

**Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”**

**(Mark 12:17)**

In September 1994, I had just started my new role as superintendent minister at Barry in South Wales

- On the Saturday afternoon, I decided that I would visit the church to meet the members
- Who were setting up for Harvest Festival the next day – and I was greeted with the words
- ‘Ah! Just the man to settle an argument – we are decorating the communion table for tomorrow
- Some people think that we can put any produce on the communion table
- But others are saying that we should only put bread, grapes, coal and salt – what do you think?’
- I replied, ‘previous generations of ministers were at ministerial training college for four years
- But I was only there for three – such a question is too difficult for a person of my inexperience’
- In my opinion, the question was not an important one – it doesn’t matter to me
- But the motive of the question was not really to settle an argument, it was to get me on one side

Of course, the same can be true of other things in the life of the church that matter to a greater or lesser extent

- Organ or band – answer: I like to think that I am equally comfortable with both
- Hymns or songs – both – the hymns for their theology and language, songs for contemporary experience
- Pews or chairs – either – it really depends on the architecture of the building and what we want to do there
- With those answers, it would be possible to have either everyone for me or everyone against me
- And I think that will depend on what people wanted to do before I even answered
- Over the years, I have learned that some people are basically supporters
- It does not mean that they are blind followers but they try to understand the leadership and support
- And some people are basically critics – it seems whatever way you try to lead is wrong
- And if you offer no leadership at all that is also wrong

In a much more serious context, Mark records questions directed to Jesus in the temple

- The ‘they’ of this passage (12:13) refers back to the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders (11:27)
- It’s no surprise that the questions focus on what might be termed ‘Jewish’ issues
- One of which concerns paying the imperial tax to Caesar, Emperor of the occupying Romans
- And an unlikely alliance has been formed between the Pharisees and Herodians to catch Jesus out
- Pharisees (or ‘separated ones’) stood for strict obedience to the law in its written and oral forms
- They would have regarded payment of tax to Rome as idolatry
- The Herodians were supporters of the Herodian rulers (puppet kings appointed by Rome)
- Who would have believed that it was right for Jews to pay taxes to Rome, albeit through Herod
- Matthew Henry notes, ‘They were contrary to one another, and yet concurred against Christ’ – adding, ‘It is no new thing for those that are at variance in other things, to join in a confederacy against Christ.’

Not surprisingly, many in the crowd, probably including his disciples, would have hated Roman taxes

- These taxes represented Jewish submission to a pagan emperor and implied support for what he stood for
- If Jesus had said it was not lawful for a Jew who wanted to follow the law to pay taxes to Caesar
- He would have won instant acclaim from most of the crowd, but put himself in danger from the authorities

There had been revolutionaries, within the previous 25 years, who had urged Jews not to pay Roman taxes

- And there had been anti-Roman revolts – there would have undoubtedly been political tension
- Jesus’ entry into the city, to shouts about the coming kingdom of David (11:1)
- Would have been the ideal time to stir up the crowd against the Roman rulers
- But would also have made it much easier for his enemies to join against him and destroy him
- While to advocate conformity to Roman rule would have discredited Jesus a revolutionary leader

## I THEY ASKED WITH INSINCERITY

It is clear that the Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus insincerely

- Later, this insincerity will be plainly revealed
- For if they truly knew Jesus to be a man of integrity, unswayed by others whatever their status
- And who taught the way of God in accordance with the truth
- Had that have been truly their opinion then ‘their persecuting him, and putting him to death
- Was a sin against knowledge; they knew him and yet crucified him’ (Henry)

I think there is a lesson here for us when we are asked about our Christian faith

- Does the enquirer really want to know the answer or is it just a catch question
- Where, however we answer, no answer is going to be satisfactory?
- Over the years I have been asked many such questions, perhaps you are familiar with them
- Where did Abel’s wife come from? Was the flood at the time of Noah even true, let alone worldwide?
- What about all the rules and regulations in Leviticus and other Old Testament books?
- What about all the violence and killing in the Old Testament? Isn’t religion responsible for war?
- Don’t parts of the Bible contradict each other? What about other religions?
- What about people who have never heard the gospel message or those who cannot understand it?
- I always try to bring my reply around to this:
- The gospel message is dependent on the person and ministry of Jesus – that’s what we need to focus on
- What really matters is who Jesus was and the significance of his death and whether or not he is alive

Jesus was not fooled by the strategy of those people who do not really want to talk about his identity or work

- But want to lure us into some cul-de-sac where there is a sense in which there can never be a right answer

## II HE ANSWERED WITH INGENUITY

By asking the Pharisees and the Herodians, ‘why are you trying to trap me’?

