

# **First Serve**

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Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 12:13-34

Topic

Jesus is asked if Jews ought to pay taxes to the oppressive government of the Caesars

Title

*"Lethal Caesar's Taxes Taxes!"*

Introduction

I voted! I trust you voted as well.

I'm always fascinated by the different political parties on the ballot. In addition to Republican and Democrat, you could register American Independent, Green Party, Libertarian Party, or Peace and Freedom.

There are more than 30 additional national political parties that were not represented on the California ballot. Among those parties:

- The Humane Party is a national political party with a focus on animal rights and a sustainable economy. Founded in 2009, the party requires all candidates, officers, and board members to sign an oath abstaining from the use of animal products and services. The party's goals include abolishing the property

status of animals, and replacing the electoral college with direct democracy. Their logo features a red-white-and blue cow skipping across the continental United States.

- The United States Marijuana Party is a cannabis political party in the United States founded in 2002 by Loretta Nall specifically to end the war on drugs and to legalize cannabis. I can only assume they get very little done at their conventions.

I was thinking about all of this because our Bible passage in the Gospel of Mark has a lot to do with first-century Jewish politics:

1. First, Jesus is going to be asked a question about Jews paying taxes to Rome. The mixed group who ask Him include a few Pharisees and a few Herodians. The Pharisees were against paying taxes to Rome, whereas the Herodians were essentially a political party and very much pro-tax.
2. Second, Jesus is asked a question about the resurrection from the dead. It may not seem like a political question until you understand who was asking Him. It was the Sadducees, who did not believe in an afterlife. Meaning they were all-about prospering as much as possible under the Roman government of Israel.

After Jesus deals with those concerns, He gets asked a third question - what we might call a spiritual question. Although spiritual, Jesus' answer impacts the kind of citizens we ought to be in whatever nation we might find ourselves; or in whatever condition our nation is in.

I began to wonder what kind of questions I am... Or we are... Mostly asking Jesus.

I'll organize my comments around two questions: #1 When You Talk With Jesus, Is It Mostly About Your Material Prosperity?, or, #2 When You Talk With Jesus, Is It Mostly About Your Spiritual Passion?

#1 When You Talk With Jesus,  
Is It Mostly About Your Material Prosperity?

(v13-27)

"Read my lips: No new taxes!"

That was the enduring sound bite from his 1988 Republican National Convention speech that became the cornerstone of George H. W. Bush's victory.

Taxation is always a volatile subject, and never more so than in first century Israel.

Mar 12:13 Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words.

The Pharisees are thought to have originated in the 3rd century BC, in days preceding the Maccabean revolt, when under Greek domination, there was a strong tendency among the Jews to accept Greek culture with its pagan religious customs.

The rise of the Pharisees was a reaction and protest against this tendency among their fellow kinsmen. Their aim was to preserve their national integrity and strict conformity to Mosaic law.

They started well, with the best intentions. They later developed into the self-righteous and hypocritical ritualists we meet in the Gospels.

The Herodians were not a religious sect, but, as the name implies, a political party, who fully supported the dynasty of Herod.

These groups could not disagree more with one another. The Pharisees opposed all things Roman, while the Herodians supported Rome.

- The Pharisees opposed paying any taxes to Rome. After all, Rome was an oppressor. The taxes you paid went directly to fund the soldiers that kept you subjugated.
- The Herodians were all about paying taxes, in order to enjoy safe travel on the Roman roads, and be able to enjoy free trade from all over the world.

They thought a question about taxes was sure to baffle Jesus.

Mar 12:14 When they had come, they said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and care about no one; for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

Mar 12:15 Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?..."

A lot has been said about their prologue being flattery, but I see it more as sarcasm. While it is accurate to describe Jesus as "true," and as not showing favoritism, and as teaching sound doctrine, these are things you can say to be condescending. It was like saying to Jesus, "You think you're the Messiah, then answer this, smart guy!"

Mar 12:15 ... But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see it."

Their "hypocrisy" was that they had joined forces to oppose Jesus. They hated each other - it's just that they hated Jesus more.

I think it's telling that Jesus had to ask for a "denarius." He didn't carry any money.

Mar 12:16 So they brought it. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's."

The image was probably that of Tiberius Caesar, and the inscription read in Latin: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus," and on the reverse side: "Chief Priest."

This inscription originated in the imperial cult of emperor worship and was a claim to divinity, which was particularly repulsive to Jews.

If Jesus were to simply answer, "Yes, pay taxes," He would be siding with the Herodians, thus alienating Himself from the common people, and the majority of Jews.

But if He said, "No, do not pay taxes," then He could be classified as a traitor to Rome, and an insurrectionist.

(He would, in fact, later be accused of saying just that, but it was a lie).

Mar 12:17 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at Him.

We normally jump right in to a discussion of the Christian and government. Yes, this answer by Jesus does instruct His followers to pay their taxes. It's applicable to believers in every age, under every government. As William MacDonald writes, "The believer is to obey and support the government under which he lives. He is not to speak evil of his rulers or work to overthrow the government. He is to pay taxes and pray for those in authority."

