

Message #44

Mark 12:13-17

We are living in a time when many believe that politics should be kept out of the pulpit. The concept that is often used for this idea is “the separation of church and state.” To many people the separation of church and state means the church should stay out of the state or nation’s business and the nation or state should stay out of the churches’ business. Actually, contrary to popular belief, this is not in the constitution of the United States of America.

Thomas Jefferson had a clause in the constitution to protect the Federal Government from making laws that would prohibit any true worship of God. But this original idea is getting lost in a maze of political threats and rhetoric.

In this text, the government is brought into religion. In this passage, religious leaders bring politics right into the Temple, hoping they could kill Jesus Christ. Not only did they bring politics into the Temple, but they also brought up the subject of paying taxes. If ever you want to bring a topic that will raise blood pressure, bring up politics and taxes.

Jesus now is in Jerusalem and He is in the Temple. He has actually gone there to die. In fact, He has specifically told His disciples exactly what was going to happen to Him (Mark 10:33-34) and this is all part of the process of making it happen.

As He was wandering around the Temple, the Chief Priests, Scribes and Elders (11:27) were trying to figure out a way to arrest Him (12:12). They were afraid to just arrest Him because Jesus was popular with the people and the religious leaders knew that if they seized Him, they could potentially lose their status with the people.

So what they decided to do was to verbally trap Jesus by sending in some leaders to see if they could get something on Him so they could arrest Him. Now the word for “trap” in **verse 13** is a word that was used for catching or taking something by hunting or fishing (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 7).

These leaders are tracking Jesus Christ so they can kill Him. They are the hunters and He is their prey. What they wanted to do was to trap Him “in a statement.” What that means is that they wanted to trap Him in His own words. These are pompous, arrogant, satanic religious leaders who are not interested in truth; but in entrapment. The point is this:

THE PHONY RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN THE TEMPLE OF JERSUALEM DID EVERYTHING THEY COULD DO TO TRY AND TRAP JESUS CHRIST BY HIS WORDS SO THEY COULD KILL HIM.

Now Christ had already outfoxed the chief priests, scribes and elders (11:27). He had also thrown a parable at them that exposed their evil (12:1-12). So they decided to recruit some other religious leaders to try and stop Him. They were trying to get Him to say something so they could arrest Jesus and kill Him.

According to **verse 13**, the two groups they sent in in this undercover, clandestine mission were the Pharisees and the Herodians. These were two groups that typically hated each other. As one commentator said, these were “strange bedfellows.”

The Herodians were political Jews who supported Herod and Rome and as a result they were not rigid nor real religious like the Pharisees. In fact, the Romans actually kept the Herodians in power. The Pharisees hated Roman authority and they wanted someone to overthrow Rome.

The Pharisees were strict religious, legalistic separatists and the Herodians were loose in their morals and religious observances. These were worldly, political men who mixed in some religion.

Actually these two groups had been plotting against Christ for some time (Mark 3:6). Both of these groups viewed Jesus Christ as a real threat to their political and religious influence. They made their living off the money of the people. So if Jesus took away their authority, they could lose their lush life. So they needed to try to figure out a way to eliminate Christ.

So what they decided to do was to bring up a political hot topic to Jesus to see if they could trap Him and the hot topic was taxes. They use four entrapment methods here that are fascinating to see:

ENTRAPMENT METHOD #1 – They came to Jesus Christ. **12:14a**

This looks like such a positive thing for these leaders to do. It looks like everything is moving along nicely between the religious and political leaders and Jesus Christ. They decided to have a meeting with Christ.

They want to make Jesus think that they are really interested in His views. They want to give Him the impression that they just want Him to give them some answers.

ENTRAPMENT METHOD #2 – They identify Jesus Christ. **12:14b**

Notice how they identify Jesus Christ as “teacher.” From all outward appearances, this appears to be a very polite and respectful acknowledgment. But when you carefully consider this, it is not quite as respectful as what it appears.

They don’t even identify Him as “the teacher.” They just admit He is “a teacher,” the character and quality of a teacher. They know full well He has been identified as the Messiah. They know He has been identified as the Davidic King. They know He has been identified as being the God/Savior/Messiah/King, but they are not about to acknowledge that because they are not interested in believing the truth; they are interested in getting rid of Him.

ENTRAPMENT METHOD #3 – They commend Jesus Christ. 12:14c

Here is hypocrisy at its most evil level. The goal of this commendation is to throw Jesus off guard. To try to trap Christ, they begin with flattery. They give Him some high accolades. This shows you just how hypocritical these men are. They sing His praises. They give Him a series of four compliments:

Compliment #1 - We know that you are truthful.

Jesus Christ had a reputation and the reputation was, He will look you straight in the eyes and tell you the straight truth of God. It did not matter who His audience. He was a straight-shooter with truth. These men are singing Christ's praises here. They know He tells the truth whether it is easy or not.

Compliment #2 - We know that you defer to no one.

What this means is that you do not say something just because someone wants you to say it. You do not care about the object; you will always communicate the truth (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 283). In other words, you stand for truth regardless of what others think or say. Actually Jesus did care about everyone which is why He always told them the truth.

Compliment #3 - We know that you are not partial.

What this means is that they knew that He did not show any favoritism based on who a person was or what a person had. He always presented truth.

Compliment #4 - We know that you teach the Word and ways of God.

The Greek reads that they knew He taught "the truthful ways of the God." They are complimenting Him on His integrity and truthfulness.

Now of course if they really believed that, they would have believed in Him. If they really believed this, they would not be calling Him "teacher." He told them He was "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28-3:6).

ENTRAPMENT METHOD #4 – They question Jesus Christ. 12:14d-15a

Now they think that after flattering Christ with all of this flowery speech, they can trap Him and catch Him off-guard. The subject they decide to bring up is the explosive political subject of "paying taxes."

