

70 Mark 12:13-17 To God & Caesar

Text

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14 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?" 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." 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 17 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.

Introduction

13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. They made a hasty retreat last week, having been terribly unsuccessful at getting the charge against Jesus to stick. The Pharisees and the Herodians team up this time. Again, they are not interested in truth, only in victory. They care not whether they should tithe, other than it provided an opportunity to trap Jesus.

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Flattery

They decide to flatter Jesus. The last group failed so miserably in an outward confrontation, so this assembly tries a more subtle method. They flatter and speak well of Jesus in the hopes that he will let his guard down. There is a song that I have had in my head in recent days from Blues Traveler. It is the song Hook, and here are some of the lyrics.

It doesn't matter what I say
So long as I sing with inflection

That makes you feel that Ill convey
Some inner truth of vast reflection
But Ive said nothing so far
And I can keep it up for as long as it takes
And it don't matter who you are
If I'm doing my job then its your resolve that breaks...
There is something amiss

I am being insincere
In fact I don't mean any of this
Still my confession draws you near

Those who heal the wounds of my people as though it were not serious.

Rom 16:17-20, Smooth talk and flattery

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. 18 For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

It is interesting here that, according to Paul doctrine is what brings unity. So many people say exactly the opposite: "doctrine divides!" is the ecumenical battle cry. So too many church are exceedingly light on doctrine. But the result is exactly the opposite. It is doctrine that unites and false doctrines that divide.

By not focusing on doctrine people simply leave themselves open to all the false teachers that are still teaching. If we ignore good doctrine, that doesn't mean all the false teachers stop teaching. You realize that right? They will continue to teach and their voice will continue to be heard. All these people who neglect sound doctrine and avoid theologically rich conversations are leaving themselves open for being deceived by the false teachers. When that happens, the divide widens. Doctrine does not cause division.

In a Time Magazine article, they were asking the question, does God want us to be rich? Here are some of the excerpts from that article:

That language is reflected in Your Best Life Now, an extraordinarily accessible exhortation to this-world empowerment through God. "To live your best life now," it opens, to see "your business taking off. See your marriage restored. See your family prospering. See your dreams come to pass ..." you must "start looking at life through eyes of faith." Jesus is front and center but not his Crucifixion, Resurrection or Atonement.....After the eclipse of Calvinist Puritanism, whose respect for money was counterbalanced by a horror of worldliness, much of Protestantism quietly adopted the idea that "you don't have to give up the American Dream.....Indeed, a last-gasp resistance to this embrace of wealth and comfort can be observed in the current evangelical brawl over whether comfortable megachurches (like Osteen's and Warren's) with pumped-up day-care centers and high-tech amenities represent a slide from glorifying an all-powerful God to asking what custom color you would prefer he paint your pews.

It seems to me that people like Joyce Meyers and Joel Osteen are exactly the kind of people that Paul has in mind in Romans 16. Some may take exception with what I am saying. The common response I hear is, "But he is so positive, the world has too much negativity we need more positive stuff." Or, "Bur he says so many good things." For those people I want to ask, "Who, then is this describing?"

Isaiah 30:10 who say to the seers, "Do not see," and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions,

Who is Isaiah describing? Who is in mind in 2 Timothy 4:3, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions." Who are these teachers that people will accumulate for themselves?

Here is humanities problem: we are sinful. You know it and I know it. Sin abounds in this world.

All of us are guilty. God is holy and all powerful and all knowing and he is the one we have sinned against. Any good judge must uphold justice. So if a person is guilty the judge will declare him guilty, and if he is innocent the judge will declare him innocent. What must logically come from this set of circumstances? Our punishment follows inexorably. Jesus died for sinner in order that those who believe in him may escape the judgment have eternal life.

But people do not to hear about their sin. People do not like to hear about judgment. People do not like to hear about the need for repentance. So who is described in these verses? Who are the false teachers that we are warned about? Who are these smooth talkers?

Matthew 3:1, 7-10 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'...But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Well obviously these verses are not talking about John the Baptist.

Matthew 23:27-33 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?"

It doesn't seem that Jesus is one of the flatterers.

Acts 2:34-38 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, 35 until I make your enemies your footstool.' 36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." 37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

It wasn't Peter either.

Acts 7:51-53 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Stephen didn't seem to speak smooth words to please people either. Who is in view here? These are faithful men of God who say, not what people want to hear, but what they need to hear.

The very fact that this is flattery and smooth talk means that it is something pleasant to listen to. These are going to be people who say nice things. That is exactly the point! "But he is so

positive." Yes! That is nice and pleasant isn't it? He says your good enough. He says you smart enough. In fact he tells you that you are even better looking and smarter than even you realize. And yet there is never a mention of sin and of justice and therefore the whole point of Jesus' incarnation is made mute! What in the world did you think smooth talk that leads people astray would look like?