But listen carefully. There is something else going on with Jesus' answer, something that reveals a deeper insight.

**The Jews were suffering and struggling under a godless government because they had rejected godliness. They had to deal with the image of Caesar because they had rejected being made in the image of God.**

The Jews were only subject to Rome because of their own national sin. God intended for them to be an independent nation, a theocracy. But all through their history, they rebelled against the authority of God, and each time He answered by raising-up Gentile nations to discipline them.

And that is why Jesus goes beyond the answer and adds, "Render... To God the things that are God's." If they had done that, they would not have been in the terrible predicament they found themselves.

It's an election year, and we should vote. Just remember when you do that **our hope as a nation is spiritual, and it starts with the church being the church, staying on point in its mission.**

Next a group of Sadducees came with a question:

Mar 12:18 Then some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him; and they asked Him, saying:

Religiously, the Sadducees only accepted as Scripture the first five books of the Bible, the ones written by Moses. They denied the existence of a spiritual world with angels and demons; they did not believe in an afterlife, believing that your soul perished at death. Therefore they said there was no resurrection from the dead.

They crafted a question designed, they thought, to show how silly it was to think there was a resurrection from the dead followed by an afterlife.

Mar 12:19 "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother dies, and leaves his wife behind, and leaves no children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother.

Mar 12:20 Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife; and dying, he left no offspring.

Mar 12:21 And the second took her, and he died; nor did he leave any offspring. And the third likewise.

Mar 12:22 So the seven had her and left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also.

Mar 12:23 Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife."

This command of Moses is called the Law of Levirate Marriage. In their tribal society, it insured that your line of descendants would continue if you were to die childless.

The Book of Ruth revolves around this law, as you see Boaz step forward to marry Ruth. He was the closest blood relative who was willing and able to step forward and marry her. The system worked!

Mar 12:24 Jesus answered and said to them, "Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God?"

Mar 12:25 For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

Let me quickly dispel an error some people fall into. We do not become angels after we die. Every time a bell rings, no angel gets his wings.

This is one of those statements that causes believers a lot of grief. We have a notion that husbands and wives will live happily ever after in the hereafter. But, according to Jesus, there will be no marriages in Heaven.

(This sort of kills Mormon theology, by the way).

Why no marriage? Think of it for a minute. God established marriage for companionship, and for procreation. In Heaven, you won't be alone; and Heaven will be populated by those who have been born-again by faith in Jesus prior to eternity, *not* by people being born in eternity.

As far as we can tell, angels do not reproduce other little angels; and its in this respect we will be like them.

I know what some of you are thinking: If there's no sex in Heaven, *I'm not going!*

C.S.Lewis explained it like this, in his book, *Miracles*:



The letter and spirit of Scripture, and of all Christianity, forbid us to suppose that life in the New Creation will be a sexual life... It is **not** of course necessary to suppose that the distinction of sexes will disappear. What is no longer needed for biological purposes may be expected to survive for splendor... We [now] know the sexual life; we do not [now] know, except in glimpses, the other [better] thing which, in Heaven, will leave no room for it... where fullness awaits us.

With Lewis, we trust that something better awaits us.

What could be better? I don't know, but I can say this. The Bible teaches **there is one marriage in Heaven**. It is Jesus Christ married to His bride, the church.

We each have that to look forward to and we will all enjoy, together, perfect companionship, forever.

Notice Jesus said, "**when** they rise from the dead." He clearly believed in the physical resurrection, and next He proves it to the Sadducees from their own self-limited Scriptures.

Mar 12:26 But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB' ?

Mar 12:27 He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken."

Moses wrote as if the patriarchs of Israel were still alive after death. Thus the argument that there was no afterlife, and no resurrection, was absurd.

Even though the Sadducees asked what sounded like a spiritual question, their motivation was material. Since they did not believe in an afterlife, and believed in annihilation after death, they were all-about prospering now, in a material sense. They tended to be wealthy and held powerful positions, including that of chief priests and high priest, and they held the majority of the 70 seats of the ruling council called the Sanhedrin.

They worked hard to keep the peace by agreeing with the decisions of Rome and they were more concerned with politics than religion.

These two questions, from the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees, revealed that they were focused upon the here-and-now. They were concerned with their own material prosperity.

I'm not saying that is always a bad thing; but if you could ask the Son of God a question, would it really be about whether or not you had to pay taxes?

Or, in the case of the Sadducees, would you try to get God Incarnate to agree with you, that this life is all there is, so you may as well eat, drink, and be merry?

They were in this horrible condition because they had turned away from following God:

- We said that the Pharisees were a reaction to the efforts of Greeks pressuring the Jews to adopt their pagan ways. The nation of Israel was in that predicament because of their own sin. Had they kept following God, there would be no need for Pharisees who called for separation from oppressors.
- In a free, independent Israel, the Herodians would not exist, because Herod would never have been over them.

