

answer, then they would have been stung not by what He challenged them to give to Caesar, but by what, in the light of this He challenged them to give to God. They made such a fuss about giving Caesar his due, where was the earnest zeal to honour and worship the Lord? Those who came to Jesus knew full well that only a day previously, Jesus had created a rumpus in the Temple, knocking down the tables of the traders and money-changers in the outer courtyard. Jesus was a zealot not for political liberation but for the salvation of people before God, and, as He had just stated publicly in the 'parable of the vineyard tenants', He was prepared to die to achieve this redemption.

We do not help ourselves by thinking that Jesus gave a 'clever' answer to the question posed Him in this story. He took the opportunity to invite all who read what He said to consider not just what they should offer the state (for most of us, this is set down in law), but consider what they owe to Almighty God. Owing Him everything, we should be prepared to give Him our all!

Application

Now, at the end of our study, we can hardly escape the consequences of this conclusion. What Jesus said asks us not so much about what we owe the state; we can go to Paul's letters (principally Romans 13) if we want to look at the full Scriptural justification for being obedient to the state. Jesus merely says 'give it back what it properly owns' in a worldly sense. Jesus asks us to think very carefully about what each of us owe God. Simply saying that we owe God everything is barely adequate, because generalisations will not get us anywhere with Almighty God, only radical faith and Christian living which demonstrates that we truly believe we owe everything to God is sufficient. I once knew someone who owned a lovely house in the West End of London, and whenever I went there, the house seemed to be occupied by a variety of people who came and went, for reasons I could scarcely discover or fathom. The man lived in his own house as if it was owned not by himself but by God, and he allowed it to be used by people he came across who needed somewhere to sleep and live for a time.

As with all humble people, he would not have seen this as the godly example it truly was to everyone who went into the house; but it was a true and practical example of giving to God what is God's. Those who know they are saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ, also know that they are called to live in the same way, as if everything belonged to God.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what reactions the crowd may have had to what Jesus said in answer to this question.
2. In what ways is it possible to become confused about our duties to God when confronted by our duties to the state?
3. How can we give God what is properly His in our culture today?

Discipleship

As Jesus responded to this challenge, He had to cope with the patronising comments of the people who came to Him and the tragedy of hearing some of His own people become so overcome by worldly problems that they could not appreciate their true relationship with God or the plans He might have for them. In the same way as described yesterday, make your own notes on what you imagine Jesus felt about what happened to Him in our reading today.

Final Prayer

Almighty and ever living God; You made the world in love, and it must break Your heart to see the mess we have made of what You intended to be for our benefit, our enjoyment and our blessing. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we can connect with all the blessings You have for us, and live as we were made to do. AMEN

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, we read in the papers and see on the news some of the most dreadful things. Evil raises its head with vicious power and makes innocent people suffer, causing others to lose their faith and say; 'how can there be a God?' Give us the courage to sustain our faith and pray for those in deepest need and who go through the darkest of times; and grant us victory over the enemy wherever and whenever we find him: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Streets

Please pray today for the people who live on the street, because they have no-where else to go. Such people are not always to be seen, and contrary to popular perceptions, during the day they can appear little different from others. Pray for them, pray about the circumstances which lead people to live on the streets, and also those who seek to help them find homes.

Meditation

Within the routines of everyday life,

Guide us with Your wisdom, Awesome God;
And give us a thirst for holy living.

Whilst doing our duties and our daily work,

Provide us with strength, Powerful Spirit;
And a desire for true wisdom as well.

When striving to honour You in our homes,

Inspire us by Your passion, Amazing Father;
And stir us up to great acts of love.

Whether we find things hard or truly difficult,

Arouse us to ask for Your help, 'Suffering Servant';
And encourage us to persist, in You.

Whenever we offer ourselves to You in worship,

Show us true humility and service, Gracious Lord;
Love us, and never let us go, we pray.

