

## Should Christians Obey The Government?

### Mark 12:13-17

**Introduction:** 1) It is one of those questions that Christians have discussed and debated for 2000 years. Regardless of one's political loyalties and commitments, the questions come up again and again and must be faced by every believer: should I as a Christian, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ my King, obey the government? In this context Mark Dever raises an even bigger question, "Does Christianity have a vision for the state and society as a whole?" Is a biblical vision one like "the Moral Majority," the social gospel", or the Amish?

2) This question, of course, is much easier to answer when you live in a democracy and/or the winds of governmental laws and policies are blowing in your direction. But...what if you live in a totalitarian context? What if you are subjected to a cruel and tyrannical dictatorship? Or, even within a free democracy, what do you do when asked to violate scripture or conscience? What then?

3) We are in the midst of a series of controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Mark 11:20-13:37 is one long and crucial day in the life of Jesus and His disciples. There are 5 confrontations all-together:

- 1) The question of His authority by the Sanhedrin 11:27-33.
- 2) The question of paying taxes by the Pharisees and Herodians 12:13-17.
- 3) The question of the resurrection by the Sadducees 12:18-27.
- 4) The question of the greatest commandment by the scribes 12:28-34.
- 5) The question of whose Son is the Christ by Jesus Himself 12:35-37.

This, then, is the second. Should we obey the government and pay taxes, especially if we do not recognize its legitimacy, disdain its policies and are subjected by its oppression? Do we feed the

monster that is eating us? Within the context of another dispute with those who will be the authors of His death, Jesus provides the answer. And, He also provides some practical and basic wisdom when we are confronted by those devoted to our destruction.

**I. The Trap: Be Careful When Approached By Strange Bedfellows 12:13**

- It is Passover, a week of national celebration for Israel. In the retail world it was their Christmas season. This is the time when Jerusalem merchants made bank.
- They (the Sanhedrin of 11:27; 12:1, 12) send to Jesus some Pharisees and Herodians. We have seen these strange bedfellows before (3:6) and here they are again. And as before, they are up to no good.
- The Pharisees were the Republicans, the conservatives, the right-wingers, the “Tea Party” of that day. The Herodians were the Democrats, liberals, the left-wingers, advocates of big government.
- The Pharisees hated Jesus because he was messing with their religious agenda. The Herodians opposed him because he was threatening their political advantage. Amazingly, Jesus brought the conservatives and liberals together this one time! They wanted to destroy Him. On this they could agree.
- No doubt this tipped Jesus off that they were up to something. Mark makes this clear when he says they came to “trap him in his talk.” The word “trap” occurs only here in the New Testament. It means to catch or capture by hunting or fishing. The idea is one of violent pursuit of one’s prey. Jesus is being hunted like an animal. They hope to trap Him in a slip of the tongue, a verbal and public gaffe or “mis-speak” that will enable them to take him down and be rid of Him.

- Luke 20:20 makes all of this even more explicit when it says, “So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.”
- The old proverb still rings true: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”
- When you see sworn enemies allied as they approach you watch out! Be careful! Be on guard! It is almost certain they do not have your best interest at heart, regardless of what they say.

**Transition:** That leads us to a second observation and truth.

## II. **The Step-up: Beware Of Flattery**                   **12:14**

- The Bible has a lot to say about flattery. None of it is good!  
Psalm 5:9 says of the wicked, “For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue.”  
Proverbs 26:28, “A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”  
Proverbs 28:23, “Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue.”  
Proverbs 29:5, “A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his [own] feet.”
- We see this sin on superb display when the Pharisees and Herodians attempted to “trap” Jesus.
  - 1) They call Him “teacher” (*didaskale*), a title of respect.
  - 2) They tell him they know He is “true” (*alethes*), upright, reliable.
  - 3) They tell him they know He is impartial, that he does “not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearance” (lit. “For you look not at the face of men”).