- Likewise there would be no tolerance for Sadducees who conveniently tore out most of the pages of their Scriptures in order to figure a way to prosper while the nation was subjugated.

The answer was right in front of them. They were talking to Him.

What do you talk to Jesus about, mostly? It can be a good litmus test for keeping you from concentrating on material things when spiritual things are so much more important.

## #2 When You Talk With Jesus, Is It Mostly About Your Spiritual Passion?

(v28-34)

If I asked you, "How many commandments are there?", you might say "Ten."

If you asked a first century Jew, he would say, "Six hundred and thirteen."

The rabbi's had gone through the Scriptures and identified six hundred and thirteen separate commandments.

The 613 commandments include 248 "positive commandments," to perform an act, and 365 "negative commandments," to abstain from certain acts.

Since some laws seem heavier, or more important, than others, the Jews liked to ask rabbi's which commandment was the greatest.

Mar 12:28 Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?"

Scribes were teachers whose office was to interpret the Law to the people. They were held in high regard. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees had scribes. This one was probably a Pharisee, seeing he thought Jesus' answer regarding the resurrection was a good one.

By "first commandment of all," he meant the most important one. If you were stranded on a desert island, which commandment would you take?

Mar 12:29 Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'HEAR, O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE.

Mar 12:30 AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.' This is the first commandment.

He began with the opening words of what is called the Shema, which derives from the Hebrew word "Hear!" [šema']. It consisted of Numbers 15:37-41 and of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. This was recited twice daily - morning and evening - by devout Jews.

Nothing new in this answer; other rabbi's would say the same, and the Jews were already giving it priority, at least in their rituals if not in real life.

But Jesus wasn't done answering:

Mar 12:31 And the second, like it, is this: 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

By "second" Jesus did not mean it was less important. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus said it was "like" the first commandment, meaning it follows necessarily from it.

You're not obeying the first if the second doesn't flow from it. Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19:18. "Love" for self is the instinctive desire to promote one's own good. This command demands that you must exercise a love equal to that which you have for yourself toward your neighbor. In Leviticus, "neighbor" meant a fellow-Israelite, but in the New Testament, Jesus expanded it to include a much wider audience, especially in the telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

It's interesting to note that the first commandment Jesus cited summarizes one tablet of the Ten Commandments, while the second commandment summarizes the other. The four on the one tablet have to do with our relationship with God, while the six on the other have to do with our relationships with others.

Mar 12:32 So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He.

Mar 12:33 And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

This scribe of the Pharisees put truth ahead of political correctness and social status. He knew Jesus had answered the question beautifully, and once and for all.

He recognized that ritual sacrifices, important though they were, could never substitute for loving your neighbor. He understood that you must **do** the law, not just hear it and go through the motions.

Mar 12:34 Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him.

Let's refresh our understanding of what can be meant by "the Kingdom of God." It can mean one of three things:

1. The Kingdom of God refers to God's rule over His creation. Even though mankind sinned, in the Garden of Eden, God has not abdicated His throne. He remains in charge, overruling by His providence, to redeem creation and restore all things.
2. The Kingdom of God is also the literal rule of Jesus Christ (the Messiah) on the earth, on David's throne in Jerusalem, Israel. It was promised the Jews in their Scriptures. When Jesus came the first time to inaugurate it, He was rejected, so it was postponed. He is coming back a second time, when He will establish the Kingdom of God on the earth for a thousand years, then take believers into eternity.
3. Thirdly, the Kingdom of God means His spiritual reign in the hearts of individuals, from Genesis through the Revelation.

How was this scribe "not far from the Kingdom?" Well, for one thing, he was talking directly to the King. He was quite literally a few feet or less away from Jesus.

More importantly, this was an invitation to salvation. "Not far" is still too far if you never make it where you're going. The scribe needed to receive Jesus as His Savior, repent of his sin, and submit to Jesus' spiritual rule in his heart.

Apparently you can come close to being saved, but still be lost.

Does that describe anyone here today? Have you been born-again by receiving Jesus Christ? If not, you're close, because the Holy Spirit is here to convict you. But you must respond as He frees your will to receive the Lord.

"After that, no one dared question Him." It was obvious they were never going to get Him to say something His press secretary would have to explain away. Their best guys all went down in flames, and one of them was close to becoming a convert.

Keeping with the theme of politics, Jesus' answer to this question affects us in that we live-out His command to "love our neighbor as ourself" in society with others.

In other words, whichever of the 30+ political parties I belong to, I must still be recognizable as a follower of Jesus Christ. He is to be my exclusive passion, from which I determine how to live among others to bring them the Gospel first, and betterment of life along with it.

So... Are your talks with Jesus mostly about your spiritual passions? Are you asking Him to go on filling you with His Holy Spirit, so you can have boldness as His witness?

Take advantage of the time we've set aside, right now, and turn your heart toward the Lord.