- Jesus showed their true motives – maybe they did not get a chance to answer but no answer is forthcoming
- Instead Jesus asks them to show him a denarius – a silver Roman coin, a day’s wage for a working man
- The fact that Jesus asked for a coin suggests that he had no such coin himself
- More because of his poverty than because they ought not to have taken such a coin into the temple
- The coin probably had Caesar on one side, ‘Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus’
- And on the other a female figure seated on a throne, holding a spear and a palm or olive branch
- The translation of the words on this side mean ‘high priest’ – the coin proclaimed god, king and priest
- The irony of the situation is plain to say – they have an image (*ikon*) of their god, king and high priest
- When before them, plain for them to see, is their God, king and high priest

The answer of Jesus shows great ingenuity

- ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’ the saying might even imply ‘give back’
- If they have no problem doing business with Caesar’s money they had better pay his taxes
- What is easy to miss is that while the coin contained the image of Caesar
- The people asking were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) therefore a higher obligation rests on them
- And that higher obligation demands something much more profound than paying taxes to Caesar
- They may owe to Caesar what bears his image and name – in short, money
- But we all owe to God what bears his image and name – in short, our whole selves
- Exactly what that means becomes clear in a subsequent passage (12:30, 33)
- love for God from all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbours as ourselves (12:29-33)

### III THEY WERE AMAZED AT HIS AUTHORITY

Not for the first time, the people are amazed at Jesus – this is a word that Mark repeats

- ‘amazed’ is rather a polite word, ‘staggered’ might catch it better or even ‘gobsmacked’
- The people were *amazed* at his teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum (1:22)
- They were *amazed* at his teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth (6:2)
- When Jesus made the deaf hear and the mute speak, they were *amazed* (7:37)
- When Jesus said it was harder for a rich man to be saved,
- Than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (10:26), his disciples were *amazed* at his teaching
- When Jesus entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, the crowd was *amazed* at his teaching (11:18)
- But Mark focuses on Jesus as the one who has authority to teach
- Unlike the trained teachers of the law, Jesus did not have to quote authorities from the Jewish literature
- His authority came directly from God – and the people are *amazed*

Jesus forces the Pharisees, the Herodians and all who heard to answer the difficult question themselves

- What are our obligations, not only to the state, but also to God?
- Peter (1 Pt. 2:13–17) and Paul (Rom. 13:1-17, 1 Tim. 2:1-6) consider our obligations to the state
- But the main challenge here is not to argue about paying tax before meeting our obligations to God
- And while they were amazed, there is no evidence of changed lives among the listeners

‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s’? Should Christians pay their taxes? Of course, we should

- Questions about whether a government is legitimate or not and the place for the struggle for justice
- Be that a struggle for justice in the sense of working within a democracy, or more direct action
- Or strike, or revolution, including a military uprising, are too complex to discuss here

‘Give to God what is God’s’? As men and women made in the image of God

- ‘Commitment to him is the only absolute commitment that can be expected of human beings’ (English)

I would anticipate that over the years that this text has been made the basis for a sermon on Christian giving

- Older Christians will remember the hymn, ‘Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee’
- In each successive verse the Christian offers things to God
- ‘Take my life’, ‘Take my moments and my days’, ‘Take my hands’, ‘Take my feet’
- ‘Take my voice’, ‘Take my lips’, ‘Take my silver and my gold’, ‘Take my intellect’
- ‘Take my will’, ‘Take my heart’, ‘Take my love’, ‘Take my all’

In a previous church, a long time ago now, a choir member had said to me that the minister’s wife

- Who had been a choir member had said that she could not sing the verse ‘take my silver and my gold’
- I simply listened politely, making no particular comment but, of course, the answer was
- The verse that you cannot sing, indicates where your idol might be – God does not want silver and gold
- There is a sense in which he does not need it – God certainly does not want 10% of our wealth
- He demands it all! Everything that we are is stamped with that image
- To give him what I have is one thing, but it is insignificant compared to giving what I am
- The new worship song by Lou Fellingham puts it this way –
- All I have and all I am is yours/There’s nothing that I have on earth that doesn’t come from you
- I lay aside my pride and worldly worth/To serve you is the greatest thing that I could ever do
- That is a true understanding of consecration
- Those conspiring for the death of Jesus were both king and priest
- But for the believer, Jesus is both king and priest – service and worship mean giving all to him