

Don't Mess With Taxes

Mark 12:13-17 June 3, 2026

In the 4th century AD a man lost or buried a gold ring in a field in England. It was big enough that it had to be worn over a glove.¹ It lay for 1,400 years until it was found by a farmer plowing his field.²

Perhaps the original owner was Senicianus. His name was carved into the side. In Latin it reads, "Senicianus, live in God." A common inscription for Roman Christians at the time. But next to the inscription is an image of the goddess Venus.³ The mixture is somewhat strange, but this was made during a time when Christians and pagans lived side by side. It's also strange that the inscription contains two errors.⁴ Clearly it was added later, maybe by someone in a hurry.

Decades later, 70 miles from that field, *another* discovery was made. This time, a lead plate that had been placed in the temple of a local Celtic god. It is a *curse* tablet. It says: "*To the god Nodens. Silvianus has lost a ring; he hereby gives half of it (i.e. half of its value) to Nodens. Among those who are called Senicianus, do not allow health until he brings it to the temple.*"⁵

Silvianus was a Roman. He said *he* was the true owner of the ring and that it had been taken by Senicianus, who then clumsily carved his own name onto the band to try to prove his ownership. So whose ring was it? Silvianus? Senicianus? Was it Christian? Was it pagan?

The question of image and inscription on treasure is the subject of this text. It's a short passage that is familiar to many of us. But despite its brevity, it packs powerful truth both then and now.

Mark 12:13 - ¹³ Then they sent some of the Pharisees and the Herodians to Jesus to trap him in his words.

The Sanhedrin has been sending these different groups to try to trip Jesus up in His words. To get Him to say something that could be considered illegal or that would make the crowds turn on Him. Last time it was a group of chief priests, scribes, and elders. Now it's Pharisees and Herodians. Next it will be Sadducees. They're throwing everything they've got, but they can't land a single hit.

They're confident that they're going to catch Jesus in a trap. The word Mark uses here is a hunting word or a term you would use for hooking a fish.⁶ But what they're doing is so obvious. Just the fact that Pharisees and Herodians are coming to Him together shows their scheming desperation.

¹ <https://astonishinglegends.com/astonishing-legends/2018/7/7/the-ring-of-senicianus>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring_of_Silvianus

³ <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/719789>

⁴ Charles Thomas *Christianity In Roman Britain To AD 500*

⁵ R.G. Goodchild *The Curse And The Ring*

⁶ James Brooks *The New American Commentary, Volume 23: Mark*

Ordinarily these groups would have *nothing* to do with each other.⁷ But by passion week *all* the leaders are united in one goal: Get rid of Jesus. They'll partner with people they can't stand to get it done. It reveals their hate and their jealousy and their greed and their selfish ambition.

One quick note before we move on: Notice they wanted to trap Jesus in His words. We know it's not going to work. Jesus' words are always pure, always true, always consistent, never wavering. On the devotional level, we can be encouraged that that is true about the Word of God we have in our hands. You're going to encounter someone - a coworker, a family member, a professor, a book, a podcast - that says God's Word is full of errors. That God's Word isn't consistent. But it isn't true. "The Word of the Lord is right."⁸ His instruction is perfect. His testimony is trustworthy. His command is radiant. His ordinances are reliable. More desirable than an abundance of pure gold.⁹

There are things that are hard to understand. And there are difficulties that can be worked through. But God will not be trapped in His words and we will not be trapped if we rely on His Word.

Mark 12:14 - ¹⁴ When they came, they said to him, "Teacher, we know you are truthful and don't care what anyone thinks, nor do you show partiality but teach the way of God truthfully. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

The issue of taxation is *always* controversial. We're not used to politicians having very high approval ratings. Did you know that in 1991, George H.W. Bush had an 89% approval rating? And yet, he lost the election in 1992. Why? Six words: "Read my lips, no new taxes."¹⁰ That was the promise, but he ended up raising taxes 3%. And that was the end of his presidency.

Taxes are always controversial but in first century Israel it was a different level. You see, the Jews' land was occupied by Rome. And since 6 AD, the Caesars had been forcing the Jews to pay a census tax every year. That's the tax in this verse. This was much more than an economic sore spot. This was about culture and religion and oppression and enriching your occupiers.

