

GIVE TO CAESAR – JORDAN SHAW

Our community in the downtown east side of Vancouver has been slowly working through the Gospel of Mark. We're nearing the beginning of the end, but first, Jesus has some more teaching to do. Here's the story so far:

Jesus has finished his long journey to Jerusalem, and has entered the city to the fanfare of the crowds, but all is not well. Jesus is not welcome; the ruling classes – the Pharisees and Sadducees, who direct the spiritual lives of the people, and the Herodians, who direct the political lives of the people – all three groups feel threatened by Jesus. The three groups, which normally are at odds with one another, form an uneasy alliance in an attempt to take down Jesus. Jesus has had some harsh condemnation for them: He has claimed that they have turned the Temple – God's house – into a den of thieves, and in the parable last week, he accused them of killing the servants of God – and even foreshadowed his own death at their hands! He threatened their position and scared them with his talk.

At the same time, Jesus is becoming something of a disappointment to his followers. During the whole journey to Jerusalem they were anticipating being at the forefront of a rebellion – back in Mark 10, just before they entered the city, James and John were still asking for positions of authority in the new government that they hoped Jesus would establish. They desperately wanted him to cause an uprising, to throw off the shackles of the Roman Empire. They wanted Jesus to be the new king, creating a free state of Israel, politically independent. As Jesus entered the city, they seemed to be getting their wish. The people were flocking to him! They were proclaiming Hosanna, and greeting him like a king! Surely now, surely now would be the time that he would move against the Romans. You can practically hear them sharpening their swords and buckling on their armour.

But then Jesus... stopped. He left the city. And then when he returned, instead of turning against the Romans, he entered the temple and threw out the money changers! This must have been a bit bewildering to the disciples – this wasn't the kind of revolution they were expecting. And as he continued to speak with the Pharisees and with others, it became increasingly clear that his agenda is different than what his followers were expecting.

And that brings us to our text, set in the middle of an exchange between the united front of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians and Jesus. This exchange, which is recorded in Mark 11:27 – 12:44, is the last time Jesus will be in the Temple before his death. But that's still to come, and right now we're dealing with the other certainty in life: taxes.

Mark 12:13-17 (NET) - Then they [the Chief Priests] sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to trap him [Jesus] with his own words. When they came they said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are truthful and do not court anyone's favor, because you show no partiality but teach

the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But he [Jesus] saw through their hypocrisy and said to them, "Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." So they brought one, and he said to them, "Whose image is this, and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him.

Israel was living under occupation. While there was a Jewish king, Herod, he was little more than a puppet controlled by Rome. The Chief Priests, too, were either installed or propped up by the Roman administration.

The Romans were not particularly harsh masters – so long as you paid your tributes and paid homage to the emperor, the Romans were pretty well fine with letting you do your own thing. The problem in Israel was that the Jews hated having to pay money to a foreign power, and they hated having to pay homage to the emperor. Both of these things were considered blasphemy.

Roman coins were used to pay taxes to Rome, but the Roman coins had the face the Caesar engraved upon them, in the same way our coins have Queen Elizabeth II on them. Graven images were blasphemous to most observant Jews – much like in Islam today – because to make an image in the likeness of something created the opportunity for the thing to be worshipped. So even carrying Roman coins was something that was only done out of necessity. Roman coins would have been especially unwelcome within the Temple.

Paying Homage to the emperor was likewise blasphemous. The Emperor considered himself divine, a kind of god-man. Paying homage to him was like worshipping a false god, something no good Jew would do. So the Jews hated the Romans, and were often trying to rebel against them.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were trying to put Jesus in a no-win scenario. If Jesus said 'don't pay your taxes to Caesar', the Pharisees could then go to the Romans and have Jesus arrested as an insurrectionist. If, however, Jesus said that it was fine to pay taxes to Caesar, he would be condemned as a blasphemer (for supporting a false god, Caesar) and a traitor to his people.

Jesus shocked everyone, however, by being spectacularly dis-interested in challenging Rome. In fact, despite the fact that Rome was the number one enemy of the Jews, and despite the fact that if he was a 'good' messiah he would be leading an armed rebellion, and despite the fact that his followers were waiting with bated breath for Jesus to condemn Rome, Jesus refused to do so. In fact, he consistently has harsher words for the Jewish leaders than for the Romans! This should be shocking. In fact, some historians find this so striking that they claim that Jesus

was actually an invention of Rome – that he was created to try and create a religion that would quiet the ornery Jews and make them more accepting of Roman Occupation. This is nonsense, of course, but it shows how shocking the idea of a messiah who doesn't challenge the occupied nation is. But Jesus is not attempting to appease Rome, and in fact in saying that Caesar deserves what is Caesar's and God deserves what is God's he is giving yet another scathing critique to the Jewish leaders. He is basically claiming that they are colluding with the Romans. The fact that Pharisees were carrying Roman money inside the Temple showed their hypocrisy – they were trying to trap Jesus in rules that they weren't following themselves. Further, Jesus is accusing the Jewish leaders of not giving God what he deserves. Jesus here is drawing a parallel between Caesar's 'image' being on the coin, and God's 'image' being upon man (Genesis 1:26-27). We bear the Image of God – we belong to him. The coin bears the image of Caesar – give the coin back to Caesar.

The Jews wanted an external change to create a new life for themselves. They thought that if they cast off the Roman influence, that they could become a powerful nation like they were when King David was in charge, hundreds of years before. In effect, they wanted the outside to change first, and hoped that would lead to internal change. Jesus turns this idea its head. Jesus claims that what they really need is to turn to God, to repent, to have a change of heart. An internal change is necessary, and this internal change will bring about the Kingdom of God.

So, how do we apply the intricacies of 1st century Roman/Jewish politics to the 21st century? First, if you are participating in, and particularly if you are benefitting from Caesar's systems you need to pay Caesar what he is owed. I love my universal healthcare. I love my roads and public spaces. I love the fact I have friends that are not starving to death because of welfare. But all these things come at a cost. We're all part of a system of the world - a system which benefits some and hurts others. Either we need to get out of the system, or we need to pay Caesar what he is owed. Being a Christian is not an excuse to not pay taxes. It is an opportunity, however, to evaluate where we put our trust. Is our trust in Caesar or in God? Are we giving all we can to God? Are we living for God? Truthfully, the answer for most of us is no. Where do we put our trust? Whether we trust in the State or in God, something is asked of us. We have a role to play. We need to choose our master wisely.

Second, we bear the Image of God. He has claimed humanity as his own. We are his, regardless of what comes. Whether good times or bad, He is with us, caring for us, and loving us. The state can't do that. The state does not care for you. The state simply wants the state to continue existing. But the answer to the State is not armed rebellion; it is a change of heart. The answer is not to pick up a sword, but to get on our knees. We know where our hope lies. We know who truly cares about us. We know where our hope comes from. And we can say with Paul that

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our rebellion starts internally. It starts with a commitment to give God all of ourselves, to allow him to claim ownership over his Image. And as his image-bearers, to engage in His work in the world. We are ambassadors to the Kingdom of God – People look at us and they should see the Kingdom. Jesus confused his followers by not playing by their rules, by enacting and living out a different way of living. Let us do the same – let people be confused and amazed when they look at how we live. Let us give God what he is due – All of it. Everything we've got.