

Give To Caesar; Give To God

Mark 12:13-17

Key Verse: 12:17

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’”

As we have studied, during Jesus’ passion week, the Jewish religious leaders intensified their efforts to discredit Jesus, arrest him and kill him. In the previous passage they questioned his authority. Jesus countered by teaching that his authority came from God and they knew this in their hearts. Jesus drove home his point with the parable of the tenants. In today’s passage, the Jewish leaders send agents to trap Jesus with a loaded question about taxes. Jesus responds, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Just as stars shine more brightly in the darkness of night, the wisdom of God shone through Jesus in the time of trial. Who can teach like Jesus did? Surely Jesus is God and Jesus is the Teacher of all mankind. In today’s passage let’s learn from Jesus our Teacher. In the first part we can learn Jesus’ integrity as a teacher. In the second part we can learn the contents of his teaching. Let’s learn how to practice Jesus’ teaching in our time.

I. Jesus taught the way of God in accordance with the truth (13-15a).

Look at verse 13. “Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.” Here “they” refers to the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. These enemies of God had been humiliated by the parable of the tenants. Jesus had revealed their true spiritual condition, which was wretched, and foretold the judgment of God and his final resurrection victory. They could not bear to be around Jesus. So they walked away, seething with anger, and yet powerless to do anything. Their frontal assault had failed completely. But these were the kind of men who fought in every conceivable way to destroy their enemies. They did not give up easily. Inspired by the devil, they hatched another plot against Jesus that relied on deception and manipulation. They sent some of Pharisees and Herodians to trap him in his words.

They say that politics makes for strange bedfellows, and this was surely the case in the alliance of the Pharisees and Herodians. Historically, the Pharisees had been known for their spirit to follow the truth of God at the risk of their lives. They resisted Hellenization and did everything possible to preserve Jewish tradition. The Herodians, however, were interested in maintaining the rule of Herod’s family. They compromised in whatever way necessary to promote Herod’s interests, and tried to win the favor of Rome whenever possible. Most of the time, the Pharisees and Herodians were opposed to each other. Yet, when it came to getting rid of Jesus, they were willing to work together (Mk 3:6). As we will see, they tried to get Jesus to incriminate himself. If Jesus contradicted the law, the Pharisees could charge him as a heretic before the Sanhedrin. If Jesus contradicted Roman policy, the Herodians could charge him with treason before the Roman rulers.

Look at verse 14. “They came to him and said, ‘Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, 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 taxes to Caesar or not?’” Sometimes, enemies know a man’s character best because they study it so intensely to look for weaknesses. Obviously, the religious leaders knew something about Jesus’ character. In a word, they recognized Jesus as a man of integrity. In their assessment this meant two things.

First, Jesus was not swayed by men. Jesus’ teaching was not influenced by what people wanted to hear; Jesus was not a “people pleaser.” Rather, Jesus taught the truth that was right in the sight of God. Jesus saw people with a shepherd’s heart and wanted to lead them to God who alone could save them. In chapter 3, Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. It was a deliberate revelation of God’s mercy and saving grace. It was meant to liberate people from the legalism of the Pharisees. The Pharisees hated Jesus for doing this. But Jesus ignored their wickedness and gave the man a new life. Again, Jesus told the rich young man to sell everything he had, give to the poor, and follow Jesus. It was the way for him to enter eternal life. But the man went away sad. Surely, Jesus paid no attention to people’s riches or power. Jesus was free to teach God’s word as it was to anyone, anytime, anywhere. On the other hand, the Jewish leaders constantly worried about public opinion and never said what they really thought.

Second, Jesus taught the way of God in accordance with the truth. Jesus always taught from God’s point of view and based his teaching on the truth of God in the Scriptures. When Jesus cleansed the temple, he acted on God’s behalf. He shared the heart of God and demonstrated God’s living presence with his people. People could experience God in Jesus. Standing on God’s side, Jesus drove out the temple businessmen and liberated the temple for God’s use. As he did this he quoted the Scriptures, “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa 56:7). Jesus taught the way of God in accordance with the truth of Scripture.

By their words, the Jewish leaders acknowledged that Jesus was God’s servant who taught the Bible with integrity. However, they rejected his teaching, suppressing the truth, and acting against their consciences and reason. In their insipid evilness, they even used the truth to try to flatter Jesus and draw him into their trap. This flattery was more dangerous than a direct challenge. Many a man has stumbled in the vanity enticed by flattery.

