

October 30, 2011

# All Things are God's; Some of Those are Caesar's

Mark 12:13-17

## INTRODUCTION

A litmus test is a standard in politics that trumps every other consideration. The word comes from the world of chemistry. But the expression is used during every election season, usually asked to the candidate who is pro-life in a way that everyone expects will make him squirm: “Will you impose any litmus test on a judge that you appoint to the Supreme Court?” at which point the politician who has no convictions buckles and stutters. The subtle assumption is that having a litmus test at all is irrational: a barking, raving, simple-minded statement of totality, that this one thing is more important than all other things. But the truth is that all of the citizens of both cities have such a litmus test where total allegiance is demanded.

- THE WORLD'S LITMUS TEST FOR CHRIST
- THE BIBLE'S LITMUS TEST FOR CAESAR

**The Big Idea** is that the whole world belongs to God, and therefore we render to Caesar exactly (and only) what images forth Christ.

You may or may not remember, from the introduction to our series on the Gospel of Mark, that this was written from Rome to persecuted Gentile Christians.

## DOCTRINE

### I. THE WORLD'S LITMUS TEST FOR CHRIST

### A) The Motive of the World's Standard {vv. 13, 15}

1. Matthew's Gospel focuses on **some of the Pharisees** "disciples" [22:16] and Luke calls some of these people "spies" [20:20], so that there were even those in Herod's court who specialized in religious controversy, only to report these pesky Jews to the Roman authorities. Notice how true Christianity brings the enemies of Christ together: *And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk (13)*. The Pharisees and the Herodians despised each other. The leaders of formal religion and the cultural elites often do; but one thing which will bring all the enemies of Christ together is a clear word from Christ. When there's any danger of God showing up in his temple, all the raging demons of hell, usually at each other's throats, will march in one step and sing in one tune. But let's just take notice of this first, clear reference to their motive. It is **to trap him** in this very matter of truth, or **his talk**. If it is his word that is so dangerous then they will have to use words to drive a wedge in.

2. Look now down to verse 15. Before we get to substance of their strategy, we have to come to grips that the world does have an evil strategy. They deliberately mean to rob you of the truth. So Jesus, just like the Apostles in their letters, assigns motives: *But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it" (15)*. Now I don't think we can say that **hypocrisy** is their base motive. It may be something else. But we can at least say that, in doing this, they were exemplifying hypocrisy. Said another way, this attempt to trap Jesus into giving up truth was characterized by hypocrisy. Now why is that? Why is it hypocritical to use rigorous logic, as in setting up the dilemma we're about to look at, in order to test someone else? Aren't we supposed to "test everything" [1 Thess. 5:21]; and do we not use reason in doing so? Well, yes and yes; but *that* is exactly why this is all so hypocritical. They are using words and logic, and even paying compliments about Jesus' love of true words and true standards, when all the while they are using the same to dismiss the truth. But I think we may have to look at the substance of their dilemma to see it.

### B) The Substance of the World's Standard {v. 14}

1. *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 (14a).* Now this was pretty patronizing. I'm not even sure that they were under the impression that this would fool anyone; it was all a PR game at this point. There will always come those who butter us up specifically by telling us that we're not the sort of people who can be buttered up! What they're looking for is some form of compromise, some form of tailoring the message; and they deceive themselves that this particular special interest, of which they are the lobbyist, is not the same thing as all those other cultural pimps hanging onto the preacher's ear. But the gist of this litmus test of the world to the church is: *If you will solve our problems (as we see them) in the way that we already know they need to be solved (never mind that we never have), then we will consider your Jesus and his gospel.*

But Paul models how the true handler of Christian truth copies Jesus in this: "For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" [2 Cor. 2:17]; "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" [Gal. 1:10].

2. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not? (14b)* Lawful here refers to the law in Exodus 30:13, that, every Jew was to render "half a shekle as an offering to the LORD," in other words as their tribute money. If any tribute money was in conflict with this, then such a tax would be a burden on people that directly prevented them from this functional tithe. So here is the crux of the dilemma: If He answers 'Yes,' then He contradicts the Law, and so makes himself an enemy of the Jews; if He answers 'No,' then He makes himself an enemy of the Roman state. Either way the dilemma sets up the death penalty. But Jesus **said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."** This has the feeling of saying, "Why haven't you given up yet? Aren't you tired by now of me making you look silly?" If ever Jesus rolled his eyes, or whatever the ancient Near East equivalent was, during his time on earth, this really could have been the time. So, in other words, go get me the noose I'm about to hang you with.

## II. THE BIBLE'S LITMUS TEST FOR CAESAR

### A) Whose Image is This? {v. 16}

1. Notice that there are two main things Jesus says here. One has to do with the image on the coin, and the other, flowing from that, has to do with what are the things of God versus what are the things of the state. And I hope it becomes clear, if it's not already, that there is a surface meaning and a deeper biblical meaning. First let's look to the surface of this coin. *And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" (16a)* This was not a hard question. It reminds me of when Jay Leno would go out to the streets of Los Angeles just to show how clueless people are, by showing them pictures of famous world leaders; except that, when there is one secular ruler in the world and he's not up for re-election, you can pretty easily pick him out of a lineup, even without television. So, naturally, *They said to him, "Caesar's" (16b)*.

