country, the political climate and atmosphere is that of dysfunctional antagonism at this point. And there is even unrest, to some extent, within the individual parties as we have seen most recently in the GOP debates. Where exactly does the Christian fit into the political spectrum of the world? How does the Christian, or how should the Christian think about government and its role? There needs to be, and all of the climate around the world, points to and punctuates the need for clarity on the role and authority of human government. Well, fortunately for us, the political climate of 1st century Palestine was no less highly charged than today's. And it was in that charged atmosphere, that Jesus made his most far-reaching statement about the role of human government. Now just to remind you where we are in the overall scheme of the book, the first 10 chapters of Mark's gospel really spell out the first three and a half years of our Lord's ministry—10 chapters, three and half years of ministry. Chapters 11 through 16 have to do with one week, primarily—the final week of our Lord's life on earth. We find ourselves in the middle of that week, that final week. We are studying a series of events that occurred during the Passion Week. Sunday, of course, was the triumphal entry. Monday, the primary event was the cleansing of the temple, when Jesus passed judgment on what was going on in first century Judaism. Tuesday's events are described at length, beginning in Mark 11:20; and running all the way through the end of Chapter 13. So, Tuesday was a very busy day, and we are in the middle of what happened on that Tuesday before our Lord's crucifixion on Friday.

Early that Tuesday morning, He and the 12 had returned from Bethany to the city of Jerusalem; and He had begun to teach those who had come early to the temple. And as He was teaching there in the temple courts, an official group of the leaders of the nation, appointed to represent

the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body, approached Jesus and questioned His authority. You remember He answered their question with a question: So, what's the source of John the Baptist's baptism? Was it of men or was it from heaven? Was it from God? Immediately following that exchange on the temple courts, crowded with thousands of worshippers there for the Feast of Passover, Mark said Jesus began to speak to them in parables. Specifically, three parables. And as you have seen over the last several weeks, those parables were scathing indictments of the Jewish leaders; and they're standing there, their representatives are standing there. He is on their home court. After that, on the heels of those parables, comes the event that we look at this evening. Look with me at Mark 12, Mark 12:13.

Then [after those other incidents had occurred, after the parables] they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him in order to trap Him in a statement. They came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and defer to no one; for you are not partial to any but teach the way of God and in truth. Is it lawful to pay a poll tax to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay or shall we not pay?" But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." They brought one. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him.

Now this passage could be reduced to this simple proposition: Jesus affirms the divinely ordained role and authority of human government and demands our submission to it. That's the lesson in a nutshell. The question is: How does this truth unfold? Essentially, it unfolds, first of all, through a loaded political question about the authority of government. And then it unfolds through a profound spiritual answer about the role and authority of government in our lives. We're going to work our way through those two basic propositional points that worked their way out in this text.

But before we examine the question and Jesus' answer, we need to first see the context in which it occurred. And that comes to us in Verse 13. Mark sets the context for us. "Then they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him in order to trap Him in a statement." Notice it begins, "Then." This is on the heels of the questioning of Jesus' authority and His answering them with a question. John the Baptist's baptism—what was its source? "Then they." This refers back to the group back in Chapter 11:27, "And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests and scribes and elders came to him." A select group from the Sanhedrin came to Jesus and was questioning him. That's the group that sent an official group of representatives of the Jewish Sanhedrin; and once they had been bested by Jesus, they wanted Jesus dead. Look at Verse 12: "And they were seeking to seize him, yet they feared the people for they understood that He spoke this parable against them." So, they went away. After Jesus had bested them with his question against their question, they went away, they consulted, and they came up with a plan. Here's how Matthew puts it in Matthew 22:15: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said." So, Jesus is still there, teaching on the Temple Mount. They leave, that group leaves and they strategize in a secret council somewhere how they can trap him in what he says. And there was a plan hatched out of that secret meeting to send back to Jesus, not the same group, but a different group consisting of some of the Pharisees and the Herodians.

