

Jesus and Politics

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[0 : 0 0] Well, there's no doubt that politics can be polarizing and it can be divisive, whether you live in the United Kingdom or whether you come from the United States. Politics divides people, whether it's the Conservative Party leadership race, which will come to a conclusion this week in the UK, or whether it's the US presidential race and the primaries and so on and so on and so on.

Politics divides people. Well, this week, the UK government have been in the news about how they best deal with the costs of living crisis that we're currently going through.

And there's debates about whether taxes should increase or taxes should be cut. And so any kind of political debate or question tends to divide people and end up with an argument.

Just think of the Scottish government referendum a few years ago and the desire for another referendum pushed by the government right now. If we just took a straw poll, I'm sure we would be a divided crowd on that one single issue because that's what politics does.

It divides people. It always has and it always will. And that's exactly what we see when we read this passage from Mark chapter 12. We see how politics divides.

[1 : 1 4] And politics, of course, isn't just a modern day discussion. That was going on here in our reading. It was contentious in first century Palestine, as we saw.

Because two groups, Pharisees and Herodians, use politics to catch Jesus out, to try and trap him. It's a political trap about paying taxes to Caesar.

But while Jesus addresses this specific issue of paying tax to Caesar here in our reading, his words actually have far-reaching implications for how we live under human governments in this world, for how we relate to the authorities that are placed over us.

Because whether we call ourselves a Christian or not, we want to know what our obligation is to the state and to the authorities over us. Do we obey the state or do we obey God?

And so what Jesus does here, he makes it clear about our obligation to those who have authority over us. But more importantly, he emphasizes our greater obligation to God as our ruler and maker and creator, whose image we are made.

[2 : 2 9] And so yes, we are accountable to state and to government, to authorities. But above all, we are accountable to God. And so let's look at the political trap and then the perfect response and then the powerful vision that Jesus gives.

So those are our three points this afternoon. First, a political trap. Second, a perfect response. And third, a powerful vision. So first of all, a political trap. So we're in a section of Mark's gospel where the religious leaders are constantly clashing with Jesus.

And before this, they challenge Jesus about his authority. And so Jesus beat them at their own game by telling a parable against them. And so here they come again with another plan to try and trap Jesus.

Verse 13. Later, they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. And so it's a trap because the word that's used here has the sense of hunting down in order to catch.

Like when you set a mouse trap in your house. You set the trap in order to catch the mouse. One time I did have mice and I thought I'll be nice to the mice.

[3 : 44] I'll give them the snapping trap, kills them instantly. Or the more humane trap where they maybe get another chance to live a bit longer. And they chose the snapping trap and they were gone.

But the point is, the religious leaders want Jesus gone. They want to kill him. And so what they're trying to do is catch him in his words.

What they want to do is get him to say something politically incorrect. So that in saying the wrong thing, he can ultimately be cancelled. That's their strategy.

They want to force Jesus to say something wrong so that they can kill him. And what is interesting is that these two groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, don't normally associate with one another.

In fact, they probably hated each other. And yet here they are combining forces. Forming some kind of holy, unholy alliance, I should say, so that they can catch Jesus out.

[4 : 44] Because the Pharisees were the ultra-conservatives of the Jewish religion on the right. So they were all about fastidiously obeying all the rules. Whereas the Herodians, more on the left, I guess you could say, they were aligned with the Romans.

So they were more liberal, more compromising. And yet they come together against Jesus, standing together in opposition to Jesus as their common enemy.

And so do you notice the sly way that they approach Jesus? Verse 14. They came to him and said, Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others because you pay no attention to who they are, but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

Is it right to pay the poll tax to Caesar or not? And we'll come to that. So they start with flattery. They say to Jesus, Jesus, you're a genuine man of integrity. You don't care about anybody else's opinion.

You're never swayed. No matter who it is you're talking to, you always teach what is true. You always teach the way of God. And, you know, they had it spot on. They were correct.