2. Now what about this inscription? Oh, it was no big deal. It just read: "TIBERIUS CAESAR DIVI AUGUSTI FILIUS AUGUSTUS," which, of course, is Latin for Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus. Flip the coin over and you would read: "Pontifex Maximus," which means "high priest." Now things aren't so secular anymore, are they? And, yes, "image" and **likeness** are used interchangeably in the Greek just as they are in Genesis 1:26-27. D. A. Carson says about this,

Yet we must not think that Jesus' utterance warrants an absolute dichotomy between God and Caesar, or between church and state, or between Christ and culture...When Jesus asks the question, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?' biblically informed people will remember that all human beings have been made in the image and likeness of God...If we give back to God what has his image on it, we must all give ourselves to him. Far from privatizing God's claim, that is, the claim of religion, Jesus' famous utterance means that God always trumps Caesar. We may be obliged to pay taxes to Caesar, but we owe everything, our very being, to God.<sup>1</sup>

And so there is this deeper meaning to the question, which, it is true, Jesus does not explicitly draw out. This is not his aim with the Pharisees and Herodians.

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2008); p. 57

They are not his disciples; they are his enemies. But two things should be kept in mind for this context, two questions that shed light on this likeness of the coin: 1) Does the rest of the Bible teach it? 2) Does the rest of this passage exhibit this same surface / depth layering? The answers to both are Yes.

### B) Which Things are God's? {v. 17}

1. Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (17a). Now Matthew adds the word “therefore” (v. 21) which more clearly indicates that the reason one is to render between Caesar and God in this way is because of the question of image that comes prior. On this coin is the image of a Man who is the image of God—**therefore** render to this man this thing and render to God these things. Now our question will be, “Which things are which?”

2. On the surface, there are basically four main ways to understand what Jesus has said here. In the class of “things” let us picture a large circle representing “all things” that may be disputed as belonging to Caesar or God. Within this circle, represented by smaller circles, we might consider that 1) Caesar has *some* of those things and God has *some* of those things, or 2) Caesar has *none* of those things and God has *all* of those things, or 3) Caesar has *all* of those things and God has *none* of those things. We cannot consider that 4) neither Caesar, nor God have *any* of those things, for then Jesus would be speaking deceptively, which would eliminate his divine status. So which of these three remaining alternatives is taught in Scripture? Let us begin with a very straightforward verse:

The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein [Ps. 24:1].

Or, as the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper said it, “There is not a single square inch of creation over which Christ does not say, ‘Mine!’” But where does that land us? Well, what if there is one more option? What if God owns *all* things and gives *some* of those same things to Caesar by means of representative agency, or what Moses called, “the image of God” [Gen. 1:26]? What if God ordained not only that Caesar would reign, but actually ordained the office that Caesar would hold to speak about his own glory? And, lo and behold, this is

exactly what the Scriptures teach about the secular office holder, that he bears a “sword” [Rom. 13:4] that God granted to him for a very a particular purpose, to speak about the justice of God. “But,” you may object, “the civil servants have often abused this sword and not used it speak of God’s justice.” That is true and we will deal with the question in our application.

3. But notice how thoroughly Jesus had confounded his opponents. This is the objective of the Christian as well: *And they marveled at him (17b)*. This is not the marveling of appreciation or admiration; this is the marveling of ultimate frustration and kindling for their hatred of Him.

## APPLICATION

1. **To the point where Caesar demands what belongs to God** – First of all, how do you know when Caesar has demands that you render to him what belongs to God? I thought everything belongs to God, so how can Caesar ask anything else? That is a good question. The biblical answer is that God has given only some of the things He owns to Caesar’s sphere. That sphere is called the state. And God made it good to speak about himself. When the officials of the state demand those things of God that do not belong to the state, then they are commanding your worship, and you and I are duty-bound to Christ to disobey the state at that point. We did a class on biblical ethics. Please consider listening carefully to the two messages called “God-Glorifying State” (Parts I and II).
2. **Jesus’ litmus test?** It’s all or nothing. Now have you given your all? If not, let me be the first to tell you, I haven’t either. I’ve made commitments, but the Bible says that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [Rom. 3:23], and “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” [1 Jn. 1:8]. But John’s very next words give us the good news: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” [1:9]. How can He do this for we who will be sinners until the day we

die? The only way is for God to punish every single one of our sins (which He did in Christ)—Peter says, “he bore our sins in his body on the tree” [1 Pet. 2:24]—and when we appear before the righteous Judge we need a perfect righteousness. This too Christ accomplishes for us. He got all of our sin; we get all of his righteousness, through faith, so that on that Day, we can say with Paul, that we will “be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, that depends on faith” [Phi. 3:9].