

A Taxing Question

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[0 : 0 0] let's pray lord god thank you for your word we pray that tonight you might challenge us rebuke us encourage us transform us by your holy spirit through your word and lord give us the grace and the courage and the strength to put it into practice in jesus name amen well what a question they've got him how can he answer this one and get away with it surely they've succeeded in their plan to trap him he slipped through their clutches before but not this time the crowds were still supporting him then even though the authorities had laughed at him cast doubt upon his sanity called him demon possessed maligned his obedience to the law questioned his authority but once he answers this question it's all over his days of stirring up the people coming into jerusalem like he owns the place causing havoc in the temple telling those terrible stinging stories they're over jesus is now seriously between the proverbial rock and a hard place is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not how can jesus answer yes or no without signing either his own arrest warrant or alienating everybody who follows him or for the jewish leaders who wanted to destroy jesus it really was the ideal question last week we heard that they had been questioning his authority but that just didn't cut it with the crowds it wasn't their language but now the pharisees and the herodians have put their heads together and come up with a beauty taxes now that's the topic of universal interest you can just imagine the whole place going quiet as the question is put is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not and just like when you're the only person left talking when the music stops at a party all ears are on what jesus has to say now if we know anything about mark's gospel we shouldn't wonder that these pharisees and herodians had come up with such a perfect trap i mean they'd been working on it for chapters back in mark chapter 3 verse 6 immediately after jesus healed the man on the sabbath we read the pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the herodians against him how to destroy him it's such a telling statement the jewish authorities wanted to destroy jesus so badly that groups who were previously opposed to each other would join together in an unholy alliance for that very purpose you see the pharisees and the herodians weren't in the habit of talking to each other let alone working together the herodians we suppose were the supporters of herod the great and his successors and these were jewish rulers who were ruling in the place of the romans but they were really just puppets for roman rule

they were allowed to rule their little areas but everything that they did was dictated to them by the roman emperor and i guess this made the herodians on the side of the romans broadly they weren't opposed to using roman money paying taxes generally behaving themselves and they were probably more concerned about the stability of the government than who it was or what they stood for but the pharisees they chafed under roman rule as you might know they were the jewish leaders who were much more concerned about maintaining the distinctiveness of the jewish people ensuring that they were obedient to the torah the law of god remaining separate from the gentiles the surrounding people they along with much of the populace were anti-roman although probably quietly so not like the zealots who got themselves killed for being loudly anti-roman but they were anti-roman not only because they were basically captives in their own land and were being charged very heavy taxes but because as god's people they knew they were supposed to be ruled by god or at least a king after god's own heart not by pagans who worshipped idols and who frankly lived debauched lives religion and politics could not and should not be separated in their opinion so when these two groups kind of on opposite sides of this debate come to jesus to ask this question they know very well that any answer will put him off side with someone if he says no it's not lawful to pay taxes to caesar then the herodians can tell the governor pontius pilate that jesus is inciting a revolt and that's the capital charge soon you'll be out of the picture if he says yes it is lawful to pay taxes to caesar he'd alienate the crowds who were following him and the jewish leaders could finally move in for the kill without any opposition as i said rock hard place jesus and to make sure he really puts his foot in it the herodians and the pharisees approach him with great flattery on their lips kind of encouraging him to become reckless in his answer to throw caution to the wind let's read it together from verse 14 teacher we know that you are sincere and show deference to no one but you do not regard for you do not regard people with partiality but teach the way of god in accordance with truth if only they believed what they were saying but instead it's a sad irony that they're only speaking these amazing words which are completely true to pressure jesus into making a bold statement that would definitely put him into one camp or another they don't want to have that situation that happened last chapter when he said to them what do you think and threw it back to them no no no they want a straight answer this time so they're saying you don't care you don't care what other people think do you jesus spit it out you're not afraid of the romans or the crowds are you jesus give us your answer and so he does we read in verse 15

