

Introduction

1. Tax season is upon us!
 - a. Last weekend I gathered my documents and spent several hours on Saturday drafting my tax returns.
 - b. I still have a few questions to clear up before I am ready to file them.
 - c. I am always glad to see tax season behind me, especially if I don't have to pay too much more.
2. Jewish leaders asked Jesus a tricky tax question in hopes that He would answer poorly and give them an opportunity to accuse Him of sedition against Rome or to incite the anger of the people against Him.
3. **Read Mk 12:13-17.**

A. Another Tricky Question (13-15a)

1. In the context of Mark's narrative, remember that Jesus had already been asked by the Jewish leaders in the temple about His authority for clearing the money-changers and merchants from the temple and for His teaching there.
 - a. "By what authority are you doing these things? . . . And who gave you authority to do this?" (Mk 11:28)
 - b. Remember that Jesus said He would answer their question if they answered His question of them about the source of John the Baptist's authority. They refused to answer and so did Jesus (cf., Mk 11:33)
 - c. Jesus then told them the Parable of the Tenants to reinforce the fact that these Jewish leaders had rejected not only His authority but also the authority of the prophets before Him. This was ultimately a rejection of God's authority!
 - d. In this passage, the Jewish leaders asked a series of four more tricky questions (cf., Mk 12:13-37) in an attempt to trap Jesus in His words. We will examine each of these four questions starting with the first question in this study and the three others in the next three lessons.
2. William Lane notes an important connection between these four questions when he writes, "The sequence of questions proposed corresponds to four types of questions recognized by the rabbis: questions of wisdom, which concern a point of law (cf. Ch 12:13-17); of mockery, which frequently bear on the resurrection (cf. Ch. 12:18-27); of conduct, which center in relationship to God and men (cf. Ch. 12:28-34); and of biblical exegesis, which often concern the resolving of an apparent contradiction between two passages of Scripture (cf. Ch. 12:35-37). It is only in the Passover eve liturgy that the four types of questions appear in this particular order, and there the first three questions are posed by a wise son, a wicked son and a son of simple piety. The fourth is posed by the head of the family himself. This arrangement shed light on the sequence of questions in Ch. 12:13-37)" (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 421).
 - a. Notice that these questions are all posed during Passover week in Mark's narrative.
 - b. So, the questions are pertinent to and reflective of the overarching context of the story—Passover.
3. The Pharisees and Herodians asked the first of the four questions.
 - a. They represented the "wise son" asking a question of wisdom related to the law.
 - 1) The Pharisees were considered by their fellow Jews to be the most righteous and pious men who were experts in the law.
 - 2) The Herodians were leaders who aligned themselves with the Romans and their puppet King Herod in order to secure political power. They were the intellectual elite.
 - 3) These two groups were political enemies, but they conspired together against Jesus early on (cf., Mk 3:6) and again here.
 - b. Warren Wiersbe writes, "A common threat forced two enemies to unite, the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Herodians supported the family of Herod as well as the Romans who gave them the authority to rule. The Pharisees, however, considered the Herod clan to be the evil usurpers of the throne of David, for, after all, Herod was an Edomite and not a Jew. The Pharisees also opposed the poll tax that the Romans had inflicted on Judea, and they resented the very presence of Rome in their land" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 139-40).

