

## A Political Question

Mark 12:12 - 17

**Proposition:** We are made in God's image therefore He owns us. We are obliged to give to God what belongs to Him.

**Application:** Be owned by God. Admit your sin. Believe that Jesus died for your sin and rose again on the third day. Call on Him. And in the power of the Spirit live as one owned by God.

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Many years ago, when Ronald Reagan was President, a little boy wanted \$50 very badly and prayed for a whole week. When nothing happened, he decided to write God a letter. When the Post Office received the letter addressed to God, they sent it to the White House. President Reagan was both impressed and amused, so he informed his aide to send the boy \$5, thinking that would be a lot to him. The boy was thrilled with five bucks and so he sat down and wrote a thank you note: "*Dear God, thank You very much for sending the money. However, I noticed for some reason You sent it through Washington and as usual, they kept most of it.*"

Unfair taxes has always been an issue. In the text we are looking at today, the religious leaders were angry at Jesus and approached Him with a political question hoping to get Jesus to say something that would get Him into trouble.

We are made in God's image therefore He owns us. We are obliged to give to God what belongs to Him. Let's explore their attack and see how Jesus answered them.

### I. The Attack (12:12 - 14)

*Fearing the Crowd* (12:12): The parable Jesus spoke was not aimed at Israel but the religious leaders of Israel. Since the message exposed their evil motives, the leaders were angry at Jesus and their anger was so intense they wanted to seize Him. But the crowds loved Him and held onto His words. Some believed He was a prophet. Others wanted to make Him King. Still others shouted Hosanna as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Fear of the crowd stopped the religious leaders from seizing Jesus. Instead, they left searching for more allies to help them trap Jesus in His words.

*Pharisees and Herodians* (12:13): The Pharisees and Herodians held clashing views. The Pharisees were religious conservatives. They loathed being subject to pagan Rome. The Herodians were liberals. They were fine being subject to Rome. In fact, they were puppets of Rome. They had no qualms about the impact pagan culture had on Israel. Jesus was a threat to both Pharisees and Herodians. He was a risk to the Sanhedrin and the State. So, a new coalition

formed between these two groups around their common goal to destroy Jesus. As one commentator said, “*they hated Jesus more than they hated each other.*” We see the same practice play out on college campuses across North America as radical Muslims and the LGBTQ community join arm in arm in their common disdain for the State of Israel, shouting with one voice “*from the River to the Sea.*” In normal times, these two groups dislike each other. Yet they are able to form a coalition because of their common hatred for Israel. This goes to show that love and hate have the power to unite people around a given cause. Love unites people toward a common good. Hate unites people in their quest to destroy. Motivated by hate, this alliance sought to trap Jesus through deceit hoping to catch Him saying something that would get Him in trouble either with the Jewish Sanhedrin or with the Roman State (Luke 20:20). The trap they used was flattery (Prov 29:5).

It has also been said that *flattery is seeking to butter you up before dropping the hammer on your head.*

*Flattery (12:14):* This envoy launched their veiled attack hoping to butter Jesus up so that He might let down His guard. This trick might have worked with a common man but not with the Lord Jesus. He knows the motives of people’s hearts (John 2:24, 25).

They called Him *Teacher* but were not willing to learn from Him. It is indeed tragic to call Jesus a Teacher yet not accept His teaching. What they said about Jesus was true because ***He in fact possessed these virtues!*** Yet they did not believe a word of it themselves. Their words were true, their motive was evil. With flattery out of the way, they got down to the real reason for their visit. *What does the Law teach about paying taxes to a foreign regime?* Unfair taxation has always been an issue. Riots and revolutions have been waged over taxes. We are seeing the early stages of this play out as our leaders fight back against Trump’s tariffs. Suppose we were conquered by the US - and they imposed a special tax that we had to pay but Americans did not have to. We would deem this to be unfair. In the same way most of the Jewish people despised paying taxes to a foreign pagan government. Romans did not have to pay the poll tax. The tax was a constant reminder of Israel’s subjugation to Rome. The poll-tax was imposed on the Jewish people 27 years before this event. To add insult to injury the tax had to be paid not with Shekels but with Roman coins bearing the image of Caesar. The spies thought their question only had a *yes* or *no* answer.

