Mark Lesson 40 (2023)

**TRIBUTE TO GOD AND CIVIC DUTY TO THE NATION**

(Subtitle: Dual Citizenship)

Mark 12:13-17

Key Verse: 12:17

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’”

In today’s passage, Jesus is faced with a cunning question the Jewish religious leaders posed about paying taxes to Caesar. They intended to trap Jesus in his words, but he wasn’t trapped by them. Instead, Jesus caught them through his wise answers. He told them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” (17) This encounter gives valuable lessons as we navigate our lives as followers of Christ in an earthly society that we have dual citizenship, heavenly and earthly citizenship. In schools, students recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the nation. “*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”* Sometimes, where to draw the line between our allegiance to God and the nation is unclear. This morning, let us think about what Jesus, our Lord, had to say about our obligations to God and our country.

Before delving into today’s passage, let’s first think about the context of today’s event. When Jesus arrived at Jerusalem a few days earlier, he entered the temple courts, drove out those buying and selling, and overturned the money changers' tables. (11:12-16) He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts and rebuked them by saying, “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. But you have made it a den of robbers.” (11:17) Jesus’ words and drastic actions in the temple court offended Jewish religious leaders. When they questioned Jesus’ authority to do what he did in the temple, Jesus told them the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, exposing their greed and delusion (12:1-11). Knowing that Jesus had spoken the parable against them, the Jewish leaders united and sought a way to arrest him (12:12).

Look at verse 13. “Later, they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.” Here, the word “they” represents the Jewish highest authority, *“Sanhedrin.”* It’s interesting that the Pharisees, who were anti-Rome, and Herodians, who were pro-Rome, united in their attempt to trap Jesus. It shows that the alliance among the Jewish leaders had been formed against their common enemy Jesus.

How did they try to trap Jesus? Look at verses 14-15a. “They came to him and said, ‘Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to whom they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax Caesar or not? Should we pay, or shouldn’t we?” They used flattery. How shrewd their words were! They were saying to him, *“Teacher, you are truly cool because you aren’t swayed by anyone, even imperial Caesar in Rome. We highly respect you.”*

Whenever I go to a barber shop nearby Queens College, the Russian barber calls me boss. Even though I am not a boss, it doesn’t sound that bad. Of course, it’s naïve flattery. But you’d better watch out if someone flatters you because they might try to get something from you without your noticing. However, what they said about Jesus was true. He was a man of integrity and wasn’t swayed by anybody. Yet, they were not sincere. Their words were aimed at enticing Jesus to be dangerously candid. They raised the well-devised question by saying, “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar? Should we pay, or shouldn’t we?”

By the time of the birth of Jesus, Caesar Augustus, the Emperor of Rome, issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world to collect a head tax from all the subject countries, including the Jews (Lk. 2:1-3). During Jesus’ time in Israel, the issue of paying the imperial taxes to Caesar was controversial. People were divided on whether they should pay or not to pay. The zealots, the Jewish extremists, Jews refused to pay it, the Herodians paid it willingly, and the Pharisees reluctantly paid even though they opposed it. If Jesus said it was okay to pay the imperial taxes, he would be considered pro-Rome and anti-Jewish, and most Jews would be unhappy with Jesus. If Jesus publicly opposed Rome by saying it was wrong to pay it, he would be in a dangerous position. The Roman government would immediately arrest him. Either way, Jesus would be trapped by his answer.

How did Jesus avoid the trap? Look at verses 15b. “But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. ‘Why are you trying to trap me?’ he asked. ‘Bring me a denarius, and let me look at it.’” Fully aware of their malice and hypocrisy, Jesus responded with wisdom. How could he react with wisdom as these malicious leaders tried to manipulate him? Of course, it’s because of his divine nature as the Son of God. But Jesus was fully human, having emotions just like us. He could have become indigent because of their evil intent. So, I believe that Jesus could remain calm and wise not just because of his divine nature but also because he knew how to manage and regulate his emotions, including anger and disgust. It teaches us a valuable lesson.

As Christian disciples, we want to live our lives under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We read the Scripture and pray diligently, hoping to live by the Holy Spirit. But despite our effort, we often fail to live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Why is it so? There can be various reasons. Even though I appeared to be spiritually mature, I was emotionally immature. In other words, the level of my emotional intelligence was shallow. I also realized that I am not alone. Many people are not even aware of the lack of emotional intelligence. We fail to live by the Holy Spirit because we fail to manage our emotions properly. In other words, there is a close connection between the guidance of the Holy Spirit and Emotional Intelligence.

Now, I acknowledge the connection between the Holy Spirit, God’s words, prayer, and Emotional Intelligence. It reminds us of what Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:5-7, “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires, but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” People who cannot differentiate between feelings and thoughts are unstable and vulnerable. Jesus was fully divine, yet he was also emotionally intelligent, so he could remain calm and wise without being entrapped by negative emotions.

