

**Transferring Ownership**  
Mark 12:13-17  
Rev. Brian Bill  
September 30-October 1, 2017

Many years ago, when Ronald Reagan was President, a little boy wanted \$50 very badly and prayed for a whole week. When nothing happened he decided to write God a letter. When the Post Office received the letter addressed to God they forwarded it to the White House. President Reagan was both impressed and amused, so he instructed his aide to send the boy \$5, thinking that would be a lot to him. The boy was thrilled with five bucks and so he sat down and wrote a thank you note: *“Dear God, thank you very much for sending the money. However I noticed for some reason you sent it through Washington and as usual, they kept most of it.”*

Today we’re going to address one of the most-well known questions of Jesus, one in which He tells us what we owe God and what we owe the government. It’s the last week of Jesus’ life and He has just finished telling a powerful parable with an explosive application to the religious leaders. As Jesus focused on God’s goodness, His grace and His glory, He let the leaders know that judgment was coming.

As you can imagine these guys didn’t appreciate being called out by Christ. Look at Mark 12:12: ***“And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.”*** Because they couldn’t arrest Him, they regrouped and came up with another plan according to Mark 12:13: ***“And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.”*** They were no doubt selected for their shrewdness. The word ***“trap”*** means to ensnare and was used of catching a bird or a wild beast with a net. Instead of a frontal attack they resort to a stealthy ambush. In a parallel account, Matthew 22:15 mentions that they ***“plotted how to entangle him in his words.”***

I heard that the Merriam-Webster Dictionary released more than 250 new words and redefinitions last week. One word they redefined was *“troll.”* Originally used as a noun to describe a character in Scandinavian folklore, it’s now a verb that means, *“to antagonize others online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content.”* If the Pharisees and

Herodians had Facebook or Twitter, they would be trolling Jesus for sure. But since they didn't, they're seeking to trap him face-to-face with his own words.

With that as background let's read our passage in Mark 12:13-17: ***“And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, ‘Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?’ But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, ‘Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.’ And they brought one. And he said to them, ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said to him, ‘Caesar’s.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they marveled at him.”***

Luke 20:21 refers to this select group of Pharisees and Herodians as ***“spies.”*** The Pharisees and the Herodians represented the opposite ends of the political spectrum. Just as our country is filled with polarizing vitriol between political parties, competing news channels, and now professional sports, the political climate at that time was also a powder keg.

Let's see if I can explain this by separating the congregation right down the middle. Those of you on my right are the Herodians. Say it with me: ***“We are...Herodians!”*** Those of you on my left are the Pharisees. Say it with me: ***“We are...Pharisees!”*** Now let's say it all together. Remember that you don't like each other so go ahead and glare at those across the aisle (looks like some of you already were).

This chart helps explain the differences between these two groups.

<b><u>Herodians</u></b>	<b><u>Pharisees</u></b>
Secular	Spiritual
Government	God
Pro-Herod	Anti-Herod
Pro-tax	Anti-tax
Hated Jesus	Hated Jesus

While they had opposite agendas and political platforms, the bottom line is that the Herodians feared that Jesus would undermine the rule of Herod and the Pharisees

worried that He would upstage their religion. The Pharisees are ready to accuse Him of heresy and the Herodians can't wait to charge him with treason.

But now, these two disparate groups come together to take out a common enemy. They're living out the ancient saying: *"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."* We see that even today when people who despise each other's beliefs will come together to defy Jesus Christ.

I'm reminded of Psalm 2:2: ***"The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed."*** They begin by using flattery, a psychological trick, to soften up the Savior. They're living out Psalm 140:5: ***"The arrogant have hidden a trap for me."***

These spies use the respectful title ***"teacher"*** and affirm His integrity: ***"We know that you are true."*** In addition, they recognize that He doesn't consult polls before stating His positions (that's refreshing!): ***"You do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances."*** Everything they said about Jesus was true but they didn't believe any of it. They identify Him as one who ***"truly teaches the way of God."*** They knew He taught the way of God but they *wouldn't submit to the will of God*. We see that in our culture as well. People can say kind things about Christ but end up not submitting to the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

Thinking they have Jesus right where they want Him, these political power players craft a question they believe will put Him in a quandary at the end of verse 14. Actually, its two questions: ***"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"*** This was *the* question of the day and they wanted Jesus to answer it so they could attack Him and say, *"Gotcha!"* The question is designed to solicit a yes or a no answer.