- c. Daniel Akin adds, “The Pharisees were the conservatives, the right-wingers of that day. The Herodians were the liberals, the left-wingers, advocates of big government. The Pharisees hated Jesus because He was messing with their religious agenda. The Herodians opposed Him because He was threatening their political advantage” (Daniel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 274).
- d. An old saying says, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In this case these groups were “friends.”
- e. Together, they used their collective wisdom not to learn the truth from God’s son but “to catch him in his words” (v. 13).
- f. Akin notes, “The word ‘trap’ means to capture by hunting or fishing. The idea is violent pursuit of prey” (Akin, 274). James Brooks adds that the word trap or catch “. . . often was used to refer to catching an animal in a snare or hooking a fish. The use of the word implies deceit and treachery” (James Brooks, *Mark*, 192).
- g. They used their wisdom to craft flattering words before asking their tricky question. (v. 14a)
 - 1) “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” (v. 14).
 - 2) “teacher” (Gk., *didaskale*) – a title of respect
 - 3) “integrity” (Gk., *aletheia* – lit. “truth”) – Their spoken words were wise but their hearts were foolish and false.
 - 4) Akin says, “They call Him ‘teacher,’ a title of respect, even though they had no respect for Him. They tell Him they know He is ‘truthful,’ even though they will crucify Him as a blasphemer. . . . Even though their flattery is insincere, what they say is actually true! . . . the ‘wisdom of God’ (1 Cor. 1:30), will not be tripped up by the foolishness of men” (Akin, 275).
- h. Then they used their wisdom to ask a question meant to trap Jesus. (vv. 14v-15a)
 - 1) “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” (vv. 14b-15a)
 - 2) Akin notes, “The Greek word for taxes is *kenson*, a transliteration of the Latin word *census*. It refers to an imperial Roman tax. The Jews despised it because it was a constant reminder of their subjection to pagan Rome” (Akin, 275).
 - 3) If Jesus answered no, then they could charge Him with sedition against the Romans—a death sentence.
 - 4) If he answered yes, then some of the people (e.g., Zealots, merchants) would likely turn against Him.
 - 4) It was a question wisely crafted to have a bad outcome for Jesus with either answer.
 - 5) Akin says this question is designed to back Jesus into a corner. Like the old question, “‘Have you stopped beating your wife?’ That is a lose-lose predicament, the classic unfair question” (Akin, 275).

B. Jesus Asks His Own Question (15b-16)

1. Jesus’ wisdom was greater than their human wisdom.
 - a. Jesus knew that these so-called wise leaders were asking with false motives.
 - b. “But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. ‘Why are you trying to trap me?’ he asked. ‘Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.’” (15b)
 - 1) “hypocrisy” (Gk. *hupokritos*) – “two faced; acting with hidden motives contrary to those expressed outwardly.
 - 2) “trap” (Gk. *peripazete*) – The word that Jesus uses here is different than the one use in v. 13 (“catch” – *agreuo*). It means “testing.” Akin observes, Jesus “. . . begins by exposing their hypocrisy, something He was well aware of (11:15), with a question: Why are you testing Me? This is the same word Mark used in 1:13 when Satan ‘tempted’ our Lord in the wilderness” (Akin, 276).
 - 3) “denarius” – The standard coin of the realm; the basic unit of Roman money. Akin notes, “. . . a denarius [was] the required tax and a day’s wage for a typical laborer in Israel. . . . On one side of the coin was a bust of Tiberius Caesar with the inscription, ‘Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.’ The other side had an image of Tiberius’s mother Livia with the words, ‘*Pointifex Maximus*,’ meaning ‘High Priest.’ The Jews found this to be idolatrous: a man claiming to be a god and a woman a priest—blasphemy!” (Akin, 276).

2. They were willing to go along with Jesus, to give Him more rope to hang Himself. So they brought Him a Roman coin, a denarius.

Brooks observes, “It may be significant that Jesus did not possess the coin but that his inquisitors did. The fact that they did showed they implicitly recognized the authority of the emperor and therefore were hypocrites in asking the question.”

3. Jesus asked His central question of them: “‘Whose image is this? And whose inscription?’” (v. 16a)
 - a. Once again, Jesus turned their question into a question back to them.
 - b. This was a common rabbinic technique when debating.
 - c. It was the way the wise spoke to the wise in a back and forth dialogue.
4. Just as the answer had been obvious to the last question Jesus asked about what should be done with the wicked tenants at the end of His parable (cf., Mk 12:9), so the answer to this question was obvious to all.
5. The image on the coin was that of Caesar, the Roman emperor.