Their question was, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” This was a real hot-button issue with the people of Israel. God’s vision and hope for the nation was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God had helped them to establish a theocratic kingdom in which God was honored as God and the king reigned under God’s blessing and authority. They did not pay taxes in a secular manner. The offerings they made were all given to God. They wanted to give offerings to God alone, not to secular rulers. However, under Roman rule, they had to pay taxes to a pagan Emperor who worshiped idols. Their taxes financed Roman expansion. To passionate Jews, this was repulsive. If the Pharisees were true to their Hasidic roots, they would resist paying such taxes.

On the other hand, the Herodians tried to cooperate with the Romans. They agreed to pay taxes that were reasonable. John the Baptist had seemed to support this position when he told repentant tax collectors to be fair in their dealings (Lk 3:12-14). Still, on each side of this question, feelings ran hot and people tended to become very emotional. The religious leaders were sure they could stir up trouble against Jesus. These religious leaders did not live by the truth. They were wicked and political. Their influence was like poison to Israel.

What a contrast with our Lord Jesus! Jesus was a man of integrity. Jesus taught the way of God in accordance with the truth. Jesus' pure teaching is like living water. As Bible teachers we must learn from Jesus. God has saved us by his grace through the gospel. Jesus commands us to preach this gospel to all creation and to make disciples of all nations. To do this equates to teaching the way of God in accordance with the truth. Let's share the gospel of salvation with the same attitude as our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's grow up to be excellent Bible teachers.

II. Jesus taught, "Give to Caesar and give to God" (15b-17).

Verse 15b says, "But Jesus knew their hypocrisy." Jesus discerned precisely the spiritual condition and motive of the religious leaders. Jesus exposed them, saying, "Why are you trying to trap me?" During his last week on earth so many different people came to Jesus with different motives and questions. Some were hypocrites. Some were sincere. It would be easy to be confused. But Jesus correctly understood each one and gave the most excellent answers. Jesus did not rebuke sincere seekers (Mk 12:29), nor was he deceived by hypocrites. Jesus was like a light shining in a dark place that exposed the truth. Jesus revealed the true nature of this encounter. Then Jesus turned it into a teaching opportunity.

Jesus called for a visual aid, saying, "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." This made people curious. It also changed the nature of the teaching from theoretical dispute to practical truth for everyday life. Jesus wanted to help ordinary people learn how to live in God's world. Many were looking at Jesus with rapt attention. Someone brought a denarius. The denarius was minted by Rome and worth about a day's wages. At that time, Roman coin and currency was the standard for international trade, like the U.S. dollar. It represented Roman rule. Jesus looked at it and asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Look at verse 17. "Then Jesus said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' And they were amazed at him." Jesus revealed God's wisdom and left them speechless. Jesus taught two main truths here.

First, give to Caesar what is Caesar's. In saying this, Jesus acknowledged that it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus acknowledged Caesar's right to rule and that he was due taxes and respect. Why? It was not because of who Caesar was, but it was because of who God is. God is the sovereign Ruler behind Caesar and every other human ruler. God works in and through the worldly rulers to fulfill his own will and purpose. God is the one who raises rulers and deposes them. A compassionate ruler is God's blessing upon his people. A despotic tyrant can be God's

punishment for his redemptive purpose. To recognize a worldly ruler is to recognize God's sovereignty in practical life. Both Peter and Paul developed this idea in their letters (1 Pe 2:13-14). Romans 13:1 says, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

When Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," he was laying down the principle by which God's people should live in this world. It is to fulfill one's duty as a human being and a citizen to the full measure with an attitude of honor and respect. Romans 13:7 says, "Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." As we pay the full amount of our taxes, we must do so with respect and honor, acknowledging the authority established in the world as coming from God.

Our general attitude toward the people in authority, from the President of the United States, to the local Chicago police officer, should be one of submission and respect. Once I was running a little late on the way to a one-to-one Bible study. I turned left on a yellow light and a policeman pulled me over and was about to give me a ticket. I showed respect and admitted my mistake, explaining that I was late for a Bible study. Suddenly, he put his ticket pad away and said, "Pastor, please go to your Bible study. It is important. And pray for me." There is no guarantee that this will always happen. But who knows? In any case, God wants us to respect and honor the basic order of the society we live in.