In his full wisdom, Jesus asked his opponents to bring him a denarius and let him look at it. (15b) We wonder why Jesus asked them to get him a denarius. It’s probably because he wanted to involve them more actively in the lesson he wanted to teach. Generally, audience participation ensures better learning.

Look at verse 16. “They brought the coin, and he asked them, ‘Whose image is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied.” I am sure it was easy for them to bring a denarius. (Pic#1) A denarius, the small silver coin, was the only coin the Romans accepted in payment for taxes. On one side of the coin is the inscription, *“Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.”* The coin represented the authority and power of Caesar, whose portrait and title were stamped on it. The images on the coin showed that Rome had political authority over those who used it. While everyone looked at the coin, Jesus asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” They replied, “Caesar’s.” Jesus was so wise that he led them to answer their question themselves.

When we think of these hypocritical religious leaders, we feel awful. We don’t want to deal with these kinds of people. But like these religious leaders, many people today try to manipulate others by using all sorts of gimmicks and tricks for their benefit. They seem to get what they want. Dealing with these kinds of folks, it’s easy for us to be tempted to compromise. We know that Christian disciples should be pure and wise simultaneously. But how could we be pure, wise, and not gullible? It is possible when we have godly fear in our hearts and actions. We must also know that there are consequences to our every intent. It reminds us of what Apostle Paul said in Galatians 6:7-8, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” Indeed, Jesus’ response toward the deceptive leaders revealed his profound wisdom.

In verse 17, Jesus concludes his answer. Read verse 17. “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. And they were amazed at him.” By acknowledging Caesar's image, Jesus highlighted our obligation to respect the civil authority established in the world. He also asserted that our ultimate allegation and devotion belong to God alone.

In short, we, as Christian disciples, have dual citizenship, heavenly and earthly citizenship. When Jesus said, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” he acknowledged our responsibility as citizens to comply with the laws and obligations to the earthly authorities. As Christians, we are called to be law-abiding citizens, respecting the laws and regulations that govern our societies. Our involvement in the affairs of our nations allows us to be a positive influence, promoting justice, peace, and the well-being of all. We should pay taxes.

Equally important is Jesus’ command to “give to God what is God’s.” We are not just citizens of our earthly nations; we are citizens of the kingdom of God. As such, we are called to give ourselves entirely to God, offering him our love, worship, and obedience. Our primary allegiance lies with our heavenly Father, and our actions should reflect our commitment to his will and purpose in all we do.

***So, how do we apply these teachings in our lives today?*** We must balance our responsibilities in the world and our commitment to God. We can honor this balance by law-abiding citizens, paying taxes, and respecting civil authorities. At the same time, we must make sure that our hearts and actions are dedicated to God, seeking his kingdom and righteousness and aligning our lives with his word.

This may mean participating actively in our communities, pursuing justice, and advocating for righteousness in our modern-day contexts. It may also involve supporting causes that promote love, compassion, and the well-being of others. Our civic obligation also includes protecting and preserving the environment and our planet.

We are called to make a positive impact on society while keeping our focus on the kingdom of God. The United States of America is the land of freedom. The Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbor was a present from France. People from all over the world come to the United States to pursue freedom and the American dream. However, there is a strong impression that many people abuse freedom, and our nation is at great risk. Looking at the Statue of Liberty, Viktor Frankl, the author of *“Man’s Search for Meaning,”* said, *“I recommend that the Statue of Liberty be supplemented by the Statue of Responsibility on the west coast.”* Why? It’s because freedom without responsibility is not true freedom. It’s only self-indulgence. Christian disciples should be citizens with freedom and responsibility. (Pic#2)

In today’s passage, Jesus demonstrated his divine wisdom by refusing to be entrapped by the malicious religious leaders of his time. He also reminds us that every aspect of our lives should be surrendered to God the Father. As we render to civil authority, we should humbly submit ourselves to God’s loving guidance, trusting that he will lead us in righteousness.

Apostle Paul affirms what Jesus taught about our tribute to God and duty to nation by saying in Romans 13:1, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”

No matter where we live in this world, we are called to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s – fulfilling our civic responsibility and respecting the authority of the world’s systems. We bear God’s image because we are created in the image of God. We should never forget to render to God what is God’s – devoting our hearts, minds, and actions to him. By embracing both aspects of our citizenship, we can fulfill our role as faithful followers of Christ, impacting the world around us for his glory. Our world is full of darkness, violence, and injustice. We are called to live as lights in the darkness. May we find strength and wisdom in his words and fulfill our dual roles with grace and love. May we not abuse the freedom we have but be more responsible. May the Lord bless our country and enable us to be responsible citizens of God’s kingdom on earth. “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.”