

Jesus and Politics Mark 12:13-17

A couple of years ago, the Pew Research Center issued a study which confirmed what most of us knew already: Americans are far more polarized politically now than at any other time in the past 20 years. Most Republicans have moved further to the right and most Democrats have moved further to the left; and a good number of each party believes that the other party is a threat to our national well-being. On a ten item scale of political values, in 1994, 64% of Republicans were consistently conservative; in 2004 70% of Republicans were consistently conservative; and in 2014 92% of Republicans were consistently conservative. Using that same scale, in 1994, 70% of Democrats were consistently liberal; in 2004 68% of Democrats were consistently liberal; and in 2014 94% of Democrats were consistently liberal. Now if today, 92% of Republicans are consistently conservative and 94% of Democrats are consistently liberal; then the moderate middle has shrunk and the extremes have grown and the right and the left in this country have grown further and further apart. As a result, many conservatives have few if any liberal friends and many liberals have few if any conservative friends. This is why there are red states and blue states: people tend to want to live around people who share their political views. And there are more true believers today than ever before; people who agree with all their party's positions rather than agreeing with some and disagreeing with others. All this has created an atmosphere where political conversations are dangerous and reasonable discussion has taken a back seat to emotions and name calling. That's the state of our present culture and the church has been affected. There are Christians who believe that a true Christian could never be a member of the Democratic Party; and Christians who believe that a true Christian could never be a Republican; and yet these same believers believe the same Bible and follow the same Lord; and are often in the same denomination. And there are other believers who believe that no true Christian would be involved in politics at all. We live in a political culture and that culture shapes the church. So this morning, as we continue to look at the Gospel of Mark and how Jesus confronted the values of His culture with the values of the kingdom, I want to talk about Jesus and Politics. If Jesus were an American, would he be a conservative or a liberal; a communist or a libertarian; a Republican or a Democrat? Or would He stay away from the whole mess?

Let's look at Mark 12:13-17. *"Then they *sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him in order to trap Him in a statement."* This happens right after Jesus cleanses the temple which we talked about last week. The high priest and his family were using the worship of God to get rich and Jesus is incensed that the worship of His Father is being perverted and that people trying to worship in obedience to the Law are getting fleeced for their efforts; so He goes into the temple, turning over tables, scattering coins, chasing animals and merchants out and thundering, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for the nations but you have made it a robbers den.'" The common people are amazed as Jesus pulls back the veil and shows them what's really going on in the temple and the high priest and his associates are terrified. Jesus has become dangerous and has to be gotten rid of immediately. That's the background of this passage. "They" in vs. 13 refers to the temple authorities; the religious establishment; who send a delegation of Pharisees and Herodians to question Jesus about a hot political topic in the hopes of trapping Him into saying something He can either be arrested for or which will turn the people against Him because as long as Jesus enjoys the support of the people, the religious leaders' hands are tied. By the way, this is an interesting delegation because it is made up of natural enemies. The Pharisees were the fundamentalists, the hyper-orthodox Jews while the Herodians were supporters of King Herod, the puppet king of Israel installed by the Romans. The Pharisees were pro-Israel and hated the idea of Romans being on Israeli soil, let alone ruling them. The Herodians wanted to accommodate Rome, work with the Romans, because the political reality was that Israel was ruled by Rome and friendship with Rome was essential for maintaining their rule. So we've got a group of hereditary enemies here, yet because both groups rule Israel, both are threatened by Jesus. So this group which comes to question Jesus is like a delegation of Republicans and Democrats. *"They came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth. (They're obviously trying to butter Jesus up and get Him to lower His guard.*