- 4) They conclude, “Truly, (*aletheias*) [you] teach the way of God.”
- These words drip with both sarcasm and ironic truth. Even though they are insincere in their flattery, what they say is actually true! Our Lord is a man of absolute integrity. He has not one ounce of bias, bigotry or prejudice and He always teaches God revealed truth. In fact He is the only one this can truly and fully be said of.
  - And since this is true, He will not be snared by their words. His ego will not inflate, pride will not cause Him to lower His guard, the “big head” will not take him down. The flattery of this “forked tongued” delegation will not work on God’s Son (cf. 12:1-12). No, Jesus, the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:30), will not be tripped up by the foolishness of men. Not now and not ever.

### **III. The Question: Watch Out For The Either/Or Scenario 12:14**

- This trap is now sprung with a question that had been carefully thought out and crafted. It’s brilliance is in its simplicity:  
 “ Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them or should we not?”
- Wow! What a question for that day. This is not a “tea party” question. No, the stakes are much higher and the issue at hand far more volatile. And, it makes room for only one of two answers. Yes or no? Heads or tails? They have Him! It is win/win for the Pharisees and Herodians and it is lose/lose for Jesus. Regardless of which way He goes, they have Him. Game! Set! Match!
- The context of the question bears this out. The Greek word for taxes is *kenson*, a transliteration of the Latin word *census*. It refers to an imperial Roman tax instituted in A.D. 6 by Caesar Augustus. Tiberus Caesar (A.D 14-37) continued it. The Jews hated and despised it. It was a sore spot with the nation of Israel because it was a

constant reminder of their subjection to pagan Rome. They hated the tax with a bitter hatred. So, if Jesus said pay it the people would turn on Him as a traitor to His own people and He would be finished. On the other hand, if He said don't pay it He could be arrested and tried by the Romans for sedition and insurrection. And, silence was not an option. He had to say something. His enemies have trapped Him on the "horns of a dilemma," or so they thought.

- Like many of you I like things in black and white not gray. I like "yes or no" options. Clean and clear cut. "A simple yes or no will do." However, that is not always the case and we should never allow ourselves to be backed into such a corner. "Have you stopped beating your wife?" That is a lose/lose option. And, it may be an unfair question.
- Jesus recognized their evil intent (v. 14, 15) and would not be manipulated by their game. Yes they thought they had Him, but they were about to find out just how wrong they were.

#### **IV. The Answer: Give To Each What They Rightly Deserve 12:15-17**

- It's crunch time. The moment of truth has arrived. Which way will Jesus go? Who will He alienate with His answer? No doubt all eyes were on Him and people held their breath to see what He would say.
- He begins by exposing their hypocrisy, something He was well aware of (v. 15), with a question: "Why put me to the test?" (v. 15). Why are you tempting me? This is the same word Mark used in 1:13 when Satan tempted our Lord in the wilderness. There is demonic intent in their motivation to destroy Jesus! Our Lord categorizes these

testing's with the efforts of the Devil to get Him off track from His mission. And as Satan failed in the wilderness, the Pharisees and Herodians will fail in the temple. What Jesus is about to say are some of the most memorable words He ever spoke. We should listen very carefully.

1) Obey the government as long as you can.

- Jesus asked for a denarius, the required tax and a day's wage for a typical laborer in Israel. He wants to "look at it" (v. 15).
- Ironically he does not have one but they do! He then asks (v. 16), "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him Caesar's." And this was correct. On one side was a bust of Tiberius Caesar with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus." The reverse side had an image of Tiberius's mother Livia with the words, "*Pontifex Maximus*" meaning "High Priest." The Jews found this to be idolatrous which added insult to injury. The image of a man claiming to be a god. Blasphemy!
- Jesus then said some of the most significant words in history. Their impact on Western Civilization is mammoth:  
"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. And they marveled."
- Jesus' answer is completely unexpected. They never saw it coming! Pow! A one-punch knockout. Now, by his reply Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of human government. He is no anarchist. God has ordained the family. He has ordained the Church. And he has ordained human government. It has the right to raise taxes and we have the responsibility to pay taxes. It has the right to make

laws and we have the responsibility to obey those laws. Other writers in the New Testament, especially Paul and Peter, reaffirm and expand on this statement of Jesus, even though they lived when the lunatic Nero (A.D. 54-68) was emperor.

