

## The City and the King: Render to God

### Mark 12:13-17

One of the most important lessons I have learned while parenting is that it is necessary to teach our kids that they are accountable to authority. They won't always be under OUR authority, but they will always be responsible to some authority here on earth and certainly they are and always will be accountable to God's rule and reign.

The main message that Jesus proclaimed in the Gospel of Mark was one of authority as he announced the arrival of God's kingdom and the appropriate response to God's reign is to repent of my self-centered rebellion and trust in Jesus for all that I need. Of course, His authority is exercised over His children in order to do them good.

As we have gotten into the final week of Jesus' life in Mark 11 and 12 we have seen Jesus make a clear and strong assertion of authority by entering Jerusalem on a donkey and then attacking the Temple and pronouncing God's true purpose for His house in 11:17. In response to this, the Sanhedrin sends a delegation to Him in order to challenge his very clear assertion of authority and right. 11:28. Jesus responds by drawing their attention to his forerunner, John the Baptist, and whether his ministry had heavenly authority or whether it was earthly in origin and so without true authority.

After they fail to answer Jesus tells them a parable about a vineyard and some wicked tenants. In the parable God the Father is the owner of the vineyard and the implication is that the religious leaders are the tenants denying the authority of the landowner to the point where they will be willing to kill his son.

Of course, this made the religious leaders none too happy. Look at 12:12. But they aren't finished yet. This week they send another delegation to Jesus to try to show his claim to authority as unfounded. They want to prove that he is a false teacher who ultimately has no authority and they do this by asking him about the highest earthly authority at that time, the Roman Emperor.

But you cannot entrap the creator and King. He is too wise and he will turn their trap back on them and in the process give us some clear instruction on how to

properly order our lives under His authority. So, today I want to share with you **3 mindsets necessary to properly order our lives under God's authority.**

### **1. Avoid Dishonest Hypocrisy (vv. 13-15a)**

After Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard and the religious leaders depart in anger, they regroup and send another delegation back to Jesus with a specific goal. Look at verse 13.

When we moved into our house here in Michigan we found an animal trap in the shed that the previous owner had left for us. A guy in my neighborhood was having trouble with rabbits eating out of his garden so I let him borrow my trap. You know how an animal trap works. You put some tasty morsel of food in the trap to lure the animal in and when the animal is in the right position and takes the bait, the trap springs and the catch is made. That is exactly what the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to do here. The bait they use is flattery. Look at the first part of verse 14.

Once they feel they have gotten the bait out there, they try to set the trap. Look at their question in the rest of verse 14. So, here is the dilemma Jesus is put in. In the United State we pay all sorts of different taxes. We pay a social security tax, we pay real estate taxes, sales tax, and so on. Imagine if the government suddenly instituted a specific tax to be paid once a year of \$250 that went directly to Planned Parenthood. Would you feel uncomfortable paying that tax?

The Poll Tax here was a tax required of the Roman empire and it was a constant reminder to the Jews that they were not masters in their own land. They were under the thumb of foreign invaders. So, when Jesus is asked this question he has two potential answers that are both equally unsavory. If he says that the Jews should pay the tax the crowds will dismiss him because they hate it. If he says they don't have to pay the tax, this will get him in trouble with the political authorities.

The Pharisees and Herodians believe they have set the trap with careful precision and lured Jesus in and he will have no choice but to spring the trap and end up caught.

But Jesus sees through their flattery and realizes the trap they are attempting to set. In fact, he identifies the real motive behind their question. Look at the

beginning of verse 15. What is hypocrisy? At root it means to be a stage actor, pretender, or role-player. The Pharisees and Herodians are pretending to ask a genuine question and by flattering Jesus, but inside their hearts are in rebellion against his authority and they want to trap him and deny his rule and reign.

Hypocrisy is one of the most frequent ways to deny God's authority. We pretend to be submissive to Him, while our hearts are in rebellion against His Word.

So, how does Jesus handle the trap that has been set?

## **2. Own Secondary Obligations (vv. 15b-17a)**

When you drive a car, the engine is of primary importance. Everything else works properly because of the power the engine gives. But you cannot neglect the transmission or the tires. They may be secondary, but the car will not run well without them.

To properly order our lives under God's authority we must rightly recognize and own our secondary obligations. Our ultimate allegiance is to God, but in His divine wisdom he has given us many different earthly responsibilities and in order to live with Him as King we must fulfill those responsibilities and not deny him. The Pharisees and Herodians set up a false dilemma here by asking this question.

Look at how Jesus responds in the rest of verse 15. The Denarius is the coin that was used to pay the Poll Tax and it was about a day's wage for the average worker. Look at verse 16. Jesus asks them about the likeness and inscription on the coin. The likeness on the Denarius at this time was Tiberius Caesar and of course, graven images were forbidden for Jews so the coin would have been offensive to Jews in this manner. But second, Jesus asks about the inscription, which would have read, "Son of the Divine Augustus." Obviously for a Jew to have a coin with an image and a title proclaiming divinity would have been maddening. This very tax led some Jews to become zealots and use violence to try to subvert the Romans.

But Jesus doesn't respond this way. Look at the beginning of verse 17. The Pharisees and Herodians had try to put Jesus on the sharp point of a fence where he had to fall off one way or the other. But Jesus doesn't see our responsibilities to human government and God's rule and reign as mutually exclusive. In fact, they go together hand in hand.

