

Life Group notes 10 Nov 2024: It's a trap!

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We're currently going through a preaching series on the Gospel of Mark. And we have covered a lot in the first eleven chapters. Mark's Gospel may be the shortest, but its chapters are definitely full of action. If you look carefully, a couple of themes that have started to appear.

First, you'll notice Jesus starts to criticise the Pharisees, some of the religious leaders of the day. This continues once Jesus enters Jerusalem and cleanses the temple, after which he has a bit of an argument with some of the chief priests, scribes, and elders, and then tells a parable against them.

You'll also notice that Jesus starts to talk more about his death and resurrection. Things are starting to get serious: people are believing Jesus to be the Messiah. When the chief priests and the scribes heard [Jesus's words], they kept looking for a way to kill him, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. Mark 11)

But they have yet to find an opportunity....This week we're looking at a passage in Mark Chapter 12.

Read: Mark 12:13-17

Q: In verse 13 what was their intent when coming to Jesus?

Q: Have you ever heard anyone quote verse 17? Any teaching that you can share with the group on what people normally explain verse 17 to mean? What do you think we need to learn from this passage?

Some commentators are convinced that this passage is Jesus saying, "Yes, 100% Christians should pay tax at all times", and other commentators are insistent that Jesus is saying "Under no circumstances should you pay tax!"

In short, it's not about the tax. It does seem like Jesus is in favour of paying tax (giving to Caesar what is Caesar's), and there are other verses in the New Testament that advocate for this (e.g. Romans 13:7). But this isn't the main point of this exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Read Mark 12:1-12

Q: Parables are helpful stories that illustrate a kingdom event or principal that is at play. Who are the farmers? Who are the servants that are sent? Who is the son of the owner?

Verse 12 tells us the motivation of the authorities for the discussion in next section – the question about paying taxes.

Q: If Jesus re-enforces that the Jewish people need to definitely pay taxes to the Romans, what do you think the consequences will be for his popularity? Why would the teachers want his popularity to decline?

If Jesus answers in the affirmative and says "Yes, it is lawful to pay tax to Caesar" then this could cost Jesus the support of the Jewish people. Remember that the Jewish people were suffering under Roman oppression at this point in history. It's a pretty safe bet that he would quickly lose the support of the people and cease to be a threat to the religious leaders.

Q: If Jesus told the crowd not to pay tax, what would the potential consequences be for him?

If the religious leaders had evidence that Jesus was fostering an anti-Roman sentiment, then they could manipulate Rome into arresting Jesus for them.

Jesus changes the focus and says "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," and then more importantly, "Give to God what is God's!" Jesus is cleverly outwitting the religious leaders as they try to trap him. See verse 15, Jesus sees that it's a trap!

Q: At what point did the religious leaders actually ask anything about God? Did they at all?

The religious leaders ask Jesus a question about giving to Caesar, and Jesus gives them a response about giving to Caesar **and giving to God**. See the difference? The religious leaders didn't mention God at all! Jesus is saying, "you're not asking the right question. What matters isn't what you give to Caesar, **but what you give to God.**"

Read: Mark 7:8.

Could it be that the leaders are concerned about human things (like tax) and have forgotten about devotion to God? How often do we come to God with questions about human things instead of divine things? The Bible is very clear about us bringing our concerns before God, but I think we need to check our underlying focus. Are we asking these questions of God because we want things to be better for us, or because we want to bring glory to God and further God's kingdom?

The Bible says "seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness".

Fear God, not humans!

The coin in V15 would have had Augustus's head very clearly pressed on the coin. The writing around his head in discovered artifacts found inscription that translated to "Caesar Augustus, son of the divine, father of the nation." It basically proclaimed Ceasar to be the son of God!

While they were able to clearly and decisively identify the head as Caesar, the supposed "son of god," **they failed to identify the actual Son of God standing before them**. This is the point of the parable about the vineyard and the tenants told in earlier verses.

Q: The Bible clearly holds the fear of the Lord out as being a good thing. But do we? What do you think it means to fear God? Discuss in your group.

What would it look like if we cared more about what God thought than about what our friends thought? Our family? Our colleagues? The government? The church? Strangers on the Internet? I imagine that with a healthy fear of the Lord, the way we pray, and the things we ask God about might be quite different. Worship God, not humans. Trust in God, not humans. Give to the things of God to God, not humans.

[Give to God what is God's](#)

Q: What do you think Jesus meant when he said we should give to God what is God's? Discuss.

Read: Genesis 1:27.

Q: What image are we made in? Are we part of the things that should be given back to God as they belong to God?

While Caesar might be entitled to a few coins, we belong to God and are to give our very selves to God. Might it be that Jesus isn't making a statement about tax but is reminding the religious leaders that they are created in the image of God and that they belong to God. Maybe they shouldn't be spending their time being so concerned about what to give to Caesar but thinking about how they can live out their calling as images of God.

Read: Romans 12:1

Q: What should we be giving to God? What did Mark write in Chapter 8:34-35?

The commandment to love God with heart, soul, and strength isn't just a list of the individual parts of our lives that we are to love God with, but rather that it encompasses EVERYTHING that we are and EVERYTHING that we have. Only by loving God with everything we are and everything that we have that we are truly giving to God what is God's. Whatever we are today, whatever we have, and whatever we do, all of it belongs to God.

Conclusion

This idea of God over humans and giving everything to God isn't news to most of us, right? This isn't a brand-new idea. Jesus's response to the religious leaders' question about tax gives us a sort-of checklist to once again evaluate how we are living.

1. Are we focused on the things of God or the things of humanity?
2. Do we fear God or humans?
3. Are we giving everything we have to God?

This message can be an encouragement and reminder that this is what we should be aiming for. Are we distracted by the things of this world? Are we really giving ourselves and all we have to God or do we need to come before God again and offer ourselves as living sacrifices for His Glory and His Kingdom.