Bible Study - Mark 12:13-17

¹³ Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus, to trap Him with words. ¹⁴ They came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity who is not swayed by the opinions of others; you do not show favouritism to people and you teach the way of God truthfully. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or should we not?' ¹⁵ But Jesus knew their hypocrisy and said to them, 'Why are you trying to trap me? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.' ¹⁶ They brought one, and He asked them, 'Whose portrait is this, and whose inscription?' They replied, 'Caesar's.' ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.

Review

It is a sign of Jesus' growing success that here, the religious authorities sent a powerful group of 'Pharisees and Herodians' to question Him (12:13). They came with the authority of the Sanhedrin, made up of the members of the High Priestly family together with scribes (scholars) and community elders. They governed the Temple and the religious life of the Jewish people, and amongst their number were people of vastly different 'political' persuasion; in particular, the 'Pharisees' and 'Herodians'.

The Pharisees are reasonably well known to us as religious zealots who were attempting to control all Jewish people by dominating theological education and placing a straightjacket of Old Testament law on God's people. However, in wider political matters, they were prepared to live with Roman occupancy because it gave them the backdrop of peace against which they could fulfil their greater claims of dominance within Judaism. The Herodians were politically very different; they thoroughly opposed the Romans and spoke vigorously for the independent rule of Israel by the family of Herod the Great, and in Jesus' day, the sons of Herod each ruled part of what we call 'Israel' but under Roman dominance.

Jesus, not for the first time, was able to perceive what was happening, and the mere sight of two sworn political enemies coming to present a united front against Him would have been enough to give Jesus ample warning of what was to come. The smooth talk that followed (12:14) was also as unreal as the whole artificial situation. Jesus was praised as a 'man of integrity', 'not swayed by the opinion of others', as one who showed no 'favouritism' and who taught 'the way of God truthfully'. However, in the company of Pharisees and Herodians, such talk merely raised the stakes for whoever might be unsatisfied with the answer Jesus would surely have to give.

It was a cunning move to send a delegation of these two groups to ask Jesus a potentially explosive political question to do with the Roman occupation of Israel. The question asked of Jesus was this; 'is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?' and Pharisees wanted to hear the answer 'Yes', and the Herodians, the answer of 'No'. However, the two groups were willing to come together to ask Jesus not because this difficult and divisive issue needed an authoritative answer to settle the question, but for the sole purpose of trapping Jesus. They had no real interest in His answer, and no-one present was going to change their mind because of anything He might say. Whichever answer Jesus gave to the question could possibly spark a very angry debate, for the crowd listening for His answer would be tense, and if Jesus put His foot wrong, the crowd might riot! This would be an excellent outcome for either the Pharisees or the Herodians, who would then be able to have Jesus arrested on the spot for fomenting unrest in Jerusalem!

Jesus took the challenge of the Pharisees and Herodians head on, and asked His protagonists why they were attempting to trap Him (12:15). What Jesus then said and did has marvelled all who have since read about it and been in awe of Jesus' ability to outmanoeuvre the most cunning of moves against Him. The coin brought to Jesus was the one used to pay the 'poll tax' required of everyone under Roman rule, irrespective of trade, employment or ability to pay, and it was the most hated symbol of Roman rule in all Israel. He asked about image on the coin, and one can almost hear the crowd around Jesus mutter their reply with hatred; 'Caesar's' (12:16). Jesus' memorable answer 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's' gave neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians the answer they wanted, and He utterly destroyed their trap.

Few of us have such wit and wisdom to pull off such a sensational escape from entrapment, and what Jesus did continues to inspire people to get their spiritual and social values right. Neither can be ignored and both must be honoured, but God's call on our lives always comes first.

Going Deeper

However, what Jesus did was far more than defeat those sent to trap Him. A closer look at what Jesus said and the circumstances in which He said it will show that Jesus did not merely tell people to divide their loyalties appropriately between the state and God. There is no way that Jesus would give ground to worldly authorities in any matter, so what did His answer mean for the early Christians, and for us who follow them.