but knowing the hypocrisy he said to them why are you putting me to the test bring me a denarius and let me see it and they brought one well it's obvious that things aren't quite going as planned the leaders who are kind of back on their haunches ready to pounce now have to scrabble around searching in pockets asking around for a little coin this denarius was the roman currency worth about one day's wages and we understand that it was from this coin that the worst tax the head tax or the pole tax that you had to pay just for the privilege of existing was taken now perhaps by asking someone else to provide one jesus was showing that he didn't carry the stuff himself but the point he wants to make by looking at it and getting them to look at it is even more important so we read on then he said to them whose head is this and whose title they answered the emperor's if you've been looking at the screen you'll see a picture of the type of coin that jesus would have been handed and you can still buy them apparently and now they're probably worth about two or three days wages but you can see what they all would have been looking at this head here or the word in the original language is like image this image here a portrait of the emperor otherwise known as the Caesar of the day and his name was Tiberius and around the head you can very vaguely see but there's abbreviated

Latin and when they put it all into its full form it means Tiberius Caesar Augustus son of divine Augustus so that's the head and that's the title it's saying this is an image of emperor Tiberius and his father is now a god that is a pretty serious claim for a Jew to be carrying around in his or her wallet every day I mean basically this little coin was a portable idol Roman emperors commanded worship as semi-divine beings and so using this money meant not only that you were taking part in a rule that you hated but you were also giving some acknowledgement I guess to this blasphemous claim on the coin how could a good Jew do this well the Pharisees must have been sure now now that everyone had looked at it seeing the image read the inscription they must have known what Jesus was going to say surely he was going to say look at this disgraceful blasphemer and his coin

I don't touch it I don't carry it and neither should you such a pagan doesn't deserve to be given anything but instead what does he say verse 17 Jesus said to them give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and to God the things that are God's and they were utterly amazed at him now I tell you that is what is called being quick on your feet we want to explore who Jesus is in Mark's gospel if it's not the son of God who could say these words then I'd like to meet the guy who made him up I mean Jesus answer is brilliant but is it more than just a tricky way of avoiding the question is it more than just a way of saying well you work out which one's which and then you'll have the answer is

[12 : 37] Jesus just like a good Aussie politician who never gives a straight answer when asked a policy question is he kind of like an ancient sage oh yes grasshopper who talks in riddles makes no sense just twisting words and playing games well I don't think so although he has avoided the trap with this kind of clever answer you work it out and he's showing once again that his life and his death are under his control his timing he won't be taken when he is not ready I don't think that he just leaves us at a kind of neutral stalemate with this brilliant answer there's some really profound stuff that we ought to reflect on here but it's not easy give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and to God the things that are God's what could it mean well some people have interpreted this as meaning that

Jesus is teaching a strict separation between the things of the church and the things of the state obviously if the government has their picture their name on the money it's theirs that's their territory and then churchy stuff that's God's territory the emperor he gets the rest on Sunday you're a citizen of heaven on Monday to Saturday you're a citizen of Palestine Rome Australia and you give your taxes to the state and you give your worship to God but you mustn't think that one has anything to do with the other now I'm sure that sounds a bit off to you but the church has fallen into that thinking many times over the last 2,000 years and my hunch is that many people in our country would very much like Christians to live that way I think we only have to observe some of the rhetoric in the debate currently going on over the legalising of

RU486 as a drug that can be used to induce abortions to see that the claims that the health minister Tony Abbott oughtn't be able to let his religious views as a Roman Catholic play a part in his political decision making keep your religion to church service and private prayers thank you very much and leave the rest of life to Caesar or to the therapeutic goods administration faith has no part in politics some people have taken this passage to mean that but is that how Jesus meant us to be shaped by this teaching certainly the New Testament confirms that being a good citizen of your country is a right and godly thing to do and that includes paying taxes and following due legal process obeying the law and so on we enjoy what the government provides we pay taxes but we do this not because we separate our lives into secular and sacred bits normal and god bits but because we know that God is the one who owns everything the earth is the