## **II. The Answer (12:15 - 17a)**

*False Question (12:15):* The Pharisees strongly opposed paying taxes to a foreign government. They believed the state with all its power was subject to God. To them the Sanhedrin was an arm of God’s rule, therefore the Sanhedrin should be above the state. The Herodians believed the state was God. Therefore, taxes should be paid to any

government whether foreign or domestic. If Jesus answered *yes pay taxes* to a pagan government, e would be deemed a traitor to His own people. He would betray His own nation and lose Jewish support. Saying *yes* might even refute His claim to be the Messiah because the Messiah would never sanction a pagan government. The view at the time was that the Messiah would remove pagan rulers and install Himself as King of the Jews. But if He said *no don't pay the poll tax*, He would be guilty of treason and the Herodians would have Him tried in court. During His trial they accused Jesus of this very thing (Luke 23:2). Of course it was an outright lie.

Jesus was not fooled by their deceit. He knew they were not seeking advice; they were seeking to trap Him. If they truly believed what they had just said about Him they would not be testing Him. He peered into their hearts and discerned hypocrisy, malice and cunning (Matt 22:18; Luke 20:23).

It appears both Jesus and His disciples did not own a Denarius. Jesus had to borrow a coin to use as a visual aid. The Lord of glory did not have a penny to His name. He became poor so that we might become rich. He had nothing so, we might enjoy everything (2 Cor 8:9).

*Fetching a Denarius (12:16)*: A denarius was a small silver coin, worth about a day's wage. One side of the coin had an engraved image of Tiberius Caesar, the emperor at the time. Along with the image was an inscription that said: *Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the Divine Augustus*. On the other side of the coin was written, *Pontifex Maximus* which means *High Priest*. Caesar ascribed divine features to himself and took on the role of high priest. This coin was idolatrous to Jews and an act of treason against God!

Jesus now moves the debate from politics to principle.

*From Politics to Principle (12:17a)*: Many scholars believe this statement uttered by Jesus is the single most influential statement in the history of Western Civilization. This statement has shaped Western Civilization more than we know. With this His reply, Jesus endorsed the right of government. Coins bearing the image of a ruler, were deemed property of that ruler. In effect what Jesus was saying is that since the coin belonged to Caesar, they were to give back what belonged to him. Israel enjoyed the benefits of the Roman empire such as good roads, relative peace and law and order so, they had a duty to repay for services rendered to them. In the same way, whether or not we agree with how our tax dollars are spent, governments have the right to demand taxes, and we have the duty to pay them. With a single statement, Jesus put things in their proper place. He qualified His statement by pointing out that Caesar should be given only what is his due. In saying this Jesus renounced the deification of the state. Some things in this world do not belong to the state. This statement is a warning to leaders not to claim undue

honours. We must not give our governing leaders what belongs to God - even if our leaders demand it from us. Just as Caesar had a right to demand his due, God has the right to demand His due. As the coin belonged to Caesar because it was engraved with his image, we belong to God because we bear His image. We are God's coin. Caesar has the right to claim the coins, but he has no right to claim the conscience. Our body belongs to God. Our children belong to God. Our conscience belongs to God. Our speech belongs to God. Our praise belongs to God. Fear belongs to God. Salvation belongs to God. Like Caesar, the state may assume divine honours. It may seek to take for itself what belongs to God. In many countries around the world the state demands the sole right of its subjects even with regard to conscience, opinions and speech. Should we be surprised? The god of this world satan is a robber and he seeks to take from us what belongs to God. As time goes on we may be called upon to resist giving to the state what belongs to God. Our greatest duty is to God not government (Acts 5:27 – 29). So, it is lawful to give to our governing leaders what belongs to them. But it is not lawful to give our government what belongs to God.

With respect to government there are four views:

1. ***God alone is our authority.*** Those who hold this view may remove themselves from the affairs of this world and live like monks.
2. ***The state alone is our authority.*** This is the stance of atheistic regimes.
3. ***God and state are both authorities, but the state is dominant.*** Secular democracies may hold to this view. In this case, what the state mandates trumps what God mandates.
4. ***God and state are both authorities, but God's authority is the highest authority.*** This view is what Jesus declared in this passage. When the state decrees a mandate aligned to God's will we submit, but should the state mandate a decree opposed to God our duty is to submit to God and not comply with the state.

**III. The Amazement** (12:17b): These men came to Jesus to trap Him. But in turn Jesus caught them in their cunning and exposed their hypocrisy. Yet they left with a high regard for what He said.

If I withhold paying taxes, I am deemed a thief. In the same way if we fail to give ourselves to the Lord, we are stealing from Him. Have you given yourself to the Lord? If we are willing to pay our taxes, are we also willing to give to the Lord what belongs to Him? We give ourselves to the Lord by admitting we are sinners in need of a Saviour. We give ourselves to the Lord by believing that Jesus died for our sin and rose again on the third day. We give ourselves to the Lord by calling on Him. When we call on Him, He seals us with His Spirit and takes ownership of our lives so that we might know Him and serve Him.