The topic of taxes is always volatile – tax reform is in the national headlines...again. A week ago when we were in Chicago I bought a couple of books and realized that I was charged a tax of 7 cents just for putting the two books in a cheap plastic bag! We think taxes are high here but are you aware that there are over 30 separate taxes in Chicago?

The Israelites during the time of Jesus did not have exorbitant taxes but they resisted them because taxes were a reminder that they were under the control of Rome.

- **Income Tax** – 1%
- **Ground Tax** – 10% of grain, 20% of oil and wine
- **Business Tax** – When goods were transported to different cities, a tax was collected. This was the job that Matthew had before he left everything to follow Christ (Matthew 9:9)
- **Poll Tax** – 1 day’s wage (denarius). Note: This is the same tax levied by Caesar Augustus when calling for a census that in God’s providence brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. The taking of a census infuriated the Jews because it reminded them that they were under the dominion of Rome. They particularly hated this tax because it was a kind of loyalty litmus test.

It’s difficult to pay taxes when you disagree with how they’re used. I confess that I was deeply disappointed that Illinois Governor Rauner broke a promise and signed HB40 into law on Thursday which expands taxpayer-subsidized abortions for women covered by Medicaid and state employee insurance. I contacted the governor’s office earlier in the week and urged him to veto this. Illinois Right to Life estimates this decision will lead to 12,000 additional abortions each year. It’s extremely troubling to me that my taxes will be used to pay for abortions.

Warren Wiersbe summarizes what’s going on: *“If Jesus opposed the tax, He would be in trouble with Rome. If He approved the tax, He would be in trouble with the Jews.”* Depending on how He answered, either the Herodians would have Him arrested or the Pharisees would finally have the evidence they needed. Which would it be? Would He be an enemy of God or of the government?

A bit of historical background is helpful. When Judea became a Roman province in A.D. 6, a census was taken so the Romans could enforce a head tax. A Jewish nationalist named Judas (not the Judas you’re thinking of) led a revolt against this tax because he didn’t want this tax revenue used to pay for the army that oppressed them. We learn about this uprising and how it was crushed in Acts 5:37: ***“After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.”*** They’re hoping Jesus will take the bait in their trap by siding with what Judas did.

Instead of going to one side or the other, to the right or the left, Jesus goes *up* by raising everything to a higher plane.

These enemies start out flattering Jesus and then He flattens them. Jesus sees right through the phoniness of the Pharisees and the hatred of the Herodians. I imagine them high-fiving each other and strutting around. But it didn't last long. Look at verse 15: ***“But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, ‘Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.’”*** In Luke 20:23, it says that Jesus knew their ***“craftiness”*** and Matthew 22:18 describes how Jesus knew their ***“wickedness.”*** As spies they were sly, shrewd and slick. These mask-wearers and flatterers were not really interested in what they should do; they just wanted Jesus to incriminate Himself.

Before they can say anything, Jesus asks for the coin used for paying this tax. I picture them searching the pockets in their robes, much like we do when we go to Aldi and need a cart! It's interesting that Jesus does not have one of these coins on Him. The Pharisees were probably excited to give Him one because they thought He would side with them and thus alienate the Herodians.

By asking for a coin he throws them off guard. As they dig through their pockets to come up with one I'm sure they're wondering about his intentions.

Could I ask you take out a coin from your pocket or purse right now? Don't worry – we've already taken the offering! If you have some extra change and the person next to you didn't bring any, could you share a coin with him or her? Acts 4:32 says that the early church shared everything in common so we might as well practice this. Could someone toss me a quarter?

Jesus holds up the denarius that was used to pay the poll tax. It was minted in Rome and was made out of silver. Coins were used to spread propaganda and to remind people they were subjects of Rome. Jesus shows the “head side” and everyone sees the head of the emperor and this inscription: *“Tiberius Caesar: August Son of the Divine Augustus.”* On the “tails side” a female figure is seated on a throne, wearing a crown, with these words: *“High Priest.”* The coin was, in effect, a portable idol promoting pagan ideology.

Incidentally, a denarius was worth a day's wages for a soldier. To put it into our context, using the average amount of money a soldier makes in a day, this could be anywhere from \$75 to \$150. No wonder they didn't want to pay this tax!