“Can you help us to resolve a debate about what God wants us to do, Jesus? You know Him so much better than we do.) *Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay or shall we not pay?*” The Pharisees and Herodians are asking about a particular tax called a head tax; a tax on each person’s head paid each year for the privilege of living under Roman rule. In fact, Rome conducted a census of the empire from time to time, just to make sure that they knew how many people were living there and who had paid and had not paid. The head tax was one denarius each year; a silver coin which was a day’s wage for a common worker. It wasn’t a lot of money but it was a very unpopular tax because it reminded everyone they lived under the Roman boot. The Pharisees believed that the law of Moses forbade the tax, the Herodians believed were much more realistic. “Look, we’re under Roman rule, what else are we going to do?” And these two groups want to know what Jesus thinks. “What does God want us to do? Do we pay or not? Are we to be loyal to God and resist paying taxes to a foreign ruler who claims he himself is a god or does loyalty to God mean submitting ourselves to Rome?” And there’s really no right answer Jesus can give to this question. If Jesus says, “Yes, it’s lawful,” He alienates the people who see Him as a political messiah. If He says the tax is unlawful under the Law of Moses, He will be charged with inciting revolution against Rome and turned over to Pontius Pilate. What will Jesus do? I want to spend some time this morning looking first at the two different approaches which people who care about God can take to politics suggested by the two options this delegation gives to Jesus; and then at the surprising third option which Jesus chooses; because in this option Jesus shows us a completely different way to approach earthly politics than had ever been considered before. I call these three options (1) Jesus and politics, (2) Jesus or politics and (3) Jesus over politics.

Let’s begin with the first option the Pharisees and the Herodians give Jesus which we’ll call Jesus and politics; meaning that it’s possible to follow Jesus and be involved in politics. That’s the position of the Pharisees and the Herodians because they did pay their taxes to Rome; they saw no conflict between their relationship with God and their relationship with Caesar – which is why we’ll see Mark referring to them as hypocrites in the following verses. They act like they want to know the right answer to their question but they’ve already made up their minds. They will accommodate Rome because it is in their best interests to do so. The Jesus and politics option is a popular one among many Christians today who see no conflict between their relationship with Jesus and their involvement in politics; because their relationship with Jesus is personal and private; their relationship with politics is public; and in their mind, there’s a clear line between the two. It doesn’t bother them that their political party holds unbiblical positions on social and economic issues because they make a separation between their spiritual life and their political life. One is private, the other public. They’ll say things like, “Well, I don’t believe in that personally but I can’t let my personal feelings intrude into my political life or try to force others to believe as I do.” If Jesus had simply answered “Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar because there’s no conflict between God and politics,” He – like the other religious leaders of Israel - would have simply accommodated Himself to the politics of His time. And that’s the Jesus and Politics position that many Christians in our country hold today who simply fit into the current political system.

But suppose Jesus had answered, “No, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. You can’t serve God and Caesar; you must choose between the two. It is either God or Caesar,” the Jesus or Politics option; either withdrawing from politics completely or actively rebelling against the political system. In Jesus’ day, there were two groups in Israel who refused to pay taxes to Caesar: the Essenes and the Zealots. The Essenes were the third major sect in first century Israel and differed from the other two sects, the Pharisees and the Sadducees – in their communalism, living in tightly organized communities and holding all property in common; their celibacy (they were all men: kind of like medieval monks) and their strict asceticism. They withdrew from both political life and pretty much from the whole culture in their pursuit of holiness. If you have ever heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, you’ve heard of the Essenes because the scrolls were discovered in the remains of one of their communities. They didn’t pay taxes because of their withdrawal from society. The other group that didn’t pay taxes was the Zealots. They opposed Roman rule on religious grounds and sought to provoke an armed insurrection against Rome in Israel. There’s some additional historical information that helps us to understand the question the Pharisees and Herodians ask Jesus and His answer. 25 years before this, a man named Judas of Galilee rebelled against the Roman imposition of the head tax, cleansed the temple, called Jews to let God be our only king and bring in the kingdom of God and led an armed rebellion against Rome. Judas was caught and executed but the Zealot movement began with his rebellion. 25 years later Jesus appears cleansing the temple and announcing the kingdom of God. The only