Some more background to today's story

When Jesus was born, His earthly father Joseph and mother Mary had travelled under extraordinarily difficult circumstances from their home in the northern regions of Galilee to Bethlehem in southern Judea in order 'for all the world to be taxed' (Luke 2:1-3). The tax in question was the Roman 'poll tax', not the property tax or custom dues gathered by 'tax collectors'. It was levied upon each adult individual (as above) and it had to be paid with a Roman coin, a 'denarius' which bore the image of the Emperor (at the time of Jesus' teaching ministry, the Emperor of Rome was Tiberius). Because of the Jewish hatred of the image of the Emperor, these coins were not in regular use for trade, but had to be procured by individuals in

order to pay the tax when it was due, and it is not hard to imagine the ill feeling about it. Indeed, when the tax was introduced (before the time of Jesus' ministry) a serious revolt took place amongst the Jews, led by one called 'Judas the Galilean' (see Acts 5:37). This was the revolt which gave birth to the 'Zealots', extremist rebels within Judaism who sought to fight Rome for the freedom of the Jewish people.

It is easy to see that within all this, religious zeal had become mixed up with political issues of nationalism, and it had already proved easy for crowds to be stirred by these issues. The Pharisees said 'God is our true King and we tolerate the Emperor', and the Herodians and others would have said 'God is our true King and we have no other'; and the tragedy which Jesus saw before His own eyes was a fruitless division of sentiment. Both parties would have agreed that 'God is our King' but unable to agree how to deal with the realities of ordinary life.

The way that Jesus dealt with this situation was not to agree with either the Pharisees or the Herodians. His famous answer was not a means of partitioning the argument to keep everyone happy, because it probably did not; the Pharisees would have been more likely to be satisfied with His answer than the Herodians. The trouble for us today is that because of our understanding of Paul's theology of State and Religion (see Romans 13), we interpret what Jesus said as the starting point for this doctrine. What Paul said was that whilst we must give all things to the Lord, we must also give the State its due because it has been ordained by God, and it must therefore be honoured and respected, but not above God.

A greater understanding of Jesus' reply

When the question about paying taxes to Caesar was given to Jesus, it was repeated; 'should we pay or should we not?' (12:14) In this way, a highly complex issue that had divided Jewish people for years was reduced to a few words designed not to solve the problem but to provide political expediency for the condemnation of a man (Jesus) who sought nothing more than to do God's will. In reality, the Judean people (the Jews) had been ruled by greater powers ever since their tiny state, based on the city of Jerusalem, had been overrun by the Babylonians in 597 BC. They saw their duty as a matter of survival against the odds, due to the power of the great pagan empires; and they lost their sense of call to be a 'light to the nations' (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). The very question asked of Jesus by the Pharisees and the Herodians betrayed the failure of the Jewish people as a whole to 'move on' since the collapse of their own independent state (2 Chronicles 36).

Jesus saw this, and He did not think about how to provide a 'clever' answer to the challenge which would win Him praise and adoration, or how to take sides with the Pharisees without appearing so to do. This is indicated in His comment 'why are you trying to trap me?' No, Jesus saw that something more important could come out of this situation which was radical and capable of moving the whole debate about the relationship of Jews and 'state' on to new ground, and He seized His moment.

His famous answer is often quoted as some variant of 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's', as if some such division of loyalties would meet the practical needs of human life. What is hidden here is the fact that the Greek verb used at the beginning of the sentence means to 'give back', as in giving something back to the owner. Just as bank notes issued today belong strictly to the state (or national bank) which issues them, the Roman coins minted in the days of Tiberius belonged 'technically' to the Emperor; otherwise called 'Caesar'. Jesus' comment asks that we recognise the right of ownership of the Emperor for what was his; small but contentious coins. However, as soon as we begin to look at the other side of what Jesus said, the truth of it all begins to sink in. What is God's that we need to give it back to Him? Even from a Jewish point of view, the answer to this just gets bigger and bigger. God is owed sacrifices, tithes and worship by His people, He is owed the love of His people, He is owed even the land upon which the people live, and He is owed all Creation which truly belongs to Him. Even in the Old Testament we find the truth that all things belong to God and to God they will return! (e.g. Ecclesiastes 3:16-21)

It is impossible to make any real equation between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God; and if those who asked Jesus the question about taxes in the first place listened to His