I can think of a few reasons Jesus asked for a coin:

- It shows us that He was poor because He carried no money.
- He wanted everyone to see that the leaders had a coin with an idol on it and it didn't seem to bother them.
- This teaching method got them personally involved as they watched him touch and look at the coin.
- Jesus is now moving the discussion from public politics to personal principle.

With everyone looking at Christ and the coin, we hear Jesus ask: ***“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”*** The answer is obvious so they respond quickly, but then they realize the implications of what they've said. And Jesus has them right where He wants them.

I picture Jesus flipping the coin back to whoever let Him borrow it. Psalm 9:16 says: ***“The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.”*** The tables have turned because they now need to answer Christ's question at the end of verse 16: ***“They said to him, ‘Caesar’s.’”***

I love how Jesus drives his point home in verse 17: ***“Jesus said to them ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s...’”*** To ***“render”*** literally means to ***“give back what is his; to deliver or return; to pay back in full.”*** The coin belongs to Caesar, so give it back to him. The very grammar Jesus uses is possessive: ***“whose likeness and inscription is this?”*** Their taxes were not optional; instead they were an obligation. Caesar is due the denarius because he owns the denarius.

Let's linger a bit here and walk through what the Bible says about our responsibilities to the government and then our responsibilities to God.

### **Our Responsibilities to the Government**

I see at least four obligations we have to the government. These first three come from Pastor Kenneth Trent.

**1. Obey.** Romans 13:1-2: ***“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”***

**2. Pay.** Romans 13:6-7: ***“For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”*** We pay our taxes to the authorities because that is our obligation, even if we don’t like it. We can express ourselves with our voice and our vote but ultimately we must pay our taxes because God set up government. This reminds me of the person who realized he didn’t pay enough tax and so he sent an anonymous letter to the IRS: *“My conscience is bothering me. Enclosed you will find \$175 which I owe in taxes. If my conscience continues to bother me, I’ll send you the rest.”*

**3. Pray.** 1 Timothy 2:1-2: ***“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”***

**4. Stay.** Titus 3:1-2: ***“Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.”*** Let the government see us doing good things and make sure we are not giving Christ a bad name through what we say or do. Let’s live in peace and be considerate of other citizens. As Americans we have the right and the privilege to be involved because we live in a democracy. Don’t pull out but stay involved. Vote your values and live on mission where God has put you.

### **Our Responsibilities to God**

Jesus could have stopped with the first part of His answer and silenced both sides, but he wasn’t finished. Our responsibilities to the government and to God are not meant to be at odds, though we know from Acts 5:29 that when they are, we must do as Peter and the apostles did: ***“We must obey God rather than men.”***

We have responsibilities as citizens of earth *and* responsibilities as citizens of heaven. It’s not either/or but both/and. We actually have both on our currency – on the “heads” of the quarter it says, *“In God we trust”* and on the other side, it reads, *“e pluribus Unum,”* which means, *“out of many, one.”*

I find 1 Peter 2:17 to be extremely helpful in this regard: ***“Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”***

- **Honor everyone.** There are so many issues that divide us right now as a country. Do you know it's possible to honor even when we disagree? Here's a news flash - this includes what we post on social media. To "**honor**" someone is to fix a high value by esteeming or prizing them. In the Old Testament it literally means a "*heavy weight.*" To honor is to treat with distinction; to dishonor is to treat someone like dirt.
- **Love the brotherhood.** We have an even higher obligation to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. This word for love is *agapao*, which means we don't love only if we feel like it but as an act of obedience. The word "**brotherhood**" means those born from the same womb. That means we're to love brothers and sisters in Christ who vote differently than we do, who like a different style of music than we do, have a different color of skin than we do, live on the other side of the river from us, are from a different generation than we are, or root for a different team than we do.

Can we commit to not allow our political views to fracture our fellowship? Remember that among the twelve disciples were two guys who, apart from Christ, no doubt hated each other. Simon the Zealot was all about overthrowing Rome while Matthew collected taxes for Rome! They came from opposite sides of the aisle but were on the same team, focused more on the kingdom of God than the kingdom of man.

- **Fear God.** You can sense the increasing intensity as we move from honoring all people to loving fellow family members to fearing God. To fear is to revere. Psalm 128:1 says, "***Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways.***" Some of us have become so familiar with God that we no longer have a healthy fear of Him.
- **Honor the emperor.** This is incredible when you think about the kind of man the emperor was. In a similar way, we are called to esteem the office of the president, even if we don't like the particular person in the office. *Good Christians are good citizens.*

Let's go back to Mark 12:17 and notice the little word *and*: "***...and to God the things that are God's.***" We have a two-fold debt made up of horizontal and vertical obligations.