David Garland writes, "*Almost every resident of [Israel] knew someone, even a father or a brother, whom the Romans had victimized. They were sold into slavery (temporarily or permanently), forced off their land...or executed for rising up against the oppression.*"¹¹

This question was a no-win for Jesus. He'd have to alienate *someone*. At least, that's what they thought. Herodians and Romans were fine with the tax. Pharisees resented and resisted it, but paid it, grudgingly.¹² But patriots *really* hated this tax. It sparked a violent revolution that was quickly put down by Rome.¹³ Zealots would not pay.¹⁴

⁷ Brooks

⁸ Psalm 33:4

⁹ Psalm 19:7-10

¹⁰ <https://www.carolinajournal.com/opinion/read-my-lips-no-new-taxes/>

¹¹ David Garland *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*

¹² Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

¹³ R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

¹⁴ Walter Wessel *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*

Now Jesus is surrounded by people of every group. Among *His own* followers was a tax collector and a former zealot. And His disciples believed Him to be the Messiah. Can you be the Messiah if you're *not* anti-Rome? Can you be the Messiah if you're *not* planning on overthrowing the Caesar? But if you say you're going to overthrow Caesar, that spells death for you *and* all your followers. How in the world is Jesus going to answer this question while still maintaining truth and integrity?

Mark 12:15 - ¹⁵ But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius, to look at."

The denarius was a particular coin, equal to a laborer's day wage. You had to use *this* coin to pay the census tax to Rome.¹⁵ You couldn't bring in a jar of dirty pennies out of spite. This coin had the image of Caesar Tiberius engraved on it, with inscriptions labeling him as chief priest on one side and as the son of god on the other.¹⁶

The coin, in and of itself, would be deeply offensive to a devout Jew. Zealots refused to handle them.¹⁷ In fact, authorities minted small copper coins *without* the graven image to be used by Jews in the area.¹⁸ But you still had to use the silver one for the poll tax once a year.

Now, Jesus did not have one. He was not a wealthy individual. But *who did have a denarius?* The Pharisees and Herodians. They're pretending they're really concerned whether it's upright and Godly to pay Rome this tax. Meanwhile, they're fine with Caesar's coins in their pockets. They're happy to enrich themselves with his idolatrous, blasphemous coinage. *That's* their hypocrisy.

Mark 12:16-17 - ¹⁶ They brought a coin. "Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked them. "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ Jesus told them, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him.

Have you heard the term "political football?" It's when politicians or parties throw a difficult or contentious issue back and forth to try to score points against their opponents but never solving anything. Jesus doesn't play political football. The truth is, this isn't a political issue. This is a personal issue. It's not about party or which group should have more power. Jesus' answer is that each of us should live a life of obedience and faith. To do Godliness in any system.

The Bible commands us to obey the government. God has authority and Caesar has authority. Not equal. Caesar only has the authority God allows him to have for a time. But the Bible is clear: All authorities are instituted by God.¹⁹ And believers can submit to governments - even tyrannical governments - and still be walking with God and honoring His call on their lives.

¹⁵ Morna Hooker *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

¹⁶ William Lane *The Gospel Of Mark*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*

¹⁷ Witherington

¹⁸ Hooker

¹⁹ Romans 13:1

See, the zealots thought they were serving God by denying Caesar's authority.²⁰ Jesus reveals they were wrong. The coins *belonged* to Tiberius. Literally. He minted them. They were his property.²¹ His government paid for the roads they all walked. Yes, he was a tyrant, but he had done things for the people which benefitted them. In fact, when Jesus said, "give to Caesar," He used a word that means pay back the debt you owe.²² You possess his coin. You walk his roads. So, obviously you should pay this tax. You may not *want* to, but it is right to and it is Godly to do so.

But at the same time, Jesus is not giving a squishy, pro-Roman answer. Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to *God* the things that are *God's*. Meaning that Caesar is *not* God. He *said* he was. His coins said he was. There was a growing emperor cult which worshiped Tiberius as divine. But here's Jesus saying, "No. There's One God, and it's not a guy in Rome."

