

"Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus" claiming he was divine. On the back was the title "Pontifex Maximus," declaring that Caesar was the high priest of the Roman Empire.

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. - Genesis 1:27 NIV
29 But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. - Acts 5:29 NLT

Caesar had placed his image and claim to deity on the denarius, but God made mankind His image-bearers. Jesus' answer tells us that Caesar (government) has some authority but does not have all authority; there are some things that should be rendered to God alone. In what areas are you challenged to surrender yourself fully to God- your finances, relationships, time? When have you felt torn between being a citizen of this world and a citizen of the kingdom of God?

... And they were amazed at him. - Mark 12:17b NIV
2 And they began to accuse him, saying, "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king." - Luke 23:2 NIV

Although His enemies were amazed, they were unchanged and even twisted His words when they accused Him before Pilate. The kingdoms of this world are at odds with the Kingdom of God. As we live as citizens of both we will face tensions and traps just as Jesus did. But we are called to maintain our allegiance to God's authority in our lives when any other authority compels us to disobey God's commands.

WRAP-UP

This week's passage highlights the constant tension between living as citizens of God's Kingdom while navigating the political and social demands of the world. In Mark 12:13–17, the Pharisees and Herodians attempt to trap Jesus with a politically charged question about paying taxes to Caesar. Aware of their hypocrisy, Jesus responds with wisdom: "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." His answer reveals that while earthly authorities have limited power, ultimate allegiance belongs to God. The passage challenges believers to discern where their loyalty lies, to resist hypocrisy and manipulation, and to faithfully follow God's intent even when political, social, or personal tensions arise.

MEMORY 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. - Mark 12:17 NIV

Challenge –

Ask God to reveal His heart to you in the volatile issues in our world today.

Tensions and Traps Gospel of Mark Ch. 12 - Week 1

INTRODUCTION

It is nearly impossible to miss the fact that our world is full of tension. Perhaps less obvious are the traps that we must navigate in our lives. But in this week's passage we find Jesus as He expertly responds to a trap set by the Pharisees and Herodians about the tension created by paying taxes. In Jesus' day as in ours, God's people must find a way to live as members of the Kingdom of God in a political world.

Ice Breaker

Have you found a trap that is highly successful in trapping some kind of pest (gophers, mice, ants etc.)? If so, please share with your group.

Key Passages

13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. 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 imperial tax to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16 They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. 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. - Mark 12:13-17 NIV

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Tensions

All of us experience tension in our lives. Sometimes those tensions can be intense, and at other times they lie below the surface.

How would you rate the level of tension for you in the following areas on a scale of 0 – 5?

- Political
- Financial (retirement, job loss)
- Relational (divorce, family, friends)
- Personal (mental, disease, illness)

The Jews of Jesus time had a special tension to deal with; they celebrated the fact that God freed them from slavery, but they found themselves repeatedly captives and oppressed. At the time of Mark's Gospel, they were under the rule of Rome.

12 Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away. 13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. - Mark 12:12-13 NIV

4 Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. 5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. 6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. - Mark 3:4-6 NIV

Jesus' presence in Jerusalem was fraught with tension. His ministry had been a challenge to those in religious and political authority. In the verse preceding our key passage, the religious officials had been offended when Jesus used the parable of the tenants as a warning of judgment to those who appear to have the promise of fruit but are fruitless. Earlier in chapter 3 Jesus contrasted the religious laws with God's heart and His intent, resulting in an alliance between Pharisees and Herodians in a plot to kill him.

How would you describe the attitude of the religious authorities in Mark 12:12? What was their solution to the tension Jesus created for them?

In verse 13 we find two diverse groups represented, Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees were "pro-Israel". They opposed the occupation of Rome and all that it stood for. They had the outward appearance of piety but were hypocritical, prideful and seeking their own gain through power and position in the church. The Herodians were "pro-Herod/political powers". But both saw Jesus as a threat and so they conspired to eliminate Him.

How have you seen examples of leaders seeking power through misuse of religious or political authority in our time? How has that created tension for a Christ-follower navigating the demands of this world?

2. Traps

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 imperial tax to Caesar or not? . - Mark 12:14 NIV 18 But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? - Matthew 22:18 NIV

The Pharisees and Herodians were setting a trap. And part of their plan included approaching Jesus with flattery. They praised His honesty, impartiality and truthful teaching of God's ways. Although this was all true, Jesus recognized their "evil intent". (Matt 22:18)

What is the motivation behind most flattery? If you were observing this exchange and you heard the leaders praising Jesus, how would that affect your view of them?

15 Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." - Mark 12:15 NIV

Flattery is most effective when it puts the recipient at ease and makes them willing to listen and agree with the flatterer. But Jesus was alert to their intent and was not caught off guard when they asked his opinion on a volatile issue- taxes! The Pharisee represented one side of the argument and the Herodian the other. By asking if it was "lawful" to pay tax to Caesar they were pitting religious law against political law.

If He said, "YES, it is lawful to pay Caesar" then He would be agreeing with the government and alienate those who despised paying taxes to Rome, as it was a bitter reminder that they were not truly free.

If He said, "NO, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar" then He was siding with the nationalists and zealots who were waiting for an opportunity for insurrection and an immediate confrontation with Rome.

Have you faced any issues that seem to pit following God's law against following governmental laws? How did you navigate the challenge?

The Jewish leaders had imposed hundreds of their own interpretations of the law on the people. In doing so they tended to lose the intent of God's laws while pursuing an outward appearance of piety (straining at a gnat while swallowing a camel). Even Jesus broke the religious laws to follow God's intent (touching the unclean to heal them, "harvesting" grain for His disciples to eat on the Sabbath). We need Godly discernment to know if the laws we are following are indeed aligned with God's heart or insincere false piety.

3. Jesus' Response

16 They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. 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. - Mark 12:16-17 NIV

Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus' image was on the Roman denarius commonly thought to be the coin they brought to Jesus. The inscription reads -