



“And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, And they marvelled at him” (Mark 12:17).

The Sacred and the Secular

Central Truth: God governs every area of the believer's life.

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Topic: Authority: Of Government; Government; Submission: To Authority.

A certain pastor took a stand on a moral issue facing his community and publicly called for a scriptural response by his congregation. One man, whose moral principles were less than ideal, was heard to remark, “Things have come to a pretty bad place when religion is allowed to interfere with the way a man lives!” But that is just the case: religion which does not “interfere with the way a man lives” is not biblical religion at all.

Men have divided life into compartments. Some things are considered “sacred” while other things are considered “secular.” That is a tragic mistake. God is involved in all of life. Everything has an element of the “sacred” about it when the Christian remembers God's personal presence in his life. Blessed is the people whose sense of the preference of God is so real that from the bells of the horses to the pots in the kitchen shall be written *“HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD”* (Zechariah 14:20, 21).

This week's study takes three separate events in the life of Jesus and shows His teaching on them. They deal with a civic issue of taxation, a religious issue of commandments, and a stewardship issue of giving. Each one is related to the Lord God. Hence, even those things commonly thought of as secular are seen to be sacred and holy before the Lord.

I. A LESSON ON CITIZENSHIP (Mark 12:13-17)

Is it right for the people of God to pay taxes to a government which will

use the money to support projects contrary to the will of God?

That is exactly the question faced by devout Jews living in Palestine during the ministry of Jesus. Their land was a part of the great Roman Empire, governed by the Caesars. The emperor considered himself to be a “god” and required that divine honors be accorded to him. The Jews knew no man could be a god, for there is but one God. Yet, they were required to pay tribute to the “little god” who ruled them from Rome. That question formented much discussion and dissension.

The Romans imposed three taxes on the Jews. (1) There was a “ground tax” consisting of one-tenth of all grain and one-fifth of the wine and fruit produced. (2) There was an “income tax” which was one percent of a person's income with no deductions permitted. (3) There was a “poll tax” levied on all men from ages 14 to 65 and all women 12 to 65 amounting to the equivalent of one day's wage. (It was for the purpose of such taxation that Governor Cyrenius required the census which sent Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem about the time of the birth of Jesus, according to Luke 2:1-20.) Many Jews opposed the tax as little better than slavery.

Taxation seemed the very issue on which the enemies of Jesus could trap Him. Pharisees and other patriotic Jews did not want the taxation; Herodians and liberal Jews approved it. Representatives of the two parties came to Jesus with the question, “Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” Jesus was trapped, so it seemed. If He said, “Yes, pay the taxes,” He would lose favor with the patriotic Jews who opposed it. If He said, “No, do not pay the taxes,” He would be accused of treason and arrested. Taxation was the trap which they thought He could not escape.

The Lord's opponents began with flattery before they sprung their trick question. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that You are truthful and court no one's favor, for You are not partial to anyone but truthfully teach God's way. No matter to whom You speak, You say the same thing. You are not swayed by people or circumstances under which You speak.” Thinking, perhaps, that such kind words would disarm Jesus, they sprung the question, “Shall we pay or not pay the tax that Caesar demands of us?”

Jesus was aware of their hypocrisy. He knew they were ready to do anything, no matter how wicked, to attain their ends against Him. He called them “hypocrites” or play-actors (Matthew 22:18) and asked, “Why do you put Me to the test?”

Jesus used their own testimony to answer their question. “Bring Me a denarius,” He replied. (The “penny” of the King James Version refers to the old English penny and not to the one-cent piece in American money. The denarius was the equivalent to one day's pay in ancient Palestine.) One of the

questioners provided the coin. While the man held it in his own hand, Jesus asked, “Whose likeness and inscription is on it?” They replied, “Caesar’s.” So it was. (One side of the coin had the head of the ruler with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus,” while the other side read, “Highest Priest.”) From the coin they held, Jesus answered their question: “What is due to Caesar render to Caesar, and what is due to God render to God.”

Jesus' answer did not evade the issue. He said, “Pay the tax.” The person who lives under the ordered society of a government must share in the obligations of support imposed by that government. It is no more than right that a citizen pay for police protection, laws which control wrongdoers, schools, protection from other aggressive nations, etc. The payment is made by paying taxes. Taxes are but “payment for services rendered.” The Christian is obligated under God to pay faithfully all duly imposed taxes (Romans 13:1-8).

Taxation is not the end of religious responsibility. “What is due to God render to God,” Jesus continued. Civic obligation and religious obedience go hand in hand. The best Christian will be the best citizen.

II. A LESSON ON LOVE (Mark 12:28-31)

One of the experts of the law (called “scribes”) came to Jesus with the question, “*Which is the first commandment of all?*”

The greatest commandment was often the subject of debate in rabbinic schools. One group tended to expand the law into thousands of detailed regulations; another tended to summarize the law in a single statement. The debate raged back and forth.