thing missing is the rebellion against the head tax. So when Jesus is asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" the question behind the question is, "Are you a revolutionary? Are you leading a rebellion against Rome?" If Jesus replies "No, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," His enemies will tell the Romans they have another Judas of Galilee to deal with. If He answers, "Yes, it is lawful," they can ask, "Then what was the temple cleansing and all the talk about the kingdom of God about?" If Jesus had said, "No, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," He would have been teaching Jesus or Politics; that His followers have to choose whether to be involved with Him or politics – which is the position of withdrawal from society which many Christians hold today; and which I personally held for many years. I was taught that society isn't what it should be but the only way to change the world is to change hearts one at a time through evangelism and discipleship because if we have enough born again Christians in the world, society will automatically become more moral and just. What we've learned over the years, however, is that even though there are a large number of evangelical Christians in the US, we are having far less of an impact on the values of our culture than far smaller groups of people who have more influence in the urban, academic and cultural centers of our nation. Even though there are more of us, we have far less influence because we have followed a strategy of withdrawal from the culture and politics of this country and focused on ourselves and our own spiritual health. What we forget however is that whether we withdraw or not, the culture still has a tremendous effect upon the people in that culture which is why fewer and fewer people in a culture left to itself with more and more believers withdrawing themselves from it are interested in hearing anything about Christ. The more Christians withdraw from the culture, the less able to culture is to make sense of Christianity and the more alien our faith seems to them.

Jesus refuses to answer yes or no to the delegation's question. His view of politics is neither accommodation nor withdrawal; neither Christ and politics nor Christ or politics. *"But He, knowing their hypocrisy, (by pretending to be seriously interested in Jesus' answer while really trying to trap Him) said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." They brought {one.} And He *said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him." (15-17)* Why is the delegation amazed? Two reasons; first they're amazed by how Jesus neatly avoids their trap. They asked a yes or no question and either answer would have gotten Him into serious trouble. But He comes up with a third option. But even more amazing is Jesus' completely revolutionary view of God and politics. As far as I know, this is the first time anyone in history talks about God and government as two separate authorities. *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* Jesus says there *are* some things that belong to Caesar but there are also things that belong only to God. That means that everything doesn't belong to Caesar and God is to be honored over Caesar. Up to this point, rulers ruled by divine consent; the divine right of kings. A king was in power either because God put him in power or because he or she was a god in their own right. Either way, to oppose the king was to oppose God. But for the first time, Jesus says that Caesar and God are separate from one another and therefore, while we pay Caesar his taxes, we owe our ultimate allegiance to God. That means there may be conflicts between Caesar's will and God's will and if so, I am to choose God's will because while a few things belong to Caesar, all things belong to God. That's why I chose to call this option Christ over politics. There is a place for a Christian to be involved in politics. We don't withdraw from politics but instead we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. On the other hand, we don't accommodate or compromise in the political arena but live under the authority of Christ. That is Jesus' view of politics.

Now to understand Christ over politics better, I want you to notice three things about Jesus' position. First Jesus' view is complicated rather than simple. The Pharisees and Herodians offer a simple choice. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" Yes or no? But the answer Jesus gives is more nuanced, more complex than the answer the delegation was seeking. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? Well, yes and no. Yes if by paying taxes you are obeying God. No, if by paying taxes you are not. Following Jesus in our politics isn't always simple or obvious. It takes a lot of thought and listening prayer. We can't mindlessly support our party's position across the board because our allegiance is to Christ, not to a party or to a political position. The question is never what is the liberal or conservative position on this particular issue? The question is always what belongs to God? What does God want? And what God wants seldom fits into a sound bite. It is more nuanced, more complicated and more thought through. What position does God want me to have? The issue is no longer what serves my best interests or what position has my party taken but what is Christ concerned about? What is Christ's position on

limited government, lower taxes, a strong military, abortion, immigration, the environment, racial justice, economic opportunity, national security, educational policy, crime, guns, the economy and domestic violence? The more thoughtful Christians look at issues from Christ's perspective and the Scriptures, the more we will find ourselves agreeing with some positions of our own party and disagreeing with others; and agreeing with some positions of the other party while disagreeing with others. And why thoughtful Christians don't always vote for their fellow Christian on the ticket. During my adult life, every President we've had has claimed to be a Christian but I certainly didn't vote for all of them. If I am to render to God the things that are God's, then my primary concern must be what is in God's interests? What is He concerned about? More on that in a moment, but the point is that taking the position of Jesus over politics is seldom simple; it is usually somewhat complicated and nuanced and takes thought and prayer. So when you find yourself questioned about what Christians believe and you feel like whatever you say will be the wrong answer, do what Jesus does: look for a third alternative. Jesus' enemies give Him an either/or question. "Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus answers with a both/and answer. Give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and give to God the things that belong to God. Jesus says that it is not Caesar or God but Caesar and God. He recognizes the legitimate authority of civil government and the people of God's responsibility to pay their taxes and support that government and He recognizes the authority of God and the people of God's responsibility to honor Him in all they do. Look for a both/and rather than for an either/or. As long as the world frames the argument, any answer we give will be wrong. So step outside the either/or. It is not a simple issue of yes or no. (Illus)

