

## **Irreligious: Forsaking Religion and Finding Jesus' Money (Mk. 12:13-17)**

**Chris Altmann – July 25, 2010**

Politics and religion. Church and state. They are often the two topics which many people refuse to talk about. And people are especially wary of attempts to combine the two. A 2008 study by the Pew Forum found a significant increase in the number of people who say that churches should not get involved in political issues.<sup>1</sup> In 2004, 37% of conservatives felt the church should stay out of politics. In 2008, that number rose to 51%. The same study found that a growing number of people are uncomfortable with political candidates speaking about religion. In 2004, 40% said they did not want political candidates talking about religious issues. By 2008, that number rose to 46%.

We wrestle with this relationship between church and state, Christ and culture, politics and religion. In broader terms, this is really a struggle over sacred versus secular. There's the sacred world of church, Christ, and religion. And there's the secular world of state, culture, and politics. And we struggle with the relationship between the two. *One of the things that sparks debate is how we deal with the sacred world and the secular world.*

This is the very issue which some local leaders bring to Jesus in our text this morning: *13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. 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. (Mk. 12:13-17 ESV)*

This verbal boxing match takes place in the temple. As we heard last Sunday, in Mk. 11:27 members of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish high court—have just confronted Jesus at the temple. Jesus then tells a parable in Mk. 12:1 which casts the Sanhedrin in the worst possible light. The members of the Sanhedrin realize this. Thus in Mk. 12:13 they send *"some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians to trap him in his talk."* We saw the Pharisees and Herodians collaborating together in Mk. 3 after Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Today, in the temple, these two strange bedfellows are partnered again.

The Pharisees and the Herodians are an odd couple because they stand on opposite ends of the continuum of church and state, or sacred and secular. *This is overstating the case a bit, but if the Pharisees were on the "sacred" end of the spectrum, the Herodians were on the "secular" end of the spectrum.* The name "Pharisees" probably means something like "separated ones." The Pharisees are defined by their desire to be separate from anything secular—that is anything ungodly or unclean. On the other hand, the name "Herodians" suggests a group of people enthusiastically engaged in things secular. As we heard earlier in this series, the local political scene in Jesus' day was dominated by members of the Herod family. The Herodians were

people who actively supported this family. They participated actively in the political process and essentially supported the ultimate authority for whom the Herod's worked: Rome. These Pharisees want nothing to do with secular culture. The Herodians have everything to do with secular culture. Yet here, they team up to battle Jesus.

They lob a nuclear-bomb at Jesus in the form of a question about a controversial issue: *14And 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?"* The controversial issue is the payment of taxes to the Roman Caesar. The Caesar whom the Pharisees and Herodians mention is Tiberius.<sup>2</sup> Tiberius was the second emperor of the Roman Empire. Tiberius had been adopted by Caesar Augustus and he became the successor to the throne upon Augustus' death in A.D. 14.

The coin used to pay the tax to Tiberius is the "denarius." The denarius had an image of Tiberius inscribed on it, along with the wording, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus."<sup>3</sup> The inscription states that Tiberius along with his father Augustus is divine. This coin was a source of great tension. It had on it the image of Tiberius, the leader of the Roman nation who had taken over Israel. And it had words on it calling Tiberius divine. To the most devout Jews, the coin itself was blasphemous. In fact, there were some Jews who were so scrupulous that they avoided even looking at Roman coins.<sup>4</sup> That may be what the Pharisees and Herodians suggest about Jesus when they tell Jesus, "*you are not swayed by appearances.*" Literally, they say, "you do not look at people's faces." They may be saying, tongue in cheek, "I bet you're so scrupulous that you don't even look at the face of Tiberius on these blasphemous coins."<sup>5</sup>

Not only was the coin a cause of friction. So was the tax it was used to pay. The word "taxes" used here indicates a tax that was paid to the Roman government by every adult male. The tax had to be paid in Roman coinage—the denarius.<sup>6</sup> And the people despised the tax. Both the book of Acts ([Acts 5:37](#)) and an ancient historian (Josephus) mention a man named Judas the Galilean who led a Jewish revolt against Rome in the first century over the issue of taxation. Pious and devout Jews wanted nothing to do with the coin and the tax.