Two words come to mind as it relates to our responsibilities to God.

**1. Live.** How do we know what belongs to God? What bears His image? I'm going to walk around the room and see if I can find something...or someone bearing His inscription. Wait a minute. Every one of you bears His mark. Since Genesis 1:26 says that we are made in His image and created by Him for His purposes, we must therefore live full-throttle for Him. Government takes a percentage for taxes but God rightfully deserves 100%. God has a claim on His creation because the Almighty owns us. We could say it like this: *We owe the one who owns us.* 2 Timothy 2:19: ***“But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his.’”***

R.C. Sproul writes: *“Every one of us has been stamped with an image by the supreme authority in heaven and earth. God Himself has placed His image on us. Caesar owned that denarius, but he did not own the people of his time. Likewise, the state does not own us. God owns us; He has the supreme right to claim our lives as His own. So, then, we are to render to God the things that are God’s, including our lives, our liberty, our possessions, and our affections.”*

**2. Give.** I belong to Him and everything I own is His as well. Or to say it another way, my person and my possessions are stamped with His ownership. Jesus tells us to give to ***“God the things that are God’s,”*** or literally, *“the things belonging to God.”* Psalms 24:1: ***“The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.”*** Just as the government is owed our taxes, we owe God because He owns everything. It's not really optional; because He owns us, we owe Him. *We owe the one who owns us.*

We are God's coinage, because His image is stamped on our lives! Are you aware the Bible includes about 500 verses on prayer and faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money? That means how we manage our resources is critical to our relationship with God.

Some of us *overspend* because we feel like we always need more. This can cause major stress in our relationships and this spirit of dissatisfaction and discontent can derail our spiritual lives. The key is to *live* for God so that we can *give* to God.

This is not really a sermon on giving so let me just briefly say that a tithe (10%) is a good place to *start*. This guideline will help you move toward grace-giving as

taught in the New Testament. Here's a good question to ponder: *Does my giving reflect the grace of God in my life as I offer to Him what belongs to Him anyway?*

I'll never forget when Samantha Castillo got saved after a sermon on tithing! As she listened to the sermon she started calculating what 10% looked like and then she realized that she hadn't surrendered to the Savior. Listen to her words: *"I was stressing about the fact that I was not 'paying God back' for all He had done for me when really I hadn't given my life to Him...I knew in my heart...that Jesus had already paid the price for my sins and that faith in Him was the only way to salvation."*

You guys have been so generous today. Someone gave me a quarter and now I'm wondering if someone could give me \$50 for dinner [lunch]? *Anyone?*

Thank you for your generosity and your willingness to give so quickly! Let me give you some backstory. The reason he/she gave me 50 bucks so eagerly is that I had given the money to him/her before the service. In other words, it wasn't his/her money in the first place...it was my money. In a similar way, when we *live* and when we *give*, we realize that our person and our possessions don't belong to us – everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. It makes sense then that we give to Him what is His in the first place.

Check out the last phrase of verse 17: ***"And they marveled at him."*** This is a very strong compound word that means, *"struck with astonishment and admiration"* or more literally, *"out of measure."*

We've seen in our study of Mark's Gospel that people had strong reactions to Jesus. Listeners were never passive about Jesus or bored with Him. There's no way to just ignore Him. He either made people angry or astonished or amazed or in awe. People fought against Him or they put their faith in Him. The same is true today. You will reject Him or you will receive Him. There's no middle ground.

In Luke 20:26, we read that they were ***"not able to catch Him, but marveling at His answer, they became silent."*** Matthew adds: ***"And they left him and went away."*** They were amazed and yet they went away. They could find no blame so they just left in shame. Do you know people still do that today? Don't just listen and then leave. If you're amazed, then accept what He's done for you; believe and then receive Him as your Lord and Savior.

Earlier I divided us into Herodians and Pharisees, but actually the whole world is divided into only two categories: The lost and the found; those on their way to Hell and those on the road to Heaven.

Rendering to God what belongs to God means that I am so amazed by Him that I surrender all that I am and all that I have. It's time to give ourselves back to Him...because *we owe the one who owns us.*

Closing Song: **“Amazed”**

### **New Members**

Gloria Keesler (5:00 p.m.)

Bryce and Nealie Hill (10:45 a.m.)