[5 : 50] They were right. Everything they said about Jesus was true. And yet it's a backhanded compliment because they hoped that Jesus' integrity would actually be his downfall.

And so they ask this politically loaded question that demands a yes or no answer. The question is, Is it right to pay the poll tax to Caesar or not?

Should we pay or shouldn't we? Now, there's a bit of background to this whole issue. And it's helpful, I guess, to know the political situation at the time. Because the land of Palestine was under the rule of the Romans.

And what they did was basically kept the Jews captive in their own country. And so they had to pay the poll tax. And it had been introduced by the Romans and it was enforced on the people.

And so you can understand why they were unhappy about it. And if you're old enough to remember Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative government, and when they introduced the poll tax in Scotland, it didn't go down too well, did it?

[6 : 53] It had riots in the streets, mobs, all kinds of violent protests and uprising. And that same thing actually happened with this taxation.

And it's documented by a man called Josephus, who was a Jewish historian. Because the poll tax, when it was introduced, I think around AD 6, provoked a revolt by a Galilean called Judas.

But Judas the Galilean was killed and the revolt came to nothing. It's actually in Acts chapter 5, verse 37. There's a reference to Judas the Galilean.

And so trying to revolt, trying to reject or oppose this tax, didn't really work very well. But nobody wanted to pay taxes to Rome. So all these years later, Jesus shows up in the scene and the feeling is still strong.

Because it wasn't just a matter of nationalistic loyalty. It was also a matter of loyalty to God, if you were a Jew. And so you can see how this question is a perfect one, or so they think, for the Pharisees and for the Herodians to trap Jesus.

[8 : 03] It wasn't just politically loaded. It was spiritually loaded too. And they want Jesus to give them a straight answer. Was it right to pay this tax to Caesar?

Yes or no? And anything else, of course, would be to dodge the question. So they thought. Just like when you watch any political debate on TV, the politician is asked a straight question, and they never give a straight answer.

And there's a sense in which that could have happened here. But it didn't, of course. But the Pharisees and the Herodians thought that they had trapped Jesus. Because Jesus was either in danger of losing his popularity, or he was in danger of losing his life.

If Jesus answered, yes, pay the tax, he'd lose his popularity with the people. He'd be seen as a compromiser with the Romans, a traitor amongst the people who hated the Romans, and who hated their tax.

But on the other hand, if Jesus answered, no, don't pay the tax, he'd become an enemy of the state. He'd be regarded as a revolutionary, a troublemaker with the Romans, and so in danger of being executed.

[9 : 19] And so they thought they had caught Jesus in a kind of heads-eye-win, tails-you-lose situation. If Jesus said yes, he'd upset the Jews.

The Pharisees could use this against Jesus, turning the Jews against him. But if he said no, he'd upset the Romans, and the Herodians could turn the authorities against Jesus.

And so whatever Jesus' response, his opponents thought they had the perfect opportunity to get rid of him, to trap him in such a way that he would end up dead.

So that's the first point, a political trap. Second point is a perfect response. Verse 15 to 17. So despite this clever political trap, Jesus springs it without getting caught by giving this perfect response.

It's there in verse 15 and 16, halfway through verse 15. But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. Why are you trying to trap me, he asked. Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.

[10 : 19] They brought the coin and he asked them, whose image is this and whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied. So of course, it's hardly surprising that Jesus knew exactly what was going on.

In fact, when Jesus accuses them of trying to trap him, the word that Jesus uses is found earlier in Mark's gospel, when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the devil.

When the devil tried, in essence, to tempt, trap Jesus. It's the same thing happening here. It's a sinister and there's a satanic element to what these men were doing.

And yet Jesus gives the perfect response. So first of all, he asked for a coin. Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. Just imagine the suspense as they dig in their pockets, trying to find a coin.

It's one of those good children's talks, isn't it? With the object. And there's an object lesson. You know, boys and girls, gather round, come sit down at the front, come and see what I've got in my pocket.

[11 : 23] What's this here? Who's this a picture of? What does it say? That's what he's doing. Now, a denarius was a tiny, small Roman silver coin. And they're still around today.