C. The End of Round One (17)

1. Jesus answered their question with a clear, direct statement, but not a yes or a no. It is a wise answer.
 - a. “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’” (v. 17a)
 - b. “give back” (Gk., *apodote*) – Wiersbe says, This word “. . . means ‘to pay a debt, to pay back.’ Jesus looked on taxes as the citizen’s debt to the government in return for the services performed. . . . The individual Christian citizen might not agree with the way all of his tax money is used, and he can express himself with his voice and his vote, but he must accept the fact that God has established human government for our good (Rom. 13; 1 Tim. 2:1-6; 1 Peter 2:13-170). Even if we cannot respect the people in office, we must respect the office” (Wiersbe, 140).
 - c. Akin adds, “By His reply Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of *human* government. He is no anarchist. God has ordained the *family*, the *church*, and *human government*. . . . Christians have legitimate responsibilities to the government, and as long as those obligations do not interfere with our ability to honor and worship God, we are to fulfill them. It is our Christian duty” (Akin, 276-7).
 - d. Brooks observes, “The coin that was minted by the emperor and had his image stamped on it was considered to be his personal property even while it was in circulation. Therefore it was proper for Jews and (later) Christians to return it to him. . . . Human beings are made in the image of God; they and all they have belong to him” (Brooks, 193).
 - e. The first implication is that they should pay their taxes to Caesar, but there is more to this answer.
2. Wiersbe observes, “We might state our Lord’s reply something like this: ‘Caesar’s image is on his coins, so they must be minted by his authority. The fact that you possess these coins and use them indicates that you think they are worth something. Therefore, you are already accepting Caesar’s authority, or you would not use his money! But don’t forget that you were created in the image of God and therefore must live under God’s authority as well’” (Wiersbe, 140).
 - a. Jesus also pointed them to fulfill their duty to God.
 - b. Here, Jesus cut to the heart of the deceptive wisdom of the Pharisees and Herodians. They were not doing their duty to God by giving Him His due.
 - 1) Jesus was talking about more than money here.
 - 2) He addressed the Jewish leaders’ failure to give God their loyalty, obedience, love—their hearts.
 - 3) He again confronted their failure to receive Him as Messiah, sent with authority from God.
 - c. If they would truly give God His due, they would drop their hypocritical masks of false pretense, stop asking tricky questions, and fall at Jesus’ feet to worship in spirit and truth.
3. The response of the Pharisees and Herodians, as well as the others who heard Jesus’ answer was that “. . . they were amazed at him” (17b)
 - a. “amazed” (Gk., *eksethamazon*) – Akin concludes, that Jesus “. . . refused to be trapped by an either/or proposition. Once more He amazed them with His teachings” (Akin, 277).
 - b. To amaze these wise men took some doing, but Jesus did it.
 - 1) They had been “amazed” (Gk., *eksistanto*) when He taught in the temple as a boy (cf. Lk 2:47)
 - 2) The people had been “amazed” (Gk., *ethambethesan*) at His teaching from the beginning (cf. Mk 1:27).
 - 3) Now, these deceitful leaders were “amazed” at His wisdom in not only deflecting their tricky, dangerous question but also turning it back on them.

4. For now, the Pharisees and Herodians step aside.
 - 1) Next up would be the Sadducees, who represent the wicked sons of mockery and will ask the second tricky question related to the resurrection.
 - 2) We will examine their question in the next lesson in Mk 12: 18-27.

D. Questions/Thoughts for Reflection

1. Have you submitted to God's authority in your life or are you playing games like the Jewish leaders to keep control of it for yourself?
2. What do we owe our government? What do we owe God?
 - a. Which debt is greater?
 - b. What should be our response to each debt?
3. Can we ever repay the debt that we owe God?
 - a. Should we try to repay Him?
 - b. What does God really want back from us?