

Paying Taxes to Caesar

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[0:00] And after a short break, it's great to be back with you again. Sorry, let me turn my microphone on. It's funny sometimes, isn't it, how little things can cause big problems.

! Just one loose wheel nut in the wrong place, and the wheel falls off and causes a disaster, a loose washer in a helicopter and all of a sudden the whole thing comes tumbling down, or a little bead swallowed by a child on Christmas Day, and all of a sudden you're rushed into hospital, or a little coin pulled out of someone's pockets, like the ones, maybe not quite like the ones you've got in the pews, but they're there as a little aid for you to think about as we go through our passage this morning.

Little things causing big problems and big issues. Well, we're going to think about how Jesus deals with that, the challenge. That we're given from what he says this morning.

But let's bow our heads, shall we? And pray as we begin. Father, we give thanks for your word this morning. For these words the Lord Jesus has spoken and that Mark has written down.

Please help us understand them rightly. That we might live under you in every area of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[1:23] Amen. So we're still in that passage that Catherine read for us a moment ago. Mark chapter 12. And it's a passage that begins with three words that set the scene for things that followed.

Later, they sent. It's always good to look at the context of a passage. That's what is happening with that word later. Actually, the original Greek manuscripts don't have that word there.

Making it even clearer, I think, that what happens in these verses comes very soon after the previous events. Well, what were they? Well, the context was one of a growing opposition to Jesus.

That was the direct challenge to Jesus' authority in Mark chapter 11, verse 27. The passage we looked at last week follows directly on from that, a parable Jesus tells that shows just a level of opposition that was there.

Directly after these verses comes another challenge. As a group called the Sadducees come to try and trip Jesus up with a theological conundrum. We'll think about that next Sunday.

[2:33] But it's clear, isn't it, that the political and religious leaders are searching for some way to discredit Jesus and everything he stands for.

They want to stop this Jesus movement in its tracks. That's the context. So who are the they that do the sending? Well, Mark doesn't tell us, doesn't name them, but it's pretty clear, I think, that the organisation behind these various questions and challenges was a body called the Sanhedrin.

If you don't know, the Sanhedrin was the supreme religious and judicial council of the Jewish people at the time. It had either 70 or 71 members, including the high priest who served as its president.

And it was made up of a bunch of different people, chief priests and tribal elders, scribes, civil servants, if you like, from a wide range of theological and legal perspectives.

And it had a huge authority over religious life, civil life, criminal matters. It was responsible for interpreting the Jewish law, administering justice, adjudicating disputes.

[3 : 43] The council also had the authority to issue decrees and regulations affecting the everyday life of Jewish people. And its decisions were binding on all Jews. This is a powerful body.

And yet Jesus is a huge threat to it. Hence these coordinated questions and challenges. But as we go through the next two or three minutes, I wanted to try and see the sense of desperation that comes out when we lift up the lid on this challenge.

You see, they added this plot that was going on, but the plot and plans were full of holes. We start to see their desperation in the unlikely alliance that is formed.

Such was the Sanhedrin's fear of Jesus that groups that normally hated each other came together in opposition to him. The Pharisees were uber-religious. The Herodians were the opposite end, utterly worldly.

In other contexts, in most contexts, they hated each other. But in Jesus, they found a common enemy. Now, that's not unheard of, is it? Last year, we saw lots of free Palestine marches where Muslim extremists were marching rather uncomfortably with gay rights campaigners.

[5 : 01] Had nothing in common. In almost every area except their loathing for Israel and the Jewish people. Here, the major divisions between the Pharisees and the Herodians, well, they're overlooked.

They're combining together to battle Jesus. They come up with what they think is a minefield of a question. They must have been really chuffed when they came up with it.

Oh, ask him this. See, if Jesus says that people should pay this tax, then he would upset every loyal Jew who hated the Romans.

If he said that people should not pay the tax, well, Jesus would soon find himself in trouble with the Roman authorities. It doesn't seem to be a way to win.

But when it comes to these minefield kinds of questions, Jesus' wisdom is such that he's always able to pick his way through, sidestepping the dangers, showing his questioners up for what they were.

[6 : 00] Because what we find here is this is a foolish plot that is tripped up in its own cleverness. Just look at the words that they say. See, they speak the truth about Jesus, don't they?

Even while they think they're telling lies. Verse 14 is a great summary of Jesus' life and character. Let me read that to you again. Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity.

You're not swayed by others. You teach the truth about God and the way of God in accordance with the truth. They're speaking the truth even whilst they think they are lying.