The Jews commonly believed Moses received 613 precepts on Mount Sinai, 365 “thou shalt not” according to the days of the sun year and 248 “thou shalt” according to the generations of men! David reduced the 613 to 11 in Psalm 15. Isaiah reduced them to 6 in Isaiah 33:15. Micah reduced them to 3 in Micah 6:8. Isaiah reduced them to 2 in Isaiah 56:1, and Habakkuk reduced them all to 1 in Habakkuk 2:4.

If there was one law more important than all other laws, which one would it be? Some rabbis thought it was the law of the Sabbath, that God had even created man so He would have someone to keep the Sabbath. That was the kind of question a scribe, who was a specialist in interpreting the law, would ask a respected teacher.

Jesus answered the question by quoting two passages of Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 and Leviticus 19:18. The first was a requirement to love

God with the totality of one's being. The second was the requirement to love one's neighbor as one would love himself. By quoting two simple verses of Scripture, Jesus ended years of debate!

The whole duty of man, the whole moral-spiritual law, is summarized in one word: "love." Such love is not a weak sentimentality. It is to go out from the "heart" — the center of personality and origin of thoughts, words, and deeds, from the "soul" — the seat of one's emotional activity, from the "mind" — the center of the intellect and the source of plans, attitudes, and actions. That the love required is no weak sentiment is indicated by the requirement that it involves all the "strength." What God commands is that the full strength of the physical body must be involved in obedience to the inner motives of the human spirit expressing love to God and to man.

What a glorious insight! It is as Augustine said, "Love God; then do as you like!" That principle is not as dangerous as it might sound when the whole of the being is committed in love to God and man. There is no commandment greater than the commandment to love God and man. Blessed is the Christian who fully obeys it.

III. A LESSON ON STEWARDSHIP (Mark 12:38-44)

God is concerned about your money. He is concerned about how you get it, how much you give of it, how much you save of it, and what you do with the rest of it. Money is "coined personality." The man who works for \$10.00 an hour is trading one hour of his life for each \$10.00 wages he receives. What a man does with his money is what he does with his life.

Jesus gave His estimation of two contrasting attitudes toward wealth. He condemned those who gain their wealth by improper methods and who use it for selfish satisfactions. He approved those who, even though limited in wealth, honor God in the use of what they have.

A. Jesus condemned those who use wealth for self (verses 38-40). There are three great problems which beset those who would be rich. (1) There is the temptation to display one's position and desire for flattery, the sin of pride. (2) There is the temptation to resort to crooked business practices, the sin of covetousness and avarice. (3) There is the temptation to pretend that one is more than he really is, the sin of hypocrisy. Jesus condemned the Pharisees, the most religious people of the day, because they were guilty of all three sins.

Be on your guard against the person whose dress is designed to show off his wealth by vain display. Watch against the person who insists that he be called by titles of high honor (Mister Chairman, Doctor, President, etc.).

Be aware of the person who insists on sitting at the place of highest honor in church or at social functions. Do not fall prey to the person who makes profit from other people's misfortunes. And be particularly on guard against the person who, having done some or all of the above, offers long prayers in church to show how religious he is. Such a person is called a "hypocrite" by Jesus.

B. Jesus approved those who trust God rather than their wealth for a livelihood (verses 41-44). Jesus saw a poor widow give an offering of "two mites." He called special attention to it as proof of loving trust in God. The "mite" which the widow gave was about one-eighth of one cent in American money. It was so small as to be almost worthless in its purchasing power. Yet, Jesus called attention to it. Small as it was in the estimation of the business world, it was all the woman had, "even all her living."

The spirit of the widow stood in stark contrast to the spirit of the Pharisees. She gave sacrificially, totally, and in faith that God would provide. They gave without sacrifice, for display, and to promote their reputation in the community. She gave out of love to God; they gave out of love for self. She gave out of want; they gave out of abundance. Jesus said she gave more than any other. The contrast teaches that offerings must be measured not by how much is given but by how much is left.

Look back over the subjects covered in the lesson: citizenship, religious devotion, financial stewardship. The Bible reveals that God is concerned about each area. Neither can be considered more "sacred" or more "secular" than the other, because God is involved in each.

Let us learn this lesson: "God governs every area of the believer's life." T. Hudson Taylor, great missionary of a generation gone, said it this way, "He is Lord of all, or He is not Lord at all. "

1. What is the one great truth taught in this lesson?
2. In what sense is religion "a way of life"?
3. How does Christian faith promote good citizenship?
4. What should be a Christian's attitude toward taxation?
5. What does Mark 12:17 mean to you?
6. What does Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 mean to you?
7. How can you live in the light of Leviticus 19:18?
8. How can one keep a right attitude toward wealth?
9. How must we measure our giving to God?
10. How can you live all your life "as unto the Lord"?