Well, if this pretender to heaven's throne says he's a god and he's occupying the Holy Land and imposing his will, isn't the only answer insurrection? Revolution? Violent overthrow of this evil, ungodly government? That would seem logical and *did* seem logical to groups like the zealots. It seems logical to certain groups in our own society today.

But you know, neither Jesus nor the apostles ever taught violent resistance against *any* government. Christianity "[does] not foster disloyalty to the state."²³ Not under Tiberius or Nero or Nebuchadnezzar or Sacramento. In this answer, Jesus doesn't send us to *any* of the groups you could've gone to in Jerusalem at the time. Not the zealots, who did use violence to try to get their way. Not to the Essenes, who just quit society and hid out in the desert. Not to the Pharisees who tried to straddle the line between piety and peace with the secular rulers. Certainly not to the Herodians or the Sadducees who had turned their backs on God.

Instead, Christians were a separate thing. Jesus is our King, but we recognize that God has scattered us into a certain time and place. And wherever we find ourselves, we can honor God and accept the authority of the God-ordained government over us. Now *when that government* demands we disobey God, *that* is when we disobey government. We must obey God rather than men. But when it's time to pay taxes, we write the check.

The thing is, we have more liberty and opportunity and influence in our governmental system than any populace in human history. We get to vote. We have opportunity to lawfully pressure our representatives to support or oppose certain legislation. We *can* protest. Our citizens *can* sue the government and try to get the courts to force the authorities to change their behavior.

These aren't bad things. However, if we're not careful, we can start to believe that gaining political power is a major goal for the Church. *It isn't*. It wasn't for the apostles. And, as one scholar notes, "an unhealthy union between church and state has been the undoing of both churches and

²⁰ Hooker

²¹ Witherington

²² France

²³ BKC

governments throughout history."²⁴ Our goal is *not* to set up a Christian Theocracy. Christ is going to do that when He returns. *Our* goals are personal. Rescuing *persons* from sin. When *people* are saved, they live out Godliness and that influences the communities and institutions around them. So, we *care* about our nation - absolutely. But *righteousness* exalts a nation, not regime change.

Now listen: This doesn't mean politics don't matter. Jesus didn't send us to the zealots, but He didn't send us to the Essenes either. The New Testament calls us to be model citizens, thoughtful about our place in society. Praying for our leaders. Working for the good of our communities. But the end goal of those activities for a Christian is not *power*, but Godliness. That we live lives that are peaceful and quiet and dignified - *even when Nero is king*. Why? Because it pleases God Who desires most of all *not* that certain parties have more power, but that *people* would be saved.²⁵

Jesus' answer was amazing. And it couldn't be denied. The denarius belonged to Tiberius. Why? His image was on them.

Whose image were *you* made in? You and I, we belong to the Lord. Not just a once-a-year tax of a single day's wage, but everything. It's His breath in our lungs. It is by His mercies we are not consumed. It's His life that makes us alive. Christians, you bear His image. His name is engraved on your heart. And you give to God the things that are God's by loving Him with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, all your strength.

The question is: Have we tried to steal the treasure of our lives away? Has this treasure, your life, been buried in a field somewhere? Not adorning the Body of the King, but lost in the dirt? Have we run off with our lives in pursuit of our own purposes, our own greatness, clumsily carving our own name and message on our lives, with a bunch of errors and mistakes along the way?

It's not too late to give ourselves over to the Lord for His purposes. He can accomplish a new work even if we've been lost in a field for far too long. God can restore you, display you, tell a new story of His grace through your life as you return it to Him, the rightful Owner.

You know, when an archaeologist discovered the link between that lead plate and the gold ring, he didn't know who this god Nodens was. So he went to a professor friend of his who was an expert on the topic. The archaeologist talked with the professor about this engraved, golden ring, stolen and then lost, the curse, all the rest. The professor helped him understand the history and mythology of Nodens and connect the dots. That professor was J.R.R. Tolkien. After all those years, the ring came out of the dirt and started telling new stories.

Your life is worth *much* more than an old Roman ring. The testimony of God's grace in and through you is a greater tale than the greatest of novels. Give your life to Him and continue the story.

²⁴ Garland

²⁵ 1 Timothy 2:1-4