Now, we've met these groups meeting, working together before. Go back to Chapter 3:6. This is when we first encountered these two groups. After Jesus heals on the Sabbath in the synagogue, Verse 6 says, "The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him as to how they might destroy Him." How they might kill Him. That was many months before. So, these groups, these two groups, have been consistently trying to kill Jesus. The Pharisees hated Jesus. There was a religious reason for that. They had created a false religious system, and Jesus was showing it for its moral bankruptcy. There was also a personal reason. They envied Jesus' popularity. You remember when they finally do deliver Jesus over to Pilate, Pilate understands that they did it for what? Envy. And so, you have both of those things going on. He undermined their authority with the people. They hated Him. The Herodians were an interesting group. Not much is known about this group, but what is clear about them is that

they were supporters of Herod Antipas, who currently ruled. He was the son of Herod the Great. It's possible that many of the Herodians were from the leading families of Judea and Jerusalem, out of whom Herod appointed High Priests. Regardless, what we do know is that they were clearly not very personally religious. They supported the corruption of the Jewish culture with everything Greek. They were Hellenists. They were eager to bring in the Greek influences from Alexander the Great and others into the Jewish culture. They were willing to support a pawn of the Roman Empire—Herod. And they hated Jesus as well. Why? Well, again they had a political reason. They wanted to maintain the status quo. They had a personal reason. They wanted to preserve their money, power, and luxurious lives under the control of Herod. They were nominally religious, but they were really secularists; and Jesus conflicted with their personal goals, their personal desires, and their personal agendas. So here you have these very strange bedfellows. The Pharisees, who are religiously and politically conservative, who want Israel self-ruled; and you have the Herodians, who are culturally liberal and who are happy to have the Romans in charge. Ultra-religious Pharisees and Hellenistic-political Herodians. The Pharisees ultra-naturalist, nationalistic; the Herodians, compromisers and accommodating. William Hendrickson says, "A strange coalition between the sanctimonious and the sacrilegious." What would bring a group like that together? They were bound together by their hatred of Jesus. Could I just stop and say this is the way it always is? All men are united in one thing: their hatred, not of the sort of caricature of Jesus. Everybody likes that Jesus. But the true Jesus, the exclusive Jesus who says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but through Me." The Jesus who says if you don't believe in Me and repent, you will perish. All men are united in their hatred of that true Jesus, whether they are ensconced in false religion like the Pharisees were, or whether they're rank secularists like the Herodians were.

Matthew tells us that it was the Pharisees who came up with this plan, and they solicit the involvement of the Herodians. Before, they had sent an official delegation to Jesus. You've got to get the picture of what's going on here. Before they were there, it was clear who they were, they presented themselves to Jesus as the leaders of the nation. They questioned His authority. But Jesus bested them, embarrassed them, humiliated them in front of this huge crowd of

worshippers there for the Feast of Passover. So now they come up with a more conniving plan. They won't go back. Instead, they will send some of their disciples, Matthew says. In other words, they are going to send some of their young, sharp followers. Men like Paul of Tarsus, or Saul of Tarsus, would eventually become. "They sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians," Verse 13 says, "in order to trap Him in a statement." The Greek word for "trap" there is used in secular Greek of catching a wild animal in a net or a snare. They had a serious purpose. Now that's the background. They've sent these young guys, and they have no official connection to the Sanhedrin. They just look like they are there with an honest, sincere question of Jesus. They're really struggling with an issue of conscience.

Now that brings us then to a loaded political question about the authority of government. Look at Verse 14. Here come these young, sharp guys, disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians, posing as those truly interested in Jesus' opinion. "They came to Him and said, 'Teacher, we know that you are truthful and defer to no one, for you are not partial to any, but teach the way of God and in truth.'" Now Jesus is still in the porticos of the temple, where he had been teaching, and they come up and address him with the normal address for a rabbi, "Teacher." But then they resort to this thick, syrupy stream of obvious and insincere flattery. "We know that you are truthful." In other words, you're honest, you're straightforward, you say what you think. "You defer to no one." Literally, the text says, "Not a concern to you concerning no one." Huh. In other words, you aren't swayed from being honest by anybody or any circumstance. "For you are not partial to any." Again, this is a sort of Hebrew idiom. It's "for you are not looking into the face of men," literally it says. You don't look at anybody's face to decide which way the wind's blowing, and which answer you are going to give. You are straightforward. You don't allow the presence of anyone to change what you say. How evil and wicked this is. Now, the previous statements—those three statements were about Jesus' character—but this group of flatterers aren't quite done. They add this about His teaching. Notice, "You teach the way of God in truth." They're really pouring it on thick here. But they didn't believe any of this. Instead, they were simply presenting themselves as young, Jewish theologians but they were really hoping to catch Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. They were setting Jesus up is what they were doing. Trying to

disarm Him, so he'd let down His guard. Do you see that? That flattery—it's like we really do care what you think, we really trust your teaching more than anyone else, tell us what to do.