Note the following:

Romans 13:1-7: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”

1 Timothy 2:1-6: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ

Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”

1 Peter 2:13-17: “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”

Christians have legitimate responsibilities to the government, and as long as they do not interfere with our ability to honor and worship God, we are to obey them.

It is our Christian duty.

## 2) Worship God as long as you live

- Jesus also said, “Render to God the things that are God’s.” He refused to be trapped by an either/or proposition and instead paved a third way that they all “marveled at.” Once more He astonished them with His teachings.
- If the coin has Caesar’s image on it, then it belongs to him so give him what is rightfully his. However, as humans you all bear a different image. You bear the image of God! (Gen. 1:26-27). The Creator God’s image is stamped on you and so you must give to God what is rightfully His – your entire life.
- We have a duty to the government but we have an even greater duty to God who has created us and redeemed us. As 1 Cor. 10:31 says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

- Again, we see this principle lived out in the lives of the apostles when in Acts 4:19-20 Peter and John say, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” And again in Acts 5:29, “But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”
- Kent Hughes says, “The statement by our Lord was not only astounding the instant it was uttered, but is even today universally acclaimed to be the single most influential political statement ever made in the history of the world (*Mark*, vol. 2, 103).
- With one simple maxim Jesus put everything in proper perspective. He put Caesar in his place. And he placed God where He rightfully belongs in our lives as well. All the people could do was stand back and look on in amazement!

### **Conclusion:**

- Putting all of this together, how might we summarize the Bible’s teaching on the Christian’s responsibilities to the government? Adopting something of a manifesto I think we can say at the very least the following:

As a devoted follower of King Jesus, my Lord, my Savior and my sovereign God, I pledge the following to the governing authorities that are ordained by God and placed over me:

1) I will be a good citizen living in subjection to governmental authority, even a pagan one (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). I will responsibly engage the political process. As I am allowed, I will vote seeking to bring my Christian convictions into the public arena (see Prov. 14:34).

2) I will live internationally more than nationally or local. My ultimate allegiance is to Christ and His kingdom. Jesus sets for us an example much like that of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon.

3) I will obey the state but only worship God. And, I will thank God for all the good He does through the government, praying always for all who are in authority (1 Tim. 2:1-5).

4) I will acknowledge all governmental authority is established by and comes from God (Mark 12:17; Rom 13:1, 4, 6).

5) I will acknowledge all government serves in some measure the purposes of promoting good and punishing evil (Rom. 13:3-4). Bad government is almost always better than no government.

6) I will pay all taxed placed upon me by my government recognizing it's right to do so (Mark 12:17; Rom. 13:6-7).

7) I will engage in "civil disobedience" only when my government prohibits me from doing what the Bible commands or commands me to do what the Bible prohibits. This means:

First, the law being resisted must be unjust and immoral, clearly contrary to the will of God, and not just inconvenient or burdensome.

Second, legal means of changing the unjust situation must have been exhausted. Civil disobedience is a method not of first resort, but of last resort, when all legal channels have been pursued and exhausted.

Third, the act of disobedience must be public rather than secretive or hidden.

Fourth, there should be some hope and even likelihood of success as my intent is to produce changes in laws and institutions.

Fifth, as I consider civil disobedience, I will be willing to accept the penalty for breaking the law.

- Mark Dever says it precisely and he says it correctly, “The legal establish of Christianity for many nations, centuries after the apostles, reflected an already distorted understanding of the gospel and led to terrible confusion as the church wielded the sword.” The Christian has only one God and His name is Jesus. The Christian longs for only one kingdom and that is the kingdom of God. The Christian has only one sword and that is the Word of God.
- So, as a devoted follower of Jesus, I will say “yes” to obeying the government and paying taxes to Caesar, but I will say “no” to disobeying the Word of God and worshiping a man or institution. Independence Day for the Christian is not July 4 and marked by a flag. No, my independence day is Easter marked by a cross and an empty tomb.