The second thing I want you to notice about Jesus over politics is that it comes from the position of the outsider rather than that of the insider. A Christian is a citizen of heaven and really not part of the system. We may get involved in politics but it should be obvious that we're not politicians; that our allegiance is first and foremost to God and not to any permanent party or position; because Jesus was an outsider. The head tax was one denarius annually for each person. So why does Jesus ask for someone to show Him a denarius? He didn't have one on Him. A denarius was a silver Roman coin worth about one day's wages for the common laborer. It had Tiberius Caesar's image on one side and the words, "Tiberius Caesar, king, son of the god Augustus." On the other side, there was a picture of Tiberius' mom, Livia, portrayed as an incarnation of the goddess of peace, along with the inscription, "high priest." So a denarius was a little idol of Caesar who claimed to be god, the son of a god, the king of the world and its high priest: everything Jesus was. Somebody hands Jesus a denarius and He asks, "*Whose likeness and inscription does it have?*" (Whose image is on this? Who does this belong to?) *They said, "Caesar's."* And that's Jesus' point. All the silver of Rome belonged to Caesar and as long as you used Caesar's money, you're operating in Caesar's system. There is a legitimate place for civil government in God's plan. But the power of civil government is limited. Caesar's image is on the money because the money belongs to Caesar. But whose image is on you? God's image which means you belong to Him; and that is why God is the ultimate authority and why our chief duty is to render to Him what belongs to Him which begins with ourselves since we carry His image as His creations.

Do you see the irony here? The Pharisees and Herodians who are part of Caesar's system and are profiting from their participation in it asked Jesus - the ultimate outsider about what is lawful - and He doesn't even have a denarius. Jesus isn't Caesar's competitor or a replacement of Caesar; He is something altogether different. He is poor and seemingly powerless and has no ambition to change that. His goal isn't to take over the culture's political system. His kingdom is not of this world and while there is a legitimate place for civil government in God's plan, we should not confuse the government with the kingdom or politics with bringing in Christ's kingdom. We need to always approach any involvement in politics as outsiders; people interested only in advancing God's interests in the world and not in gaining power or influence or position for ourselves. I remember back in the 70s and 80s when many of the religious right became concerned that America was abandoning its moral values and began to make conservative Christians a force in the in the Republican Party. That was the birth of the Moral Majority and the efforts to take America back for Christ. What we saw however was that politics shaped the believers more than the believers shaped politics. The more powerful Christians became politically, the more seduced by that power and compromised they became. I heard Chuck Colson share about how when he worked in the Nixon administration, they would bring evangelical pastors to the White House for conferences and how easily they were able to manipulate them to do whatever served the party's interests because the feeling of being on the inside was so powerful. Christians have never done well with worldly political power. As soon as we cease to be outsiders and committed to Christ's agenda, we begin to be corrupted and often the church ends up

being an instrument of oppression and preservation of the status quo rather than representing Christ. So Christ over politics means we follow our Savior's example of participating in politics but not really being a part of politics.