And they say in that paragraph that Jesus was someone who is never swayed by others. And yet here they are giving him a conundrum which they hope will sway him in the right direction they want him to go.

That was never going to happen. That was never going to happen. In fact, what turns out is that they get caught up in the hypocrisy of their own question.

[7 : 03] The tax they refer to is there in the heading. It's an imperial poll tax. And to be honest, it was about as popular as the one Margaret Thatcher tried to introduce in the 1990s.

It was the equivalent of a day's wages. And it was paid with a coin called a denarius. On one side, it had a picture of Tiberius Caesar and a picture of his mother on the other side.

You think, oh, what a lovely family thing. But the Jewish law prohibited images being made of people. So that was a problem for the Jews.

But the inscription was more of an issue. Because the inscription on one side read this. Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.

It was a claim for divinity of the previous Roman emperor. That's why the Jews wouldn't allow these coins to be used in the temple. That's why there were money changers in the temple courts.

[8 : 01] But did you notice where the coin came from? Jesus says, show me one of these coins. These coins that you hate so much. Where do they bring it?

Well, they look in their own pockets. Pull one out. They've got one already. They're caught up in the hypocrisy of their own question. And of course, lastly, the question is a false dichotomy.

It gives them a false choice. It's not an either or decision. But a both and. See, if we are those who are seeking to walk in God's ways, the question for us isn't a choice between full obedience to the state or full obedience to God.

As if the two are mutually exclusive. It's not either or, but both and. As Christians, as we'll see, that we have responsibilities both to the authorities that God has established in the society and where we live, and we have a responsibility to obey God in every area of our lives.

And of course, there are rare times when those two come into conflict with each other. But it turns out that for the majority of our lives, obeying the state, living under the various structures God has established, is actually part of how we live out authentic Christian lives.

[9 : 20] That's where we're going to spend the rest of our lives. That's where we're going to spend the rest of our time this morning. Look into these two different aspects, thinking through what it means to live as Christians who are under our own Caesars, whose faces are on our own coins.

And the answer is summed up in Jesus' response. Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's. Two things then.

Here's the first major point this morning. As Christians, we are called to be subject to the God-ordained earthly authorities. One of the big implications from what Jesus teaches here is that although as Christians we know we are citizens of heaven, of God's eternal kingdom, we are also citizens of the nation where we find ourselves living here.

We have dual citizenship. That means that when we become Christians, we can't simply say, ah, I don't belong to your nation anymore, so I'm not going to pay any taxes. I'm not a citizen here anymore, so I'm going to ignore the speed limits.

No. We can't say, well, now I have a higher law, and a greater lawgiver that I obey. We might think it would be nice that as citizens of that far-off country we could simply park wherever we like simply by putting a fish symbol on our dashboard.

[10 : 39] That's all right. I'm a Christian. No, we can't do that. We might wish that because all things belong to God, and we are his heirs, that we could use and take whatever we want from wherever we find it, because we know that all things belong to God, and he is our father.

No, that isn't the case. Christians are citizens of heaven and citizens of this earthly kingdom, and that means we remain subject to the appropriate God-ordained earthly authorities in whose realm we live.

Actually, I think there are a number of those authorities that the Bible mentions. There is the government or civil authority.

God has designed for the family as well. Employers or business leaders brings a different realm of authority to us, and within the church as well.

We haven't got a time for a deep dive into those today. Each one is worth a sermon on its own. But as we sit underneath those structures, things that God has designed and put in place, our responsibility is to hear what God says and sit comfortably under them, accepting their responsibility, acting in a way that brings glory to God.

[11:56] That is how we give to Caesar what is Caesar's. So very briefly, let's look at these four. So whatever government is in power or whatever monarch is on the throne, how do we relate to them?

Well, those who bear the weights of responsibility firstly deserve our prayers, because it's a tough job. I certainly wouldn't want it. And secondly, they deserve the respect and honour due to them for taking that role on.

So by all means, comment and criticise the policies of various governments and rulers, but do it respectfully. Campaign with all your energies for a different party if you choose, but make sure you're also praying for those in power right now.

And if councils and governments pass laws that you disagree with, don't think you have a reason and a right to ignore them and do what you like. Unless it's something that clearly contradicts the teaching of the Bible, our calling as Christians is to obey and to submit to the authority of those over us.

In Ephesians chapter 5, Colossians chapter 3, the Apostle Paul also sets out God's structures for family life. In those passages, there are layers of responsibilities for husbands and wives, for children and parents.

[13:18] Husbands are to love their wives and serve them as Christ loved the church, giving himself for them. Wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. Children are to honour their parents.