You can still find them in museums. You can even find them on eBay. I was tempted to bid, but I didn't. But you can pay thousands of pounds if you want a silver denarius coin.

Now, denarius was the daily wage for a laborer in Palestine. And the Roman poll tax for the year was one coin. That's what the Jews had to pay.

And what's interesting is that while Jesus doesn't have one on him, these people who seem to resist paying this tax seem to have them in their pockets.

They produce one. And so Jesus asks, whose image is this and whose inscription? And the answer is Caesar's. Now, the denarius had an image of the head of Tiberius Caesar on it.

[12 : 20] He was the Roman emperor at the time. And the inscription read in abbreviated form, Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus, meaning Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of divine Augustus.

And then on the flip side of the coin, the inscription read, Pontifex Maximus, meaning high priest. And so you can see why the Jews hated this tax.

Not only did it go to Rome, but it was a coin that was blasphemous. It was a coin that was idolatrous, because it was essentially saying Caesar was divine.

Caesar was God. Every coin was saying Caesar was a God with, he claimed, authority, and people had to accept his rule.

And so Rome was this totalitarian regime where everybody was just expected to bow to the state. But when Jesus gets their answer, he doesn't say, how dare Caesar make those blasphemous claims, take the coin from them and chuck it into the lake.

[13 : 33] He doesn't do that. Nor does he say, nobody should pay this tax. What does he do? Well, Jesus does something far more revolutionary.

Verse 17. Then Jesus said to them, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. And they were amazed at him. They're amazed because he gave the perfect response in one short sentence.

And so it springs the trap without Jesus getting caught. Just like that clever little mouse, and there's always one, who manages to dance across your mousetrap, pick up the cheese with these little paws, and then rush off scurrying away into your house again.

So, Jesus escapes, evades their trap. And Jesus said that they should give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

Because when Jesus asks, whose image is this? Verse 16. He uses a Greek word from which we get our word icon, which means image or likeness.

[14 : 42] And it's the same word that's used of humanity in the Genesis accounts of creation in the Greek version of the Old Testament. And so in Genesis chapter 1, verse 26, it says, Then God said, Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.

And so Jesus' words here echo the creation of humanity in Genesis. It's where all human beings have been made in the image and likeness of God.

In other words, Caesar should be given the coin that bears his image. He minted the coins. They've got his picture on them. They belong to him.

So give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Give him his coin. But, Jesus says, Give to God what bears his image. What bears God's image?

All humanity. Every single human being who's ever lived, including you and me, we are imprinted with God's image. He made us.

[15 : 46] We bear his image. We belong to him. So yes, give Caesar his coin, but give yourself to God. That's the amazing answer Jesus gives.

He's saying, Give to God what belongs to him. And that is you. You are his. We belong to God. So we owe God our lives.

Jesus catches them in their own trap. So he moves from this political issue of obligation to Caesar, and he takes it to the more fundamental issue of obligation to God.

He turned it back on them. Because the question for them now is, Well, are we giving God what is rightfully his? Jesus, namely us, our lives, everything.

And so Jesus gets to the heart of the matter by challenging their very allegiance to God. He's exposing their rejection of God, just as he did in the parable of the tenants earlier on.

[16 : 45] They wanted to catch Jesus out over the rule of Rome to pay tax. But Jesus forces them to face up to the rule of God and whether they're submitting to him.

So this isn't just about tax evasion. This is about a far more serious evasion. And that is our failure to give God what rightfully belongs to him, which is ourselves.

And so, yes, as we get ready to move on to our third point, yes, we do have an obligation to the authorities who rule over us, whatever society we live in, whether good or bad.

But as human beings made in the image of God, we have a far greater obligation to him. So there's a political trap.

There's a perfect response. And then thirdly, by way of application of all of this, there is a powerful vision. Jesus gave the perfect response to this trap. He says, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.

[17 : 46] Or, older translations say, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. Now, what Jesus says here has implications for our obligation to the authorities over us.