Lord's and everything in it we heard in Psalm 24 and God is the working one who is working in all of life including through the state Paul says to accomplish his sovereign purposes so we read in Romans chapter 13 let every person be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God and then jumping down to verse 6 for the same reason you also pay taxes for the authorities are God's servants busy with this very thing pay to all what is due them taxes to whom taxes are due revenue to whom revenue is due respect to whom respect is due honour to whom honour is due God is the one who is working in all of life Monday to Friday Saturday Sunday there can be no separation between how we live as

Christians when we worship God together on a Sunday and then the rest of the week God uses governments even bad ones it seems in the scriptures to accomplish his plans for humanity our right living as Christians is part of our spiritual act of worship Paul has just said a chapter before it's all part of an integrated Christian life to pay our taxes not something that's seen to be separate to our acts of worship yet we also know from scripture that God's people have a responsibility to continue to discern what cannot rightly be given over to Caesar out of a life lived in obedience to God what cannot ever be given over to the government to the state to the emperor over the summer and on my ordination retreat a couple of weeks ago

[18 : 30] I was reading and chewing over the book of Daniel in the Old Testament and in it we find an amazing example of a young man and his friends who were living out their faith in a pagan king's palace in Babylon using their gifts for the good of that nation working for the king the very king who had captured them yet drawing the line time and time again men because of their obedience to the Lord Daniel Shadrach Meshach and Abednego took great risks in fact if you know the stories you'll know they risked their very lives for God to maintain their distinctiveness in their diet their worship of the one true God only to continue their daily prayers to the Lord despite the king's edicts to the contrary there was no sense in which they said well my faith and work are separate to the point that it doesn't matter what I'm asked to do in public

Caesar's stuff is Caesar's no they were constantly assessing and discerning how and if they could live in obedience to the state but at the same time in full obedience to the Lord their God they were giving to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's but drawing the line when Caesar asked what was not his to ask now I don't want to make this sound like it's at all easy how did Daniel decide that he would interpret the king's dreams but he wouldn't share his table and it wouldn't have been easy in Jesus day to discern whether the Roman government's idolatry did in fact mean that using that money that paying those taxes was beyond the pale it's not easy sometimes God's people have erred on the side of caution and sometimes on the side of submission too much to the authorities and in our own day it won't be easy to know always what is

Caesar's due the state's due it won't be easy to know when political correctness and tolerance have gone too far it won't be easy to know when at work we should keep silent about our views because we're on somebody else's time we're being professional it won't be easy to know when we must take a stand because of our call to obey God but working out how to live life was never meant to be easy the Bible is not a book of rules alphabetized at the back with an index that goes from abortion to the ethics of zoo keeping living out the Christian life is a matter of something else entirely it's a matter of having

God shape our entire world view by his word his character revealed in it his Holy Spirit working through it it's a matter of responding being totally 100% given over to God heart mind body soul strength whatever it will cost us you see just as the coin which bore Caesar's image belonged to Caesar just as the currency that we use is the property of our government and they can choose to change it it's illegal for us to do whatever we like with it just as this coin ought to have been given back to Caesar because it belonged to him in one sense we too friends bear an image that marks us as owned each of us here tonight and each of those listening to

Jesus that day the Herodians the Pharisees the disciples the crowds each of us bear the image of God we bear his likeness and we are rightfully his and we as Christians also bear his title his inscription his name we are doubly his we have been made in his image and we have been redeemed into his family and therefore we must give ourselves back to him whatever we do 100% fully wholeheartedly in every area of life Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday perhaps we haven't gotten to the bottom of that question yet but perhaps the real question that the

[24 : 28] Pharisees and Herodians needed to be asking was not whether it was lawful to pay tax but how in a messy painful mixed up world we can grow in our ability to give back to God what is God's our whole lives our all our everything so let's pay our tax once a year but let's every day live 100% for the one who made us the one who owns us and the one who paid with his life for us to be redeemed the what this time we are who learn Thank you.