

“GOD AND CAESAR (Mark 44)”
Mark 12:13-17

We ended our last look at this chapter by seeing that the leaders of the people were wanting to get rid of Jesus because they had cottoned on to the fact that he was telling parables that were very much a criticism of them and their position. Unfortunately for them, Jesus was enjoying unparalleled popularity amongst the people at this time and they knew that, if they tried to touch him, they'd have a great deal of trouble on their hands. (It's not unlike the Roman Abramovich and Claudio Ranieri!)

So they resort to subterfuge. They send spies to try and catch Jesus out. Mark tells us that in *v13*. He says they were “*Pharisees and Herodians*”, once again a very unlikely alliance of people who really had very little in common other than a desperate desire to see Jesus disposed of. (The Herodians actually approved of paying taxes to Rome and the Pharisees, by and large, considered paying taxes to Rome to be a form of idolatry.) They may well have been younger protégés of the leaders who are eager for a slice of the action, but could actually appear to be asking the questions out of a genuine desire to learn. But Mark rubs in that they have come “*to catch him out*” – literally “*that they might trap him with a statement*”: whatever he said was going to upset one of the groups questioning. (Mark repeats it in *v15*, and uses words like “*hypocrisy*” and “*trap*” in the next few verses. But, of course, Jesus doesn't fall into the trap and comes out on top, as we shall see.

This section of chapter 12, from here to the end of the chapter, contains 4 questions that Jesus answers. The first three are put to him by people eager to catch him out; the fourth is a question posed by Jesus himself. But to all these questions, Jesus responds with an uncharacteristic directness and an authority that leave the people in stunned silence - look at *v34*. This morning, we'll look at the first of those questions, for it has at the heart of it an issue that has long troubled the Church and has led to sharply opposing views, particularly since the Reformation. What's a Christian's obligation to the secular authorities? For some, the followers of Jesus should have no truck at all with the state. They try to lead a separate existence and to keep themselves as unsullied as possible in a ghetto-like community. For others, the Church seems to be there almost to bolster up the state and lend its support to all manner of things that are clearly (I would argue) at odds with the teaching of the Bible – blessing nuclear warheads, for example, or providing a theological rationale for apartheid.

But let's look at what Jesus has to say here, and at how that fits into the teaching of wider Scripture. One word of warning, though – and it applies to all that you hear from the pulpit – remember that I have my own personal biases, too, and you need to be aware that what I think is going to shape my interpretation of the words of Jesus just as much as what anyone else has to say.

Anyway, this first question is an obvious trap, as Mark makes clear here. His opponents are hoping that he will answer in such a way that they can hand him over to the Roman authorities for seditious preaching. If he tells them – as they presumably think he will – that they shouldn't pay their taxes to Caesar, then they will be able to rush straight round to the officials and report him. As we've said, this was a very live issue at the time and there were groups who did refuse to cough up the required contribution to the coffers of Rome. It is reckoned that an average citizen of Palestine at this time would have paid about one third of his income in taxes of one sort or another (not too far different from today, then). It's interesting that, although Jesus gives an unequivocal answer to the question which could leave the Roman authorities in no doubt that he was upholding the system of taxes, his opponents still manage to include subversion and persuading people not to pay amongst the charges at his trial (*Luke 23:2*).

This question, as well as being a hot topic for discussion, was based on the premise that the Pharisees and other leaders held to that you could be loyal to God **or** loyal to the state, but not both. The two things were in quite separate compartments in their lives and needed to be kept apart. They liked to keep things – at least in theory – in lots of little boxes and choose which ones they had anything to do with. Jesus'

answer, as we shall see, blows that idea right out of the water.

Firstly, Jesus asks them to show him a coin. He didn't produce one himself, but asked them to get one. Presumably one of his questioners provided a coin - a denarius with the head of the Emperor Tiberias on it. It was a coin that was worth about one day's wages for a labourer, and at this time would have had on the reverse an inscription that read *Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus*. If nothing else, that would be regarded as idolatry by the Jews, but Jesus makes no comment on that here and it is obviously not a part of his argument. The fact that they are able to produce one, however, shows – as Jesus probably intended to – that at least some of them were quite happy to use these coins and to be involved in the transactions that it involved. In answer to his question, they confirm that it is Caesar's image on it.

Jesus then makes his answer – a clear statement of principle and not a compromise or accommodation. It's this answer that has caused the problems down through the centuries: “*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*” And whatever else we might want to say about it, this is a position that is upheld elsewhere in Scripture, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. In *1 Chronicles 26:30,32* and *2 Chronicles 19:11*, there is mention of “*the affairs of the King and the affairs of God*”, clearly identified but, in the context, clearly part of the same responsibility for the people. And later in the New Testament, there is the teaching of Paul in *Romans 13:1-7*. Particularly important are vv6,7.

There is no doubt that we live in both realms – under the lordship of God and under the earthly authority of the king, emperor, president or whatever. And these two realms are not mutually exclusive, as the people who questioned Jesus seemed to be trying to imply. In fact, a case could be made that one is a sub-set of the other. We respect and honour the king because he is permitted his authority (*given* his authority, if you prefer) by God, who wants his world to be well-ordered and peaceably governed.

