

Mark 12:13-17
Politics and Taxes
WRCoB 3.3.24

We are in the midst of the season of politics and taxes

For some, tax season, is a dreaded thing.

It's difficult to see all that hard-earned money
Go to the government.

But it is what it is.

One of those things we can't avoid
Along with death!

And if you haven't noticed by now
It is also the season for politicking.

The presidential primaries are Tuesday in Virginia.

Paying taxes and voting are two of our civic duties.

For we are blessed to live in a country
With the freedom to vote for our government officials.

Not all countries have that privilege.

Anyway, I'm always a bit skeptical
Of all the rhetoric
Candidates make on the campaign trail.

Have you ever noticed that shrewd politicians
Have a way of answering a most pointed question
In the most ambiguous way?

Now, I'm not saying that Jesus was a shrewd politician

But, in our Scripture Lesson today
Jesus answered a yes/no question
In a way that satisfied no one.

I don't think his answer wasn't meant to be vague.

It was meant to be thought-provoking.

And to this day
We wish for a clearer understanding
Of what Jesus actually meant.

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25-years-earlier, there was a man, Judas the Galilean
Who led an insurrection against the Romans in 6 AD.

They revolted because of a tax levy placed on Judea.

Quirinius, governor of Syria decreed a yearly head tax.

One denarius per head, per year, for all of Judea.

A denarius was approximately one-day's wages.

So, if you were a family of four
That's four days' worth of wages.

They revolted but the Romans easily crushed the rebellion.

This particular tax was the issue in today's incident.

The Pharisees and Herodians attempted
To trap Jesus by a question

The question was meant
To force Jesus to reveal his political views.

During the time of Jesus
There were five distinct divisions of Jews.

- Herodians
- Pharisees
- Sadducees
- Essenes
- Zealots.

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The Herodians were Jerusalem's Jewish aristocracy.

King Herod, was himself, a Jew
Designated as king by the Roman Empire.

In truth, he was a puppet to Rome
And his followers, cronies.

They essentially cowed to the Romans.

The Pharisees and Sadducees
Were not supportive of the Roman Empire.

They, nevertheless, were law-abiding citizens.

They paid their one denarius tax every year
And hoped the Messiah would come to liberate them.

The Essenes were altogether a different sort.

They withdrew from society
And settled in the region around the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea scrolls came from the Essene settlements.

They were similar to the old Brethren
Choosing to be separate from the world
Rather than in the world.

They did NOT pay the tax.

And neither did the fifth group called the Zealots.

They chose a different strategy.

They were revolutionaries
Who sought to overthrow the Roman Empire.

The Zealots wanted to establish a government
Ruled by Judaism.

Two of Jesus' disciples were likely Zealots.

Simon the Zealot, listed in Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:13
And Judas Iscariot.

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The encounter began by complimenting Jesus.

He was a great teacher
And a man of integrity.
Not swayed by public opinion
And taught the truth about God.

And then . . . the question.

Mark 12:14b-15a NLT “Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay them, or shouldn’t we?”

“Yes? Or no?”

All the microphones and cameras loom in
Ready for his answer.

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“Jesus, which political party do you belong to?”

“Who will you vote for come November?”

“Are you a Republican or a Democrat?
Maybe you’re a Libertarian?”

By his answer, they will know his politics.

A simple yes or no was what they wanted.

But Jesus knew this was a setup.

If he answered yes, pay your taxes
He would lose many of his followers, the Zealots
Who wanted the Messiah to overthrow Rome.

If he said no, don't pay the tax
He'd be marked as an insurrectionist.

Jesus didn't give them a direct yes or no answer.

In fact, most of us are unsure
How he answered their question.

Are we to pay taxes or not?

Actually, his answer is brilliant.

Jesus asks to see a denarius.

Mark 12:16 NLT

¹⁶ When they handed it to him, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied.

Mark 12:17 KJV Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

Mark writes they were utterly amazed
And probably baffled by his answer.

A trick question deserves a trick answer.

Do you think Jesus was purposely ambiguous?

Do you think he was playing politics?

Did Jesus' answer mean we are to be good citizens
Under any country, rule, or regime
And pay taxes when asked?

Did the early American colonies do that?

The Boston Tea Party was an act of protest
For taxes levied against them.

Does Jesus mean
Shut up. Pay your taxes. Be good citizens?

Maybe! Maybe not!

Take the denarius.



Inscribed on it is the image of Caesar and the letters DIVI.

The letters were an abbreviation for “Son of the Divine.”

This is Caesar’s claim HE was the Son of God.

What I think Jesus is saying is
Give to Caesar the coin holding his graven image
And his claim to be God.

The NIV says it this way.

**Mark 12:17a NIV “Give BACK to Caesar what is
Caesar’s”**

In a subtle way Jesus could be saying

Give back to Caesar this coin
His claim to be the Son of God
Give back your allegiance to him.

And then, in the same breath, Jesus tells them

Mark 12:17b NLT and give to God what belongs to God.”

And what, I dare ask, belongs to God?

EVERYTHING!

Everything is God’s

So, if you render to God what is God’s
What’s left for Caesar?

Nothing!

The original question was to trap Jesus
Into revealing his politics.

Jesus did reveal his politics by his answer.

Jesus was not a Pharisee, a Herodian, or a Sadducee
He was not an Essene nor a Zealot.

Jesus is not a Republican or a Democrat or a Libertarian.

He is none of these.

Jesus was all about the kingdom of God.

Not a geographical kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom.

His politics were kingdom politics.

A kingdom not originating on earth.

A kingdom that shapes and forms the world
The way God had originally intended.

Jesus' politics focused on the well-being of ALL people.

His politics were about building bridges, not walls!

His concern was for peace and justice
And it was to include everyone.

This is the politics of Jesus!

Jesus was radical!
Jesus was revolutionary.

But not in the way the religious leaders thought.

For he brought in the kingdom of God
Not with a violent uprising
Not by the force of political power

But through self-sacrificial and unconditional love
And the power that comes through the cross.

The kingdom has begun in and through Jesus
But it is not complete.

It is now, but not yet.

Matthew 13:31b-32 NLT

^{31b} “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. ³² It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches.”

He taught us kingdom living in his teachings and parables
Hoping to instill in us what it takes
To live out kingdom principles.

Jesus calls us to continue the work he started

In building the kingdom of God
Simply, peacefully, and together.

He showed us the way.

The way of the cross, a selfless, nonresistant confrontation

The politics of Jesus.

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Politics have become very divided in this day and age.

I think it is largely because

We confuse our earthly politics
With our spiritual allegiances

Here was something written in 1993

Already warning citizens of the temptation
To unite church and state.

Too many of us Christians confuse political convictions with spiritual convictions. Insecure with ambiguity, we assume people of one Lord, one faith and one baptism must also promote one political agenda.

That assumption leads the church into trouble. First, it prompts us to make judgments about people that ought to be left to God. ... Second, when the church confuses spiritual and political convictions it is tempted to use political power to forward a "spiritual" agenda.

Source: Don Ratzlaff in the Christian Leader (Feb. 23, 1993).
Christianity Today, Vol. 38, no. 2.

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Jesus calls us to another way of living
To strive for peace and justice in our lives
And in the world around us.

He said render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's
And to God the things that are God's.

We are called to be good citizens.

But we are also called to speak truth to power.

Our allegiances are first to God and to his kingdom.

Yes, tis the season of politics

And tis the season for paying taxes.

Let's do what Matt Smethurst

Of the Gospel Coalition suggests

So pay your taxes, choose your candidate, (for politics do matter after all) and cast your vote. But do so as one whose trust is anchored in another world.