And so Jesus gives a powerful vision for how we respond to issues of religion and politics, of church and state, of God and government. So even if we live in a society that pays little attention to God's rule, like Rome, or even like the UK today, there are lines of application here that flow from Jesus' statement.

And I think we can take Jesus' statement and flow two lines of application. So the first is, we're subject to the governing authorities. Give to Caesar what is Caesar. And then secondly, we must give our ultimate allegiance to God.

Give to God what is God's. So first, let's think about, we are subject to the governing authorities. Now, Jesus' words imply there is a place under God for human rule and society, for human government, for the state to govern its people.

Because when Jesus tells his listeners to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, what is he doing? He's acknowledging that Rome has political power.

[19 : 12] In fact, at his trial, Pilate, the Roman governor, Jesus said to him in John chapter 19 that he would have no power had it not been given to him by God from above.

And so the governing authorities have been established by God. And they might be pagan, like Rome. They might be secular, like in the UK. But we are still subject to them.

And that's why Jesus' words here are expanded upon and applied throughout the rest of the New Testament. So Romans chapter 13, or 1 Timothy chapter 2, or 1 Peter chapter 2, all speak of the need to be subject to the governing authorities.

But the obvious questions are, well, what if you live under an evil regime? Should you submit or obey then? And many people do across the world.

Or what if the government overreaches with its power and what it forces people to do? Do you obey then? Or what if the state laws are opposed to God's good purposes for humanity?

[20 : 22] Well, what do we do then? Is Jesus telling us to obey no matter what? Well, the first thing to acknowledge is that Roman rule was by no means perfect.

In fact, it was far worse than many governments and many authorities and the way that they have ruled throughout human history. But Jesus is saying, pay the Romans.

Give the Romans. Give these rulers who think they're deities. Give them your money. He's saying that despite the fact that it would be the Romans who would soon kill him by nailing him to a cross.

Crucifixion was one of the most gruesome and violent means of execution ever invented by man. Jesus says, give them your money. And so the state may seem like an enemy and the state may often be an enemy, yet we still have a responsibility towards it and its leaders, which means we should be taxpaying, law-abiding citizens.

But secondly, if we follow Jesus, then of course we are citizens of a different kingdom, citizens of the kingdom of God. And so we must live out those kingdom values in the kingdom of this world.

[21 : 43] How do we do that? Well, by being the best citizens that we can be, helping to make our society a place where there is justice and freedom and good laws and adequate care for the vulnerable and so on and so on and so on.

Because if we, as God's people, abandon our responsibilities, who else in society is going to fulfill them. And then thirdly, we're also commanded later in the New Testament not just to be subject to the governing authorities, but we are commanded to pray for them, to pray for them.

And so Jesus' vision here is radical. It was then and it still is today because the Jews had always lived under a theocratic state. In other words, they were ruled by the laws of God.

And those who led them, their leaders, led and ruled in the name of God. But that wasn't happening at Jesus' time.

And nor does it happen today. And so there's no suggestion that Roman rule was perfect or right or good because human government never is. And yet, Jesus allows for submission to human authorities as long as we are aware that they are always under the supreme authority of God.

[23 : 05] Which is our second point. We must give our ultimate allegiance to God because we shouldn't misunderstand Jesus by thinking that Jesus wants us to obey the state, obey any government, no matter what, no limits and no questions asked.

That isn't what he's saying. Because God is distinct from the state and he is above it. And that's why our ultimate allegiance is always to God, not to any human power, no matter how strong.

Because while Jesus said, give Caesar his tax, Caesar actually wanted more than tax. Remember that inscription on the denarius coin?

Basically claimed that Caesar was a god. And so he wanted more than money, he wanted worship. And so while Jesus says, give him back what is his, the tax, Jesus is saying, you can't give him what he really wants.

What he really wants, above all else, is your ultimate allegiance. He wants your worship. He wants you to treat him as God. And you can't do that.