With all that flattery as a backdrop, here comes the question that their mentors had created for them to pitch Jesus. "Is it lawful to pay a poll tax to Caesar or not? Shall we pay or shall we not pay?" Now, by "is it lawful?" obviously they didn't mean according to Roman law. It was required by Roman law. They meant does God's law, the Torah, allow us to pay this tax or not. What does the scripture teach about this tax? That was their question. A few minutes before, Jesus had sent some of their friends packing by asking them a question that set them on the horns of a dilemma, so they come back with the strategy to Jesus. Let's pitch him a public question that doesn't leave him an out. It was an intentional trap. In fact, Luke puts it like this in Luke 20: "So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be righteous in order that they might catch Him in some statement," (and here was their goal) "so that they could deliver Him to the rule and authority of the governor." That was the plan. Their goal was to get Jesus in trouble with the Romans.

Now, to fully appreciate their question, you need to understand the historical context. Back in 6 AD, Rome had deposed Herod the Great's son. And when they deposed Archelaus, Herod the Great's son, they consolidated the rule over several regions—Idumea, Samaria, and Judea, where Jerusalem was located—under one governor, a Roman governor. And that had made it a Roman province. What that meant practically was that their taxes went directly to the coffers and the budget of the emperor, not the Senate of Rome. As a province, the citizens of Judea had a new tax levied against them that those who lived in Galilee didn't have to pay. Understand Jesus didn't have to pay this particular tax because He was from Galilee. This was a question about those who lived in Jerusalem and Judea. In the Greek text, this tax is called, it's translated "poll tax" here in our New American Standard Bible, but it's the census. It's the word, the Latin word from which we get our English word census because a census was taken to determine who ought to pay the tax.

Now, all Roman taxes were highly unpopular, but especially this one. The Romans levied two taxes, two direct taxes on the provinces. First of all, there was the tributum soli. It was the tax on agriculture. So, if you had produce, that was taxed under this tax. The second tax, though, was the tributum capitis, literally a poll tax. And it consisted of two parts. The first part was a flat rate, per head tax. That's what the word poll means—a per head tax. And the second part of this was a property tax. Their question is about the first half of the tributum capitis; the flat rate, per head tax. Should we pay that? Essentially you paid it for the right to exist in the Roman Empire. Now in response to the tributum capitis when it was first put in place back in 6 AD (we are now in the year 30 AD here in Mark 12). Back in the year 6 AD when the tax was put in place, there was an immediate rebellion. It was led by a man by the name of Judas the Galilean. He is actually mentioned in the Book of Acts by Gamaliel. “Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him. He, too, perished, and all those who followed him were scattered.” He rebelled against this tax. He saw the tax, “as an introduction to slavery and an affront to the sovereignty of God.” Out of his rebellion, out of the rebellion of Judas the Galilean back in 6 AD, came a group called the Zealots. You recognize that name? They were zealous for the nation, for the national religion. They insisted that any political submission to Rome was an outright denial of God's lordship over Israel. Their motto (you ready for this?) was, “No king but God.” Any act, then, was justifiable if it recovered their national freedom. This group, the Zealots, that Judas the Galilean really began, was ultimately responsible for the destruction of Israel because in 66 AD they openly revolted against Rome and four years later, Titus marched into Rome with his armies and destroy, or marched into, to Jerusalem, I should say, with his armies and absolutely destroyed it. One of Jesus' disciples was a Zealot. You remember Simon? He was saved out of this ultra-nationalistic group. Now the reason you need to know that background is because this is what they believed. Josephus tells us that what Judas the Galilean, the Jewish man who first excited rebellion against Rome because of this very tax, had this to say. Here's Josephus: “He called his fellow countrymen cowards for being willing to pay tribute to the Romans and for putting up with mortal masters in the place of God. They have,” Josephus says, “an unconquerable love of freedom since they have accepted God as their only leader and master.” That was the background of rebellion against this tax.