This question about paying taxes to Caesar touches on the larger issues of sacred and secular. Specifically, when they ask "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*" they are referring to the *Law of Moses, to the Scriptures, and to the sacred world in general*. The first part of their question raises the bigger question of how to live in the sacred world, how to obey the law of God, how to walk rightly in relationship with God. *And when they ask "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" they are referring to the secular world*. The second part of their question raises the bigger question of how to live in the secular world, how to walk rightly in relationship with political powers and secular institutions. The question about the lawfulness of paying taxes to Caesar is a question about life in the sacred world versus life in the secular world.

No matter how Jesus answers this question, he cannot win. If he indicates that pious Jews should use those ugly coins to pay that wicked tax, he will be accused by the Pharisees of

neglecting the sacred world. But if Jesus indicates that pious Jews should tear up their blasphemous tax forms and throw away those irreverent coins, he will be accused by the Herodians of neglecting the secular world. Jesus is caught in that tension between the sacred and the secular.

Yet listen to Jesus' answer: *15But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 17Jesus 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. (Mk. 12:13-17 ESV)* First, Jesus counsels, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's..." And with this line, Jesus highlights an important difference between religion and following Jesus. *Religion argues that the sacred should have nothing to do with the secular.* The Pharisees seem certain that Jesus will agree with them, because that's the common opinion on the Jewish street. True, devout, spiritual, and godly Jews want nothing to do with this secular tax and secular coin. Religion argues that the sacred should have nothing to do with the secular. What we ought to do is isolate ourselves from that world and protect ourselves from it.

*But Jesus argues that true, devout, spiritual and godly Jews must have something to do with the secular.* They have an obligation toward the Empire. They benefit from the Empire and they should contribute toward the Empire. They should render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Jesus argues that the sacred must have something to do with the secular.

James Emory White writes that in the ancient world, when mapmakers came to the end of the terrain they were certain about, they would write in the margins of the map "Here be Dragons."<sup>7</sup> It was their way of acknowledging that beyond those borders, beyond their safe and known world, there were Dragons—that is, there was danger. Some today have a similar perspective when it comes to what lies outside the small sacred world they live in.

- I regularly read Facebook status' from Christians in which they warn about the corruption of the government in Washington, the evil of Wall Street, or ills of contemporary culture. They seem to be saying "Here be Dragons! We ought not to have anything to do with the secular because it's just too dangerous out there."
- I overheard an educator recently talking about a group of students touring the 9-11 site in New York City and how some of the students didn't know what 9-11 was—because their parents had shielded them from any news of what happened on September 11. "Here be Dragons!" those parents seemed to be saying. They didn't seem to want their kids to have anything to do with that secular world.

Sometimes we act as if we believe that our sacred world can have nothing to do with the secular world. And what we need to do is to isolate ourselves from and protect ourselves from that secular world.

To be clear, there are Dragons out there. Yet Jesus reveals that true followers of God have a role to play among the Dragons. We are expected to contribute meaningfully to our larger

society. We are to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. There is an active role we are to take in the secular world.

- A Highland father recently shared about having his son play in a secular sports league rather than in the church league. It made for some tense times, but it was their attempt to get out and contribute meaningfully among the Dragons.
- The blood drive we held a few Sundays ago is a good example of this. On the surface a church and Lifeblood seem to have nothing in common. But it was the perfect opportunity for us to participate positively in our secular community.
- LeBonheur Children's Hospital and the Highland church might seem worlds apart. But we've recently adopted their neo-natal intensive care unit because it's one way for us to get out of our little world and take part in the larger world.
- Some of you may work for schools or companies or organizations which seem to be completely secular. And yet your sacred presence there each workday contributes meaningfully among the Dragons.