There are many things I could say here to nuance this, but I am going to resist that temptation and simply call you examine these matters seriously. These Pharisees and Herodians were flattering Jesus. They were speaking kindly to him. But it was not speech that overflowed from a heart of love and spoke the truth.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"

Whose Image?

Here is the gist of their trap: paying taxes is never pleasant. Paying taxes to a conquering nation is worse. The coin that Jesus requested to look at had this inscription on it, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus Son of the Divine Augustus." On the other side it said, "Highest Priest." Paying taxes to a conquering nation as a devout Jew with this kind of emperor worship was too much. This tax was first imposed on the Jews in 6 AD by Quirinius when Palestine first came under Rome in an official sense. Judas of Galilee was a vocal opponent of the tax. He viewed the matter entirely from a theological standpoint.

AND now Archelaus's part of Judea was reduced into a province, and Coponius, one of the equestrian order among the Romans, was sent as a procurator, having the power of [life and] death put into his hands by Caesar. Under his administration it was that a certain Galilean, whose name was Judas, prevailed with his countrymen to revolt, and said they were cowards if they would endure to pay a tax to the Romans and would after [that is in the place of] God submit to mortal men as their lords.

He led a revolt that was quickly crushed by the Romans. This happened within the lifetime of everyone there and was therefore a strong background to this question. That is half of the trap. The other side of the coin, if you will, is that paying taxes were obviously required. If Jesus forbid the paying of taxes, he could be arrested. Either way, by turning off the crowds or by challenging Rome's rights, the Sanhedrin would get what they wanted.

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." 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 17 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.

Jesus see through their empty words. He sees through their flattery. Not only does he see through them, but he makes it clear that he sees what is going on. "Why do you put me to the test?" Jesus then requests that a denarius be brought to him. Why didn't Jesus produce one himself? Why didn't he borrow one from the disciples? Hendricks notes that it is possible "that Jesus wanted the coin to come from the pockets of his opponents, so as to impress upon them the fact that they themselves were using the coinage, were benefiting from its use, and had accordingly accepted the resulting obligations."

What Jesus exposed, in logical terms, is called the either or fallacy. Either you pay your taxes or you don't" is how the pharisees phrased the question, and that is how most of us take and apply it. But Jesus' answer was more subtle than that. The Pharisees and Herodians and the Herodians asked an either or question, but there was something implicit in the question. The reason that a "yes" answer would turn the crowd off was because of the emperor worship that they thought was involved. This is what Judas of Galilee so exercised.

When, therefore, the Herodians asked this question, it functioned more like this: "Should we pay taxes to Rome (which implies an acknowledgment of him as the son of Caesar, a god and high priest) or not and run the risk of being crushed again by Rome?" This is what made the question so difficult.

So when Jesus answers he exposes this "either or" fallacy. Give to Caesar what is Caesars. If you use his roads, enjoy his peace, make use of his currency for goods and services, then give to him what is his due. But give to God what belongs to God. You can pay you taxes without worshiping Caesar. Worship belongs only to God. Paul used similar logic with regard to food sacrificed to idols. Eat the meat, there is nothing wrong with meat. It is nothing. If, however, you also render some sort of honer or worship to the idols to whom this meat was offered, then it is wrong.

In this way Jesus brings all things under the dominion of God. It is wrong to conceive of God in one box, and human government in another box. God is the one who established that human government. God raises kings up and he tears them down. God worked through Alexander the Great and Caesar to prepare the world for the spread of the gospel. God continued to work through Titus and through Constantine. God was working through Bush and he is working still through Obama. God is working in Ahmadinejad and in Kim Jong-Il, and in Nicholus Sarkozy. Although these are all governments and people set in place by God, they are fallen people and governments. They will fail and do evil from time to time. A rule of thumb is that you should always obey the government unless they command you to do something God forbids, or forbid you to do something God commands. It is actually kind of rare when a government will cross that line. They will regularly do evil things, but rarely do they command you to do evil things. The question Jesus posed was, "Whose image is on this coin?" By bringing God into his final reply, it begs the question, "Whose image do you bear? To whom then do you owe your allegiance?" Your whole life belongs to him. He made you and sustains you. His grace has paved the paths you walk in life. His grace has built the edifice of this universe in which you dwell. You are his workmanship and you use and enjoy all that is his on a daily basis. Therefore render unto God what is his due.

Give him thanks. Give him glory. Give him honer. Give him praise. Render unto God repentance and confession and a contrite heart. Give unto him a fruitful life.