And parents are not to exasperate their children. Within the structure of a Christian family, there are calls to submit and calls to serve. And actually, within those things, it's more of a reciprocal relationship than simply top-down.

But God has given these structures. And he's given them for our good and for the flourishing of family life. And as Christians living in God's world, we need to hear and obey them.

Render to Caesar, within the family structures, what is Caesar's? The language of employer and employee doesn't very often turn up in the New Testament. But the language of master and slave does.

And I think that sets the pattern for our work lives as well. We're to serve our bosses, our masters, as if we are serving Christ. We're to work hard when they're watching us, when the time of evaluation comes up, and when they're a long way away.

[14:33] We're to be honest, loyal workers, doing an honest day's work for an honest day's wage. Again, if our employer asks us to do something that the Bible says we shouldn't do, we are to say no.

If things are in our workplace, going on that are wrong, then we're to stand up and say something, to do something about them. We are to be agents of good in the world. But we have to work for that change.

We have to deal with colleagues, and sometimes difficult colleagues and difficult bosses, in a respectful way. If someone has authority over us in the workplace, we're to render to them the respect and obedience they deserve because of their position.

And to some degree, that pattern follows on in the church as well. Paul and Peter both speak about the weight of responsibility that falls on church leaders, and the responsibility of all of us in the church to pray for and support the leaders that are there.

That means speaking respectfully to them and about them. Working in a church under the authority that's been delegated. That's not a free reign for pastors and teachers to live and preach however they like.

[15:48] Absolutely not. Congregations are to hold their ministers to account. That's why you need to have your Bibles open, whether it's me or someone else is up here preaching.

So if we bring out something that you think isn't in the Bible, you can speak to us later on and say, did you get that right? Not sure that's correct.

If you see something in the lives of me or Gareth or any of the church leaders, actually you need to take us aside and hold us to account. As a vicar in the Church of England, I've got my own responsibilities to the bishop.

And if you were here three and a half years ago, you would have heard me swear to obey him and honour him in all things honest and lawful. Honest and lawful, being relating how they relate to God's word as well as to the law of the land.

And so within the Church, there is a structure of rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's. And our task as Christians is to willingly sit under those.

[16:56] If you want a way of summing it up, Paul puts it this way in Romans chapter 13. Gives to everyone what you owe them. If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue.

If respect, then respect. If honour, then honour. Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another. For whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

We're to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. We're to do it willingly and cheerfully because those structures and powers have been established by God. So which of those challenges are you most, I wonder?

Where do you most often want to throw off restraint and go, stuff what you say, I'm going to do what I like? Whose authority do you most despise?

We're to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. The words of Jesus this morning. Something to ponder as you go out into this next week. Secondly, as Christians though, our prime obedience belongs to God.

[18:07] Remember what Jesus said when he picked up that coin? He said, whose image is this? And it was Caesar's image. That was the reason why Jesus could say, well this coin obviously belongs to Caesar.

You need to give back to him what is his. He has a right to levy taxes. It says so on the coin. He's the emperor. Well how does the Bible speak about you and me?

Whose image do we bear? Well Genesis chapter 1 tells us that we are made in the image of God. All of us. Every one of us.

Not just Christians. All of us belong to God. This is his world. We are made in his image. We sit under his authority. That's why God's commands are universally true for all people.

But actually I think we might say that they are doubly true for Christians. If it's true for all people whether we accept God's authority or not. Well what about Christians?

[19:15] The Bible tells us that we have been born again. Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 6. You are now not your own. You have been bought with a price. As Christians Jesus paid a price for us to bring us out of sin and death and into God's kingdom.

We were his to begin with. We're now his doubly so. So we've got a double level of obedience that belongs to God haven't we? Which means we're to find out how we're to live as his people in his world.

Something that God has revealed to us in the scriptures. And then we're to do it. If we belong to him we no longer have the right to say hey I'm going to live as I like. And just rock up on Sundays for a bit of dose of religion.

No. God has given us instructions for life. If we are his. Then we need to live in obedience to one who has authority over us.

And that means that his authority is every area of our lives. Not just in a little part but everywhere. So if you thought the command for the Jews to give to Caesar what was Caesar's was challenging.

[20 : 23] Well this is something far more all encompassing. Will you turn over in your Bibles with me to page 1139. I think this is one of those passages where Paul unpacks the teaching of Jesus here wonderfully for us.

It's a wonderful passage Romans 12. It's worth reading again when you get home. I may be thinking through over the course of this week.