Jesus argues that the sacred must have something to do with the secular.

But Jesus takes things even further: *15But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 17Jesus 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. (Mk. 12:13-17 ESV)* Jesus not only urges us to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" but to render "to God the things that are God's." And with that final phrase Jesus shatters this nice distinction that religion likes to make between sacred and secular. After all, what *are* the things that are God's? What is Jesus talking about when he describes the "things that are God's" which we are to render to God? The answer seems to be "everything." Doesn't everything belong to God? Isn't that part of what it means to be God? If God is really God, then everything on this planet and in our lives is God's—the sacred and the secular.

For many years a popular understanding of what Jesus means focuses on verse 16: *And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's."* The coin contained an image of Tiberius Caesar. For this reason, Jesus argued, the coin should be used in ways that pleased Tiberius. And many throughout the centuries have pointed out that just as that coin had an image on it, so we humans are inscribed with an image. We are each made in the image of God. Just as Caesar's image made the coin his, so our being stamped in God's image makes us God's. Thus, when Jesus urges us to "render to God what is God's" he may ultimately be referring to *us* and all that we are and all that we have. *We* are what belong to God. Thus we are to give ourselves—money, time, talents, everything—to God.

Jesus is ultimately saying that God is concerned with all of life—the sacred and the secular. It's not either/or. It's both/and. We can't just leave it with "render to Caesar what is Caesar's." We can't just leave it with, "Spend a little bit of your time and effort contributing meaningfully to the culture." Jesus takes it all the way. What God wants is people willing to give all of their

life—all the sacred and all the secular—over to him. Our politics. Our careers. Our families. Our friends. And every minute of every day.

Mark Batterson writes about Wilson Bentley:<sup>8</sup> *Wilson grew up on a farm in Jericho, Vermont, and as a young boy he developed a fascination with snowflakes. Obsession might be a better word for it. Most people go indoors during snowstorms. Not Wilson. He would run outside when the flakes started falling, catch them on black velvet, look at them under a microscope, and take photographs of them before they melted. His first photomicrograph of a snowflake was taken on January 15, 1885. Wilson Bentley wrote: "Under the microscope, I found that snowflakes were miracles of beauty; and it seemed a shame that this beauty should not be seen and appreciated by others. Every crystal was a masterpiece of design and no one design was ever repeated. When a snowflake melted, that design was forever lost. Just that much beauty was gone, without leaving any record behind."* Mark Batterson continues: *The first known photographer of snowflakes, Wilson pursued his passion for more than fifty years. He amassed a collection of 5,381 photographs that was published in his magnum opus, titled Snow Crystals. And then he died a fitting death—a death that symbolized and epitomized his life. Wilson "Snowflake" Bentley contracted pneumonia while walking six miles through a severe snowstorm and died on December 23, 1931. Batterson concludes: And that is how I figured out how I want to die. No, I don't want to die from pneumonia. But I do want to die doing what I love. I am determined to pursue God-ordained passions until the day I die.*

I think that's the spirit behind what Jesus says here. I think Jesus is calling for reckless abandon. No more wondering what's sacred and what's secular and where the Dragons are and where they aren't. No more trying to draw lines and trying to get the map just right. Jesus is looking for a person who will just render to God's what is God's—all they have and all they are. Jesus is seeking people who will do what God loves and die doing what God loves. He's calling for an obsession. He's asking you and me to simply turn over all of life to God and for God's purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> "More Americans Question Religion's Role in Politics," [www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org) (9-3-08).

<sup>2</sup> Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (1004). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (1004). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1993), 697.

<sup>5</sup> Gundry, 697.

<sup>6</sup> Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (577). New York: United Bible societies.

<sup>7</sup> James Emory White, *Christ Among the Dragons* (IVP, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase* (Multnomah, 2008), pp. 15-16