The basic idea was that an allegiance to God and an allegiance to a pagan government would always be incompatible for a true believer in the true God of Israel. And those sentiments still divided, in 30 AD, still divided the Jewish people. The Pharisees, they went ahead and paid the tax but grudgingly. They hated it. They didn't want to do it, but they recognized it was a political reality they had to deal with. The Herodians, they paid the tax as well, but they did so gladly. They had no problem with the Romans ruling. And supporting the Romans meant staying in power for them. The Zealots, which were around in Jesus' day, still argued that to pay it was to blaspheme the true God of Israel, and they had widespread support among the people. Even though most people went ahead and paid it like the Pharisees did. So that was the heated political context in which they asked Jesus this question. Do you see the trap they've set for him? They begin with this insincere flattery, intended to obligate Jesus to give an answer. Oh, you're honest. You don't let any person or any circumstance, even here on the temple grounds, with the representatives of the Sanhedrin standing over there. You don't let any of that bother you. You speak the truth, regardless of who's listening or what it might cost you. Regardless of those Roman troops over there and a Roman garrison up there in the Fortress Antonia looking out over the Temple Mount. You want people to be clear on what is right before God. So, they'd set this question up in a way that Jesus had to give his honest perspective, and he couldn't win. OK? Here were the horns of the dilemma. If Jesus told them to pay the tax, he would alienate himself from many of the people and even raise serious questions about his claims to be Messiah. What kind of Jewish Messiah would urge the Jewish people to subjugate themselves to a pagan Caesar? If he told them not to pay the tax, then they could take Jesus to the governor and accuse him of being a rebel against Rome and encourage his execution. But what really makes this insidious is the way they round out their question. Look at the beginning of Verse 15: "So, Jesus, shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" They make it sound, rather than a theoretical question, they make it sound like a serious issue of conscience which they, as young Jewish theologians, are really struggling with. This is just wicked.

Now, implied in this question, for us, are a number of difficult ethical questions about our biblical response to government. Because buried in this question are these questions: Should

God's people pay taxes? Should God's people pay all taxes, regardless of what those taxes are going to provide? Should God's people pay unfair taxes? Should God's people pay taxes that support a pagan, idolatrous government or that use those monies for wrong purposes? Purposes contrary to the purposes of God. Is it necessary to submit to a pagan government? Is it necessary to submit to a government who is only in power by force? These were all buried in this question. They asked it for evil purposes, but it's recorded for us by God for good, so that we can learn. Because those are questions that we find ourselves asking as well, aren't they? So, in an economy of words, Jesus is going to answer all those questions.

That brings us to the second part of this passage. A profound spiritual answer about the relationship of God and government. Look at the second half of Verse 15: "But Jesus, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, 'Why are you testing me?'" Jesus understood what was going on. We don't know if this was through his wisdom, his human wisdom, and his ability to observe human nature, and to expect this after he sent the other group packing. We don't know if it's something the Spirit allowed him to know in his omniscience. But one way or another, he understood what was really happening. And so, he says to them, "Why are you testing me?" I know what's going on here. And then he makes this curious command: "Bring me a denarius to look at." The denarius was a small, silver, Roman coin. In fact, I have, a picture of one up on the screen before you. This is an actual coin, the very kind of coin, the same markings that Jesus would have held up to the crowd. It was the only monetary unit in which the tax could be paid, the denarius. It was the equivalent of the average first century worker's daily pay. So, you figure they worked at that point maybe 200 days a year, then it was 1/200ths of their annual salary. Verse 16 says, "They brought one. And he said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?'" By the way, this coin that I have up here, I should give you a little history. It was the very coin used to flip before the Lions and the Giants played in the Coliseum. Nah, just kidding. Just a joke. It's a joke. This is an actual coin that was in circulation in that period of time, and it was the coin of the current Emperor, Tiberius. He was the emperor at the time. On one side of this coin, you can see is an image of Caesar's head. On the other side, is an image of Caesar seated on his throne. And on the side with his head, is a Latin inscription which says this:

“Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” On the other side of the coin, as I said, is him seated on his throne, and this Latin inscription: “Pontifex Maximus” or High Priest. This coin grew out of the cult of emperor worship. That’s why those expressions are there. So, you can see how highly charged this was because you could only pay, you required, if you were Jewish, to pay this poll tax, this head tax. And you could only pay it with this coin, which on one side had the image of the Caesar claiming to be semi-divine and on the other side, claiming to be high priest. Both inscriptions, as I said, were connected to emperor worship, and so Jesus shows them this coin. He holds it up, and He says, “So whose image and whose inscription appears on the coin?” And, of course, the said to him, “Caesar’s.” Verse 17: “Jesus said to them, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.’” That is a monumental statement. Kent Hughes, I think, is absolutely right when he writes, “It is the single most influential political statement ever made in the history of the world. It was decisive and determinative in shaping Western civilization.” Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.

Now, as we look at that and take it apart, first of all understand that Jesus’ answer here is not some kind of a deliberate dodge to keep himself out of trouble. It’s a profoundly wise answer, but it’s also a completely comprehensive answer as well. Jesus’ answer comes in two parts. The first half answers the Pharisee’s questions. The second half answers a question that the Herodians should have had but didn’t ask. He deals with both of them who have sent this group of disciples, and we’ll see that as we unpack it.

Let’s begin with the first half of this statement: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” The Pharisees, understand, resented, distrusted, and resisted as much as they could, the Roman government because it was so thoroughly pagan. Even the coin brought that to light. So, to them, to those who out of their religious background and makeup, despised a pagan, secular government, to them, Jesus says, “You must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Jesus’ point is this. God has established secular government and it has legitimate authority. Jesus affirms both the existence of government and the reality that it has certain roles to play in fulfilling the plan of God. Turn over to Romans 13, which Romans 13 is really, as we’ll see,

Paul's commentary on this statement of our Lord's. You'll notice at the end of it, in Verse 7, he captures the very language our Lord used, "Render to all what is due them." And then he spells that out some. So, this is Paul's commentary on what our Lord taught. Now go back to Verse 1, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God and those which exist are established by God." God established human government and He has delegated it a limited authority. All government, whether it is totalitarian or democratic, whether it's a monarchy or whether it's an oligarchy, every government, all government is established by God. The question is why? For what specific purposes? Well, Paul here, sort of unfolds why God allowed in His eternal wisdom, the necessity of human government. Why He chose in eternity past to establish human government. There are several reasons in this text. There are other reasons, by the way, in other places. But there are several reasons right here for why God instituted, constituted human government.

First of all, He did so to express His common grace. Look at Verse 4, "For it [that is government] is a minister of God to you for good." God intended government as an expression of His common grace to all of His creatures. And if you doubt whether or not government, even bad government, flawed government, is a blessing, look at what happens when government is taken out of the picture. Riots ensue, law and order is completely gone. Even if law and order before was only mildly in place and was unfairly expressed, at least there was some measure of it. But when you strip all government away, you have anarchy. And anarchy is not tenable. It's not a situation in which we can live. And so, government is an expression of God's common grace. It is a minister of God to you for good. Folks, we have a government that is a flawed government and so does every other country on earth and so has every other country that has ever existed and every other country that ever will exist because it's filled with flawed and fallen and sinful people. But understand that government, in whatever form it takes, is an expression of the common grace of God because bad government is better than no government.

Secondly, it is to restrain evil. Look at Verse 3, "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same." Notice here, government produces, phobia is the word, fear. Why?

Because of evil behavior. When government executes justice against evil behavior and does so in a timely way, it produces fear, and it restrains evil. It serves as a deterrent. This is what God says. Notice Deuteronomy 17:13, when the person who acted presumptuously is put to death, “Then all the people will hear and be afraid and will not act presumptuously again.” Or Ecclesiastes 8:11, “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.” Don’t you for a moment believe that government punishing evil isn’t a deterrent and restraint to sin. And you see it when that breaks down and people think they can get away with whatever they do. You have them looting stores and taking advantage of the situation. Government restrains evil.