So what do we find here? Well in verse 2 we see that our way of seeing the world and how we see everything. Our worldview needs to be shaped and directed by God and his will.

We're not to conform to the pattern of the world but be transformed as our minds are renewed. Verse 3. Our self-assessment of ourselves. Our self-image is not to be shaped by those around us or our Facebook profiles or whatever we might post online.

But it's to be shaped by a sober reflection on ourselves in the light of God's glory and holiness. Verses 4 to 8. Paul is describing well how does that play out in the rest of our lives?

[21 : 38] Well our time and our talents, our abilities, gifts, resources all fall unto God's direction. So we're to give generously, serve willingly, do these things cheerfully, diligently to the best of our abilities.

The focus here in Romans 12 is serving within the local church. And if you're part of the congregation here, then you need to be serving in some way. We'll think more about that in a couple of weeks' time.

But our gifts and talents are to be used for God's glory outside in the world as well, not just within these four walls. Verses 9 to 20, Paul moves on to talk about our relationships.

And he talks about every relationship, either here or elsewhere. And whether it's with our spouses or those we would like to be our spouse, our children or parents, colleagues at work or neighbours.

Whether our focus is on our church family or those who we feel are our enemies. Whether they're individuals, governing authorities or difficult bosses. God has a word to speak to us here.

[22 : 48] About how we should live and love and serve in every situation. And all of that is in the context of Romans 12 verse 1.

Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

It's in view of this act of incredible grace, Paul says, that you're to live this out. You're to change the way you think about the world, about yourself, about how you use your lives.

Our lives. Our right response is to offer our bodies, meaning our very lives, our loves, our dreams, ambitions, possessions, resources, opportunities, talents and time.

As a sacrifice to God. Saying, God, this is yours. How do I live for you? At times that will be inconvenient and difficult. Our natural disposition is to do what we want.

[23 : 50] To drive as fast as we would like. To park wherever we fancy. To use our time and our resources just to do what we fancy at that time. Naturally we want to be independent of God's rule.

So of course changing that will be costly. Jesus said as much himself, didn't he? If you want to follow me, what do you need to do? Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow.

Following Christ means dying to self. And as those who were his twice over, it's what we are called to do.

But it is ultimately the path that brings the greatest joy. So as I wrap things up, let me leave you with an illustration to ponder. I want you to imagine for me that your life is seen as a big house.

You've been living in this house all your life. So some rooms are newer than others because as your life has grown and you've started new things, well new rooms have been added on. Each room matches one different area of your life.

[25 : 02] So there's a work room. If you've had a varied career, maybe there's a whole wing with different jobs. And the people you've met there and the ones you're doing right now. Maybe there's a marriage room.

Or a I'd like to be married to this person room. So it's your romantic life that's in there. There are rooms for the parts of life you enjoy with certain friends.

Maybe there's a snooker room or a walking group room, whatever floats your boat. Maybe there's a room for church. There's a library with all your books and magazines, everything you read.

There's an internet cafe for your online life. There's a banking room which has got all your money and pensions and financial states within. In a quiet corner there's a thinking room.

A place you go and daydream. And you mull about the future and how you'd like it to be. And somewhere in the middle is a diary room which controls your time.

[26 : 01] For most of your life, these rooms have belonged to you and you alone. You've decided what goes on in them. But for some time now, the deeds of this house has been signed over to Jesus.

To a new owner. You're a Christian now. You've been bought at a price. And all you are and all you have now belongs to him. As you think about those rooms and what goes on in them.

I wonder if you would be honest with yourself and before God. Which of them still have locks on the doors to which you have the only key? Which of them have secret compartments or dark corners?

You're happy for Jesus to come into part of the room but you'll stand there. Like someone inviting a friend round and saying, Oh, just don't worry about the laundry. I haven't had time to clear it up. Which of them have parts of the room which you won't share?

Which of the rooms do you wish Jesus had never seen or heard of? And which of those rooms does Jesus truly reign and have authority? And from what rooms do you keep him away?

[27 : 13] Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. Give to God what is God's. That was Jesus' answer to his questioners. The answer would have been deeply challenging to them and it's challenging to us.

So which rooms does Jesus have full access to? Which ones do you need to open up to him?

As you contemplate that, can I invite you to keep these three things in mind? Jesus knows what's in those rooms already. Because he knows all things about you.

No matter what is in those rooms, he loves you more deeply than you can ever contemplate or imagine. And thirdly, the future that Jesus has in store for you is more blessed and glorious than anything else you can imagine right now.

He's good. His ways are good. He's good.

[28 : 45] He's good. And I'll open up our lives to him. Amen.