The third thing I want you to notice about Jesus over politics is that we pursue God's interests over human interests. Rendering to God the things that belong to God means seeking what He wants in the world rather than what we or anyone else wants. That means we need to understand His purpose for government. First of all, there is a legitimate place for civil government which Paul describes Romans 13:1-7 *"Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. (Or as Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. There is a role for government in this world.) For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor."* Paul says that government is established by God for our good and has two functions: to restrain evil by administering justice to evildoers and to promote the welfare of its citizens. We live in a representative democracy where the citizens determine what the government does and so as Christians, we need to pursue God's interests and purpose for government as opposed to some other agenda or our own interests. That doesn't mean there is a verse for every political issue or that the Bible tells us how to vote on everything. I've seen voters' guides which try to tell Christians the stand they should take on every issue with a Bible verse besides each. For example, Jesus told His disciples to buy a sword, so obviously we should oppose any attempt of the government to impose gun control. But whatever you believe about the right to bear arms that verse is not about gun control. And there are a lot of issues we're concerned about where the Bible is silent. However, we can know that God is concerned about the orphan, the widow, the poor and the alien; about justice for the oppressed and helpless; about loving our neighbor as ourselves; about the sanctity of life, the importance of the family, the protection of children and a whole slew of other issues; and those are the issues where we need to make our voice heard. That's why Christ over politics means that God's agenda always trumps my agenda; Christ's interests are more important than my personal interests. The question is what does God want for our country and for our world and how can our involvement in politics contribute?

So what does Jesus over politics look like in real life? One of the best examples is the Englishman, William Wilberforce. Wilberforce entered political life in 1780 and eventually became a member of Parliament where he served from 1784 until 1812. In 1785, during a tour of Europe with his family, he began to rise early each day to read the Bible and pray and kept a private journal. As Christ worked on his heart, Wilberforce came to faith, repenting of his past life and committing himself to spend the rest of his life in the service of Christ. Outwardly he continued to be cheerful, interested, and respectful, but he also began to tactfully urge others towards Christ. England during that time was a lot like America today in society's attitude toward evangelical Christians. Religious enthusiasm as it was called was regarded as a social transgression and was stigmatised in polite society and . Evangelicals were held in contempt and ridiculed so Wilberforce's conversion led him to question whether he should remain in public life. He sought guidance from John Newton, whom we know as the slave trader who became a Christian and an Anglican clergyman and wrote *Amazing Grace*. Newton urged Wilberforce to remain in politics, and he resolved to do so "with increased diligence and conscientiousness". From this point on, Wilberforce's political views were shaped by his faith and by his desire to promote Christianity and Christian ethics in private and public life. As a result, he was often distrusted by the progressive voices in Parliament who saw Evangelicals as radicals, bent on the overthrow of church and state.

Because of his commitment to Christ, Wilberforce soon became involved in the antislavery movement in Great Britain. The British initially became involved in the slave trade during the 16th century and by 1783, the triangular route that took British-made goods to Africa to buy slaves, transported the enslaved to the West Indies, and then brought slave-grown products such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton to Britain, represented about 80 percent of Great

Britain's foreign income. British ships dominated the trade, supplying French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and British colonies, and in peak years carried forty thousand enslaved men, women and children annually across the Atlantic in horrific conditions. Of the 11 million Africans who made the voyage, about 1.4 million died before arriving in the West Indies. As Wilberforce learned the facts of the slave trade, he and other Evangelicals were horrified by what they saw was a depraved and unchristian trade, and the greed and cruelty of the owners and traders. He felt called by God to do something, writing in a journal entry in 1787 that "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners [moral values] While it is evident from his writings that he felt inadequate to the task, he began his parliamentary campaign in 1789 and on May 12 1789, he made his first major speech on the subject of abolition in the House of Commons, in which he reasoned that the trade was morally reprehensible and an issue of natural justice. For the next 18 years Wilberforce labored in both Parliament and in the court of British public opinion, making speeches, holding hearings, enduring threats, slander and opposition until finally in 1807, the Slave Trade Act was enacted and slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire. Wilberforce once said, "A private faith that does not act in the face of oppression is no faith at all." He felt compelled to fight a long and difficult political war because of Christ and the gospel.

That doesn't mean we will win every political battle but every political battle gives us an opportunity to be witnesses for Christ by the stands we take. The kingdom of this world will not become the kingdom of Christ until Jesus returns and no amount of legislation can change people's hearts. But in human history, we can see that the more Christ's people have been concerned about His concerns and apply His commandments to public and private life, the more humane society becomes and the more human rights are enjoyed by all. Our goal isn't to transform society even though substantial improvements have been and can be made through Christian's involvement in the political process. But our real goal is to reveal who Jesus is before a watching culture so that people will believe in Him and receive forgiveness and eternal life.

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