Thirdly, government exists to promote and to protect the good. Look at Verse 3 again, second half of Verse 3, “Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same.” If you’re a good citizen, if you’re law abiding, usually you don’t have to worry about or be afraid of the government. And often, various government officials at different levels will publicly recognize and commend those who model certain virtues. They may not be thoroughly biblical virtues, but they praise those who do good. In fact, in 1 Peter, Peter refers to government doing this very thing, praising those who do what’s right.

A fourth role of government here in this text is to punish the one who practices evil. Notice Verse 4, [Government] “for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing.” By the way, that and many other passages are justification for government executing justice including death. The sword was typically not used to prick, it was used to kill. And notice what he says. Verse 4 ends with this very fascinating expression: “For it [that is government] is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” Government is a minister of God. How does government serve God? Well, the end of Verse 4 says it serves God by being “an avenger that brings wrath.” Whose wrath? Not the government’s wrath; God’s wrath. Government is a servant of God, an avenger who brings His wrath to bear, in a temporal sense, on the one who does evil. So, all government exists and functions, then, under the authority of God. As an expression of His own love of order

and structure; God is a God of order and structure. His spiritual kingdom is run that way. And it's an expression of His common grace to maintain order in a fallen world.

So then, understand, that when Jesus says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" it means that our duty to God does not eliminate our duty to human government but rather establishes it. Now as a result of Jesus' statement, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," several things flow out of that. First of all, all men must obey its laws and its leaders regardless of how odious the laws may be or how odious the leaders may be. Titus weighs in on this, as Paul writes to Titus 3:1, "Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed." 1 Peter 2 makes this clear as well. In fact, turn there with me. Peter is writing when Nero is the emperor. That wonderful paragon of virtue. 1 Peter 2:13, and he says:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king, as the one [who is] in [the ultimate place of] authority, or to governors, the ones He sends for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.

In other words, it doesn't matter if it's the top official, in our case the president; or whether we are talking about our congressmen and women; or whether we're talking about our local, our state and local government. He says, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake, to every human institution." Verse 15:

For such is the will of God, that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil but use it as bondslaves of God.

We have to obey the laws of our nation and its leaders, and it doesn't matter whether we agree, whether we think they deserve it, or whether it's odious or they are odious. None of them are worse than Nero.

Now as a balance to that, just to make sure we have the full picture, as a balance to this responsibility to obey the laws and the leaders—in other places in Scripture, God affirms that it is acceptable for us to use the privileges afforded to us by the laws of the land in which we live. Jesus did that at his trial when he said, “Why do you strike me?” This isn’t proper judicial procedure. Paul did that when he reminded them that as a Roman citizen he could not be beaten without cause. He did it when he appealed to Caesar for the ultimate hearing of his case. It is acceptable to use the privileges that the laws of our country allow us to have. Fortunately, in our case, our Constitution affords us many more freedoms than those living in Rome would have had. We can, by law, become involved in the process, we can vote, we can legally express our disagreement through letters to Congress and through peaceful protests and other means within the laws of the land. Our Constitution even gives the power of government to the people. But in the end, we must obey the laws of the country and its leaders.

Secondly, coming out of this expression, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” is this: All men must respect and honor the leaders of its government, its officials, regardless of their own godlessness or how they came to power. Respect and honor the leaders and officials regardless of their own godlessness or how they came to power. Again, nothing we’re dealing with in our country even comes close to what was happening in ancient Rome. And yet, that is the context in which these commands are offered. In Romans 13:7, Paul says, “Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.” Peter puts it like this in 1 Peter 2, “fear God, honor the king.” That’s Nero.