So, in the first half of this reply, Jesus is saying that we have a responsibility to pay our dues as part of the society in which we live. This who benefit from Caesar must pay for it. There's a scene in one of the Monty Python films (*The Life of Brian*) in which a group of Zealots who are wanting to start a rebellion in first century Palestine are sitting round their conference table and the rabble-rouser gets them all wound up and starts to ask “So what have the Romans ever done for us?” Instead of the response he was hoping for, there's a long pause and then someone replies, “Well, they've built good roads.” Another adds, “The water system is their idea.” And someone else adds, “They've done a lot for trade, really.” And so it goes on as the poor demagogue is reduced to whimpering by all his colleagues listing the many benefits of Roman rule!

What Jesus is pointing out, then, is that the state may have its faults, but once you accept its authority and use its facilities, you must abide by that authority and play your part in supporting it. The authority of the Emperor was considered at that time to extend as far as people used his coins, so that fact that the questioners had produced the coin indicates, as we said earlier, that they recognised his authority. Admittedly, his authority is subject to the permission of God, but, in a sense, that validates it even further.

The same still applies. We may well complain about paying our taxes to a government that does not seem to have the values of the kingdom of God at the heart of its policies. But that government – of whatever political colour – is an agent of God's order in this world. And we all benefit enormously from its provision – of roads, schools, hospitals, welfare, infrastructure, defence and so on. That has to be paid for – and part of our responsibility to our nation is to contribute towards it. And, as God's people, we have a further responsibility to pray for our leaders. In fact, that's not a responsibility, it's a command from God as you'll see if you look at *1 Timothy 2:1-4*.

But Jesus goes on. Part of the problem with having only the printed word to go on – and probably an edited version of that, too – is that we can't hear how Jesus actually says these words. What was his tone

of voice? Where did he put his emphasis? Was there a dramatic pause after the first part of the answer? I like to think that Jesus might have paused at the comma (which wasn't there in the Greek, after all) and added with yet more weight and authority, "*and to God the things that are God's.*" As Norval Geldenhuys phrases it in his comments on this verse, "*When you render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's - and this you have to do - never forget that ultimately your loyalty is to God.*"

You see, the coin bears the image of the Emperor. It may have got a bit damaged and distorted – the Roman mint wasn't as sophisticated as our modern mints and the metal was a bit softer – but it's still Caesar's image on it and so to Caesar it must be paid. Now, what do we believe about human beings? We bear the image of God. The very first chapter of the Bible tells us that. His image in us might have got a bit damaged; there may be distortions due to our weaknesses and our sins, but we bear that image – all of us. So our responsibility is to offer our whole lives up to him – "*Give to God what is God's*" – your very being.

Do you see what Jesus is trying to say here? God has stamped you with his mark. You are his. Your life is, if you like, lent to you on the understanding that it will be used by you for the glory of God and that you will respond to all the wonderful things he has done for you and given to you by offering it back to him. And part of that loyalty to God is accepting the authority which he has given to our earthly rulers. That's what Paul says in *Romans 13*. I come from a position that finds it hard to accept that sometimes, but there is no escaping what God says in his word. Of course, there will be times when the two things come into direct conflict and then it is clear that our first loyalty is to God alone. We are not called to give religious respectability to decisions that are clearly at variance with the word of God and at those times when there is a clash our voice needs to be heard loud and clear. That is the prophetic calling of the followers of Christ. But Jesus here is telling his listeners that their duty is to make their contribution to the authorities that govern their lives, in this case through their legitimately levied taxes. And I think it can be argued from the Bible that we have other contributions to make as well as we use the gifts that God has given us in the service of our communities and our nation.

The answer which Jesus gives, then, confounds his critics and leaves them, once again, dumbfounded. They are clearly amazed at what he has said, but he has given them no excuse to report him to the authorities, no reason to trap him. And he moves on to deal with the next question, from yet another group of critics (the Saducees) as we shall see next time.

What's it got to say to us, then? Well, this – which we probably all go along with in practice, even if we've never really rationalised it in our thinking: it is a question of our priorities once again. First and foremost our loyalty as human beings is to the God whose image we bear. That God, a benevolent and just God who wants his world to be ordered in the best way possible for the good of his creatures, has set up certain people to be rulers of his creation, to take responsibility for the smooth running of society. They don't always get it right, but they are there by his permission and as such they deserve our loyalty and they deserve that we make our contribution to the overall governance of society – through the paying of our taxes and through our participation in other ways. At times when the two might come into conflict, our loyalty is first and foremost to God and we seek to follow his way. Above all, what we do should always be to the end of glorifying him.

Questions for discussion

1. Who or what is Caesar in our contemporary world?
2. Do you believe we should pay taxes? Why/why not? If not, what is the alternative?
3. In what ways might our taxes be used contrary to God's will? How should we respond?
4. How do you decide what is God's and what is "Caesar's"? Do you actually ever think about it?

5. How do we decide the extent to which we are going to submit to the will of “Caesar”? Give some concrete examples.