This topic is still explosive today. I remember one of my early jobs which, as a teenager, I stocked and priced trailer parts and put them on a shelf. I can remember looking forward to pay day and when I got my check, thinking about all the hours I had worked, I was shocked at how much of my money had been taken out of my check.

Why? Taxes. I could not believe it. The government took a lot of money out of my little pay-check for taxes. It is still a sore spot. At the time this happened, Israel was being dominated by Rome and Rome had imposed a lot of taxes on the people.

- 1) There was the ground tax which demanded 10 percent of all grain and 20 percent of all wine.
- 2) There was the income tax which demanded 1 percent of all of a man's income.
- 3) There was the poll tax that demanded 1 denarius from all people ages 14-65.

Now Israel should have been the freest nation in the world. She should be the nation blessed by God, not dominated by some other nation. She should not have to be paying taxes to a foreign Gentile power. But Rome controlled the world and controlled them and they had to pay taxes to Rome.

So these leaders know this is a hot topic. So in **verse 14**, they asked Jesus whether or not it was lawful for people to have to pay taxes to Caesar.

Now the word for "poll tax" is a reference to a Roman head tax. In A.D. 6, Rome instituted this poll tax, which caused a revolt that, according to Josephus, was led by Judas a Galilean, who was violently destroyed by Rome. This episode is actually referred to in Acts 5:37.

The tax was paid to Caesar. The noun "Caesar" came to be a synonymous term for Emperor of Rome, who at this time was Tiberius.

Let us say that the President of the United States demanded that each of us pay a tax directly to him. That would not sit well with us. In fact, high taxes still do not sit well with us.

Now this question about whether they should pay this tax is a tricky question and it is a dangerous question.

If Jesus answers the question "yes" this tax is in accordance with the law of God, it will anger the Jews who despise Roman oppression and taxes. But if Jesus says "no," then He will be at odds with Rome and could be charged with being guilty of some insurrection and that would make Him liable to arrest and perhaps crucifixion.

So they are really trying to back Christ into a corner with whether they should pay or not pay this tax to Caesar.

According to **verse 15**, Jesus knew their "hypocrisy." He was God and He knew what they were doing. The word "hypocrite" refers to a stage play actor. Jesus knew these were a bunch of phony religious and political play actors. They were not fooling Him one bit.

So Jesus says, "Why are you testing Me?" The word "test" is used in a bad sense. They were trying to prove that He would say something so they could arrest Him and kill Him. Jesus knew what they were doing and they knew what they were doing.

When He asks them the question, He knows they are not going to answer Him. He does that so they have to face what they are doing.

They are not about to say we are trying to trap you so we can kill you.

So Jesus says to them in **verse 15**, bring me a denarius to see. A denarius was a Roman coin that was worth about one day's wage (Matt. 20:2). Now the coin probably had the likeness on it of Tiberius Caesar who ruled from A.D. 14-37. He was the Emperor of Rome. On one side of that coin is the inscription that reads: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, *himself* Augustus." On the other side of the coin are the words "Pontifex Maximus" which means chief priest of Rome.

When Jesus asks the religious leaders to give Him one of those coins, these were coins that they would never carry because they considered them to be so secular. The thing that is so interesting here is that they are trying to trap Christ into saying something idolatrous and they are carrying and using coins that say idolatrous things. Augustus was not divine, yet these coins were in the Temple.

They are in the Temple and there are plenty of those coins there. See, this Temple was in the business of making big money so when Jesus asks for a denarius, it is not a problem to produce one of these heathen coins because these religious leaders were known for taking in the money.

According to **verse 16** they brought one of those heathen coins to Jesus and Jesus asked them, well, whose likeness or inscription is on this coin?

When He said that they were forced to look at the coin and say, "Caesar."

So in **verse 17**, Jesus said well since this is Caesar's coin, you give to him what is his and give to God what is His. In other words, use some of your money to pay your taxes and use some of your money to give to the Lord. Now what Jesus is saying is that we do have a responsibility to pay our taxes and we do have a responsibility to give to God. We do not want to short change either responsibility.

This point is clearly reinforced by Paul (Rom. 13:1-7) and by Peter (I Pet. 2:13-17). We are responsible to submit to human government as long as that government does not demand that we do something contrary to God and His Word.

Now there are many hypocrites in religion today who are not about to submit to God on this point. Let me cite some examples.

We are responsible to pay what we owe to the government. Years ago, many of us were drafted to go into the military. We had to report to a place and we were bussed to Detroit and we were given physical exams to determine our military destiny. Some of us were accepted and some of us were rejected, but we had to go because this is what we owed our country.

Now just recently a man was honored by the world that refused to go. He said I am not going to obey the Word of God, and I am going to say I am a religious conscientious objector. Well study your Bible. There is no such thing because we are to render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

There is a so-called Pentecostal/Baptist minister named Al Sharpton who apparently didn't understand what Jesus said. He has refused to pay taxes for years that would have landed most of us in prison. His owed tax bill is 4.5 million dollars. He has not paid State or Federal income tax and he did not pay federal taxes that he owed for employees.

These are supposedly religious men who frankly are playing a dangerous religious game because they will face Jesus Christ who said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."

Verse 17 says when these Pharisees and Herodians heard this answer, they were amazed.

Now don't miss the end of **verse 17**, we are to render "to God the things that are God's."

What do we owe God? This is the God who gave us physical life. This is the God who gave us our minds and our skills and our abilities to work and earn a living. This is the God who gave us His own Son so we might be saved from our sins. What do we owe Him? We owe Him a debt we cannot pay. We own Him everything.