[24 : 18] Caesar isn't God. The state isn't God. There is only one God. God. And he's sovereign over all things and all people.

And so while we should be subject to the state, we can't give it our ultimate allegiance because that belongs to God alone. So our allegiance to God trumps everyone and everything else.

So Jesus wasn't compromising here. And neither should we compromise as his people. Jesus doesn't deny duty to Caesar, but it must also come, it must always come after duty to God.

And so there will be times when I think increasingly in the future we will not be able to go along with the state. And so if we ever need to choose, then we must give to God what is God's.

Let me give you an example. And I think this is probably more applicable to ministers or preachers like me or David, but I also think it applies to any Christian who works in any kind of employment.

[25 : 28] And there are lots of you who are teachers, medics, and so on. So it applies to everybody who wants to hold a Christian faith and express that Christian faith out in the public world.

Because preaching the truth of the Bible could be viewed, if it isn't already viewed by some, as a hate crime. And because it's a hate crime, then it can be something that leads to a prison sentence.

Or, as a Christian employee, if you refuse to compromise your Christian values, you could lose your job. And the state or the law of the land is unlikely to have your back for that.

And so can you see where the rubber hits the road for what Jesus is saying here? Easy to obey the authorities when they govern well, but what do you do when they don't?

What if you are forced to compromise your faith and do what you know you shouldn't do? Well, that's the time when allegiance to God has got to trump all other allegiance.

[26 : 46] Because we are called to give our ultimate allegiance to God, which means we can't stop living as a Christian if we profess to be a Christian. It means we can't stop speaking Christian truth to people around us if we follow Jesus Christ, even if there are consequences and even if those consequences lead to what is called breaking the law.

But let's not be discouraged because what Jesus is saying here, his vision means that we can actually live under any system of government like the Roman government or any government today.

Christians can always live under any system of government as long as we are absolutely sure that God is the highest government because ultimately we have got to give an account of ourselves to him.

And so if we are meticulous when it comes to filling out our tax returns and sticking to the speed limit, voting in every election or whatever it is, shouldn't we be even more diligent in worshipping and in obeying God?

And so we don't need to engage in any kind of political revolution but neither should we acquiesce and just accept this is how things are. Because Jesus calls us to a different kind of revolution, doesn't he?

[28 : 16] By living as citizens of the kingdom of God in the kingdom of this world. And so as we close, well, where do we get the power to pursue this radical vision that Jesus lays out here?

Well, only through faith in the one who calls us to live this way. Because it's only when we see that Jesus is king, but the kind of king who gave up his power by subjecting himself to the evil human authorities in order to be killed.

That's the kind of king he is. And why did he do that? He did it for us. For our failure to give our ultimate allegiance to God. And so Jesus conquered through death.

He triumphed through suffering. And God raised Jesus to life. And one day Jesus will return in power and glory and he will establish his perfect everlasting kingdom.

The kingdom that will end all earthly powers, all authorities, all states, all governments, all kings, all queens, all princes, because it will be the perfect government with peace and justice and righteousness and it will last forever.

[29 : 36] And all the politics of this world will be no more. Thank goodness for that. And don't you want to be part of the kind of revolution that Jesus is speaking of here?

Well it starts by how we live now, today, tomorrow, next week, wherever we live, wherever we work. And God always welcomes people into this kingdom, the kingdom that is here but not yet.

It's coming in all its fullness. And we are welcomed in by being accepted by God himself. How are we accepted? Well, by turning from our sin of failing to give God what is God.

What belongs to God? Everything. You, me, my whole self, my life, my existence, my resources, my energies.

And so we must trust in Jesus Christ as our King. And if you've still got to do this, if you haven't done this yet, then you should do it today because when you do, you receive God's Spirit.

[30 : 47] And he enables us to pursue Jesus' powerful vision until Jesus returns. And when Jesus does return at last, then we'll have the perfect government that we all long for.

And so until then, well, yeah, let's pay our taxes. But even more, let's offer ourselves wholly to God and to his service.