You ready for this? The biblical perspective on government is that human government is not inherently evil. When God created Adam and Eve and told them to multiply and take dominion over the earth, there was going to come a time when enough people were living that some sort of system of public organization would have to take place. We are made to live with other people and by definition our common lives must be properly organized and led. This is even more of a reality since we are no longer living in sinless innocence, but we are broken by sin.

In fact, I would say the biblical perspective on government is that it is a gift from God given to us to promote what is good and restrain evil. Listen to Romans 13:1-7 for this perspective. So, as followers of Jesus we ought to render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. In other words, we have certain responsibilities to our government and we should attempt, as best we can, to help human government fulfill its God-ordained role. We want our government to promote what is good and restrain evil.

Jesus here is specifically referring to the practice of collecting taxes. When a government collects taxes, it is not theft. The word Jesus uses here is “render” and it means to give back what is owed. What should the tax rate be? What if the government takes 30%, 40%, 50% of my paycheck? The Bible doesn’t specify what the tax rate should be or the specifics of how human government should operate. These are things we can discuss and debate as believers as we seek to help our government fulfill its role of promoting what is good and restraining evil. But the teaching of Jesus here is quite clear. To properly place yourself under God’s authority, you must come under human political authority.

But, there are certainly times when human political authority will overreach and try to bypass the authority of God in our lives and that brings us to our last mindset.

### **3. Restore Primary Authority (v. 17b)**

Look at the rest of verse 17. The authority of government comes under God’s rule and reign. We do have secondary responsibilities to government, but ultimate authority goes to God. In our country today, we aren’t very often asked to disobey the Bible in order to obey government, but I think politics tries to expand its authority into God’s realm by going after our hearts and not just our actions.

In Jesus' day the Roman empire may demand that you only worship Caesar as divine. In our day, politics is taking up more and more of our time, energy and mental capital. We increasingly see political positions as the most important thing about a person and government as the source of our problems and the pathway to solutions. This works whether you want small or big government. You may think reducing the size of government will solve our issues or more government programs or better run programs will fix things. The bottom line is that today our temptation is to put our hope in politics.

United States Senator Ben Sasse is a believer and gave a talk to a group of Christian pastors a couple of years ago and he said this about our current political moment:

*"I believe we are having a crisis in politics because people are deciding to project grand meaning onto politics and politics can't bear that weight."* – Ben Sasse

If you have ever been driving along and seen a sign letting you know that you are approaching a bridge and that bridge has a weight limit on it. It's not that the bridge is unimportant because it can't handle an 18-wheeler loaded down with steel beams, it's just that the bridge was designed for certain vehicles and not others.

We cannot allow the political to become everything to us precisely because of the way Jesus puts it in verse 17. Only God can bear the weight of all our hopes and only God has decisive authority in our lives.

Keep in mind that Jesus asked the Pharisees and Herodians whose likeness was on the coin. Likeness is the word that is translated "image" in the Bible. The implication of what Jesus is saying is that the coin belongs to Caesar because his image is on it, therefore, the human being belongs to God because, according to Genesis 1:26, we are made in God's image. From the very beginning human beings were designed to be reflections of God and to live for God. We are made to live with God as our ultimate authority because He is our creator.

Earlier I told you that the word "render" means to give back what rightfully belongs to someone else. We are to "render" our lives to God because they belong to Him.

If you're like me, you probably don't think a whole lot about patents and I've never even considered applying for a patent. We had a friend in Virginia who had a couple of patents for work he had done in Manufacturing Engineering. He didn't really brag about his patents and we actually discovered them when we helped them move into a new house and Bethany was carrying some boxes. If I had a patent or two, I'm pretty sure I'd be letting everyone know about it.

But, when you receive a patent you have exclusive rights to make, use, sell and import your creation for a certain number of years. And rightfully so. You created it and you should have ownership of it.

God created human beings. Full stop. This is one of the most important things we can say about each other. We are created by God. If you deny that reality, you cannot expect to understand the path to human joy and flourishing. Rejecting that we are created is like refusing to water your ferns because you believe you own a cactus. Wrongly assessing the nature of your plant means failing to do what is good for your plant.

We are created by Him in love and wisdom and designed to live dependent on Him and to find fulfillment and life by living according to His Word.

But rather than submitting to God's authority, we human beings are adept at setting ourselves up as the ruling authority. We are ferns in need of water, but we act like a cactus. We go by what WE want to do and how WE think we should live.

This rebellious mindset puts us in opposition to God and under His judgment. He has the right to rule over us as His creation and when we rebel, He has every right to bring swift justice. Listen to Romans 1:18-23.

But God's authority is not the rule of a hateful dictator. His rule over his creation is benevolent and good. He wants us to joyfully submit to his authority and he will do what is necessary to bring us to that submission. The gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus came to earth for this very purpose. Listen again to Mark 10:45. He came to give His life as a ransom because we needed to be purchased back from sin and brought back to God.

The only way to rightly order our lives under God's authority is by humbly repenting of our rebellion and sin and trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as

my ransom for sin. Then out of gratefulness and faith I render back to God my whole life, because it belongs to him in the first place.