Thirdly, this statement of our Lord’s means all men must pay taxes that are required of them, regardless of how harsh and unfair or how godless the ends for which those taxes will be used. The agenda of ancient Rome was not a Christian agenda. And yet, we’re commanded to pay. Our Lord, here, puts it very clearly, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Clearly, Jesus is not only saying to these young spies that it’s acceptable to pay taxes to Rome, but he’s saying that it’s biblically required to pay taxes to Rome. It belongs to Caesar. And Paul, of course, as I just read to you, says the same thing. “For because of this,” Romans 13, “you also pay taxes for rulers are servants of God devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all

what is due them, tax to whom tax is due, custom to whom custom.” Folks, there is no excuse for a Christian not paying his taxes. There is no excuse for stealing money from the government by lying and cheating on your taxes. You are disobeying Jesus Christ, your Lord. He couldn’t have been any clearer, in many different places.

So, that’s what it means to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. It means that we must pay our taxes, it means that we must honor those who are in leadership, and it means that we must obey the laws and leaders of the land.

Now that brings us to the second half of Jesus’ statement. “Render to God the things that are God’s.” This was Jesus’ response to the other group that came to trap him, the Herodians. Remember, they were the Jews who put all of their confidence in government, so much so that they completely aligned themselves with Herod and Rome. They put, unfortunately like many Christians today, too much hope in government as the chief legitimate way to further God’s plan in the world. If we just buddy up to Rome, buddy up to Herod and Rome, then we can get the agenda we’re after. To them, Jesus said, God is the ultimate authority, and He will always be over government. Government has no right to demand, nor should men give to government, the allegiance that belongs only to God. Due to Caesar, give to Caesar; due to God, give to God. Duty to Caesar, though, is surpassed by duty to God. Our ultimate duty is not to government, but to God. Jesus is making it clear, here, that there are things which don’t belong to Caesar, whether he claims them or not. And those things should not be given to him, including, by the way, what was on both sides of that coin, which was worship. Give Caesar what he deserves, but don’t give him what God deserves. Jesus’ statement here, by the way, assumes that more often than not, the demands of the state and the demands of God will not conflict. He’s assuming that as an order of normal life, and that’s normally true. But when they do, implied in this statement is we must always obey God rather than man. And that’s exactly what the apostles said. Do you remember these two incidents in the early part of Acts? In Acts 4, Peter and John answered and said to the Council, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge. For we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.” They had ordered them to stop preaching Jesus and they say, “Sorry, God is our ultimate authority.

When what you say and what God says contradict, there's not a choice." They said the same thing in Acts 5. They brought them before the Council. They stood them there. The High Priest questioned them and says, "Wait a minute, guys. We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name. And yet, you have filled with Jerusalem with your teaching and intended to bring this man's blood upon us." In other words, you're disobeying the authority of the government in your life. But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men!" It's seldom that what the government commands us to do and what God commands us to do come into complete conflict, but when they do, we must obey God rather than men and take the consequences.

So, Jesus is very clear, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, render to God the things that are God's." This event has a postscript. Look at Chapter 12:17, "And they were amazed at him." The Greek word is more like astounded, astonished. They just never dreamed he could work around this dilemma. But he wasn't being cute. He was answering their question. He just did it in such a wise way, that there was nothing for them to accuse him of. Luke writes, "They were unable to catch him in a saying in the presence of the people, and being amazed at his answer, they became silent." And Matthew writes, "And hearing this, they were amazed. And, leaving him, they went away." Don't you love the magnificent glory and wisdom of our Lord? May we walk in His steps.

Let's pray together:

Father, thank you for Your Word. Lord, we are so rich to have what our Lord taught and what He did, so that we can study it together, so that we can learn of Him, so that we can see modeled His great wisdom and marvel. And, Lord, so that we can follow what He taught. Help us, Father, in the politically charged environment in which we live, with all of the talk shows and all of the pundits urging us to think a certain way, to speak a certain way, to be disrespectful of those in authority, Father, help us to learn the difference between disagreeing and being disrespectful. Help us to follow the command our Lord laid down here. May we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Father, may we obey the laws of our country and its leaders. May we show

respect and honor to those who are in positions of authority, whether they deserve it or not. And Father, may we pay our taxes. Lord, I pray as well, You would help us always to have our chief allegiance not to government, may we not be like the Herodians thinking that the solution for God's people is found by buddying up with the government; but Father instead may we always remember that You are the ultimate authority. You are over every government. And ultimately, our allegiance must be to You. Lord, help us to live like this to the honor of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who did this perfectly. For it's in His name we pray. Amen.