

The Remarkable Wisdom of Jesus

In Mark 12, Jesus continues to encounter high-level conflict with Jewish religious leaders following His entry into Jerusalem. In today's text, two groups that were notoriously hostile to one another now join together to entrap Jesus with a question. His remarkable answer has changed the world we live in.

Mark 12:13-17

¹³ And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. ¹⁴ And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" ¹⁵ But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶ And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." ¹⁷ Jesus 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.

Both the Pharisees and the Herodians knew there was no way Jesus could answer this question directly without either destroying His ministry or ending His life. If He said "yes," the people would have ceased following Him as Messiah, because they believed the Messiah would come to deliver Israel from Roman occupation and oppression; if He said "no," He would immediately be arrested and executed by the Romans as an insurrectionist, as were others before Him. You can get the first century historical background from the 2/3/13 morning sermon.

Jesus saw through their hypocrisy, their flattery, and their treachery, and in His answer He not only avoided the trap they had set for Him, but (in verses 16 and 17) He taught lessons needed in every generation.

1. Jesus commands that we render submission, support, and respect to all governing authorities (16,17a)

Jesus asks them to give Him a Roman denarius, the very coin that was required for the "poll tax" in question. He asks whose "likeness" and inscription are on the coin. On one side of the denarius was the likeness of Caesar Tiberius with these words inscribed: "Caesar Tiberius Augustus, Son of Divine Augustus." On the other side was the image of his mother with the words "Pontifex Maximus (High Priest)," which referred to Caesar. Jesus then says that we must "render" (pay back) what we owe to Caesar. Taxes belong to him. Romans 13:1-7 teaches us that submission is owed to him. In I Peter 2:17 we learn that honor is also owed to him. In I Timothy 2:1-2 we read that prayers are owed for those in authority. This is our duty as followers of Christ.

2. Jesus commands that we render ultimate allegiance to God (17b)

What is it that we owe God? The word "likeness" (or "image") in verse 16 gives us the key to the answer. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, this same word is used in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image..." On what has God stamped His image? On us! If we owe Caesar taxes, we owe God our whole selves. This truth has many implications, one of which is that we must submit to all human authorities only as our obedience to Christ allows us. One can see examples of this God-centered civil disobedience in Exodus 1:15-22 and in Acts 4:13-22. We do not find any teaching like this anywhere in recorded history before Jesus Christ. This breathtaking, transcendent commitment to God over all civil authorities had not been taught until then. The true followers of Christ have been seeking to carry out this mandate ever since.

Discussion Questions

1. What is hypocrisy? What drives it? Why is it so dangerous?
2. Why is it essential that we give our civil leaders submission, support, and respect? In what ways do we most often fail to obey this mandate?
3. Read Exodus 1:15-22 and Acts 4:13-22. What is so amazing about what these four people did? Why did they do it?
4. What examples of civil disobedience in American history should we celebrate? What moments of civil disobedience might we face?

Going Deeper

1. When have you found yourself most often not submitting to or showing respect for civil authorities? What must you do to conform to Jesus' teaching?
2. When have you found yourself most easily going along with the status quo, rather than being willing to take a courageous stand for Jesus Christ? What must you do to conform to Jesus' teaching?