When Jesus said, "Give to Caesar," he emphasized the word "give." Jesus wants his people to be positive, generous and exemplary in doing whatever they do to be good citizens. President John F. Kennedy once said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." We must not have a welfare-seeking mentality, that is, a begging spirit to get something from our government. We should not be selfish or indifferent. We should not avoid doing civic duties with the excuse they are not spiritual works. Instead, we should have a giving spirit in fulfilling our civic duties. We should be eager and willing to pay taxes, educate our children, vote intelligently, obey the traffic laws, pay our annual fees for vehicle registration and city stickers, and serve our military duty. As we observe Veteran's Day, we should remember those who gave their lives for their nation. This remembrance should motivate us to fulfill our duties as citizens. We have the privilege of voting for the candidate of our choice. We should know the issues and the candidates and pray to make a wise choice that pleases God.

However, we need to qualify this part. If worldly rulers demand that we worship idols or stop preaching the gospel, we must not obey them. Like the early apostles, we must say, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Ac 5:29). Thus, our submission must be done with prayerful discernment; it is obedience to God.

Second, give to God what is God's. Sometimes a small word is very important in Bible study. In this case, it is the small word "and." Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." We must do both. There is no dichotomy in God. All of life should be lived before God and with a giving spirit.

Then, what must we give to God? We must give ourselves to God. As the coin had the image and inscription of Caesar, we human beings have the image of God stamped on us. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." We belong to God. One Christian leader would reach into his pocket from time to time and take out the change that was there. After looking at it, he would say, "Lord, I am like change in your pocket. Spend me in the way that pleases you." We belong to God, not only because God made us, but also because God redeemed us from bondage. 1 Peter 1:18,19 says, "For you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." While we were slaves of sin, God gave his one and only Son to buy us out of bondage and to make us his own. We belong to God. That is why 1 Corinthians 6:20 and 7:23 both say, "You were bought at a price."

What does God really want from us? Simply speaking, God wants us to worship and serve him as God. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." There is one God and he has given each of us one heart. He wants us to love him with all of this one heart, and with all our soul and strength. Whether we are praising and worshiping him at church, or doing our job at the office, or studying for our exams, or shopping for groceries, God wants us to be in love with him all the time. God wants us to love him with all our heart, soul and strength. Our lives themselves should be a perpetual act of worship to God. God wants worship from our hearts.

In giving to God, there is a matchless person. She had been a wayward woman who had a bad reputation (Lk 7:36-50). One day, she heard that Jesus was coming to her hometown for a dinner party at a rich Pharisee's house. In the middle of the dinner, she burst into the room and went straight to Jesus. She stood before Jesus weeping and wet his feet with her tears. They were tears of repentance. Then she wiped his feet with her long, shiny hair, and poured perfume on them. It was the finest perfume and her most precious treasure. It was worth a lot of money. But in worshiping Jesus, she did not count the cost. She gave herself to Jesus and she gave all she had to Jesus in a sincere act of surrender and worship. Jesus was pleased by her act. Jesus said that she loved him much.

Another important example is that of Abraham. After carrying out a great and successful rescue mission, defeating a large foreign army, Abraham returned to the promised land. He was met by Melchizedek who blessed him, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram raised his hand to the Lord and gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High. Abraham acknowledged that God had given him the victory and he gave the victory back to God by giving a tenth offering.

Later in Abraham's life, God tested him. By that time in his life, Abraham had received the full measure of God's blessing. He had received God's promises and the son of the promise Isaac. He was content and happy with the

blessing of God. Then God asked him to offer his only son whom he loved, Isaac, as a burnt offering on a mountain. Abraham obeyed God from his heart, and went to the point of raising his knife to slay Isaac before God stopped him. To Abraham, this was an act of worship to God (Gen 22:5). Abraham was ready to give back to God what God had given him. Abraham knew how to love God with all his heart and soul and strength. So he was blessed with the everlasting blessing of God. The Bible says he is our father in the sight of God and we must walk in his footsteps.

As our Lord Jesus Christ gave this teaching, no doubt, the cross was before his mind's eye. There he would offer himself to God as a ransom sacrifice. Jesus would pour out his blood and die on the cross. In this way Jesus would purchase the salvation of all sinners and restore to God what was rightly his. Jesus would restore God's reign in the hearts of men and in all creation. With this spirit, Jesus had said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The Spirit of Jesus is the spirit of serving and of giving life for the glory of God and the blessing of others. Let's pray that we may have a giving spirit that motivates us to practice Jesus' teachings.