**Give to God What is God’s**

(What does God want from us?)

October 6, 2013

Mark 12:13-17

Key Verse 12:17 “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’”

What does God want from us? Many different people throw up different answers. Some might say that he demands 10% of our income and then debate whether this is before or after tax. What Muslim faith requires is not that difficult: abstain from a few things, pray at the appointed time and make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in your lifetime. But what about Christians? What does God want from us? In the previous passage, the religious leaders questioned Jesus’ authority. Jesus countered by teaching that his authority came from God. Jesus drove home his point with the parable of the tenants. In today’s passage, the Jewish leaders sent agents to trap Jesus with a loaded question about taxes. Jesus responded, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” In this verse we can find answers to our question, “What does God want from us?”

Look at verse 13. “Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.” This verse shows all the Jewish religious leaders and political leaders had united among themselves to find a way to arrest Jesus. On any other occasion the Pharisees and Herodians were archrivals. The Pharisees opposed Roman occupation of Israel. Herodians were Jews who supported the Roman sponsored Herod dynasty. Both parties found common grounds in their opposition against Jesus. Look at verse 14. “They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

Now, what is at dispute here is not taxation policy. The Pharisees and Herodians were not really interested in what Jesus had to say about the issue. What they were interested in was trapping Jesus. This was a trick question, along the same lines as “Have you stopped cheating on your exams?” If you answer no, then the response is “So you still cheat.” If the answer is yes, then the response is “Ah, so you admit to cheating in the past.” We laugh at the joke. But this question, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” was a serious question.

Israel, at the time, was under the control of the Romans. The Jews believed that they were the chosen people of God and they longed for the day when God would kick out the Romans and put his anointed king, the Messiah on the throne, while all the other nations in the world became subject to them. So if Jesus says “yes, you should pay the tax,” then he would alienate the crowd and set himself against them. How could he claim to speak for God, or claim to be the anointed king, the Messiah if he was for a Roman tax. The Pharisees would say, “Look, this Jesus is no better than the collaborating tax collectors and sinners he hangs out with.” But on the other hand, if he actually says “no, don’t pay the tax,” then they can report him to the Romans as a rebel and inciting revolt, both of which were capital crimes. Finally the Jewish leaders felt they had Jesus in a trap in which there was no escape.

Jesus’ answer was a masterpiece of brilliance. He starts by asking them to give him a coin and then asks them whose picture and inscription were on the coin. Here is the picture of a Roman coin from the 1st century during the reign of Tiberius the Roman Emperor at the time of Jesus. You’ll notice that on the coin there is a picture of Tiberius. On one side it says “Augustus Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus” and on the other side it says “High Priest.” Now while most people know that Jews were forbidden to make idols in the Old Testament, what most people don’t know is that they were also forbidden to make any images. For example, when Herod made coins, he put a reed on them, not his own face, not because he was an observant Jew, but he wanted to win the favor with the Jews and did not want a revolt. As you can imagine, this made the coins really unpopular with Jews, not only having a forbidden image, but claiming to be Son of God. Some Jews wouldn’t even accept, keep or use such coins because of the blasphemy on them, making sure all transactions took place with Jewish coins. So the question is about whether to pay the tax acknowledging idol worship, or whether not to pay the tax in order not to commit the sin of idol worship.

Look at verse 17. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Jesus answers with a reply that avoided both traps the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to lay for him. Firstly, it can be taken as way of saying ‘yes, pay the tax’ so he’s not in trouble with the Romans, but by drawing attention to the blasphemous image and inscription, he is in fact saying “send this filthy stuff back where it came from.” It is opposing the Pagan Romans and their blasphemous claims but they can’t charge him with anything, after all he didn’t “tell people not to pay the tax.”

Look at verse 17 again. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Jesus was saying that if a coin with the image of Caesar was to be given to Caesar, surely what bears the image of God should be given to God. What bears the image of God? According to Genesis 1:27, man does. It says, “God created man in his image.” It mentions it four times in Genesis that man is made in the image of God. Here is Jesus standing in the courtyards of the temple, saying, “Coming to the temple and giving the required sacrifice are not enough; he wants all of you. Religious observance that ignores God is not enough.” Jesus’ answer was directed at the Pharisees and Herodians who refused to respect the Son of God as in the Parable of the Tenants. They did not give Jesus the Son of God the respect he deserves. Jesus is really saying that as we bear the image of God, we should give our lives to God, all of it, completely.   
  
What does God want from us?

**First**, we should not distinguish the secular and the sacred. It is very easy to split our lives up into different bits that don’t affect one another, so religion is one thing, work another, family another and so on. But God says no. There are some people who when they cross the threshold of the church, their languages change, there are things they would never dream of doing in church, yet they do them all the time when they are not in church, as if God is somehow confined to the church and is not aware or doesn’t care about what goes on outside the church doors. When Jesus said, “give to God what is God’s,” he was talking about man bearing the image of God. That means all of us. Our work life, our private life, our family life, our religious life. Everything belongs to God. It doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy yourself or do things for your pleasure. It does mean that your ethics apply right across the board. If it’s not acceptable in the church, then it is probably not acceptable out of the church either.

Charles Spurgeon, the 19 century famous preacher, said, “To a man who lives unto God, nothing is secular, everything is sacred. He puts on his workday garment and it is a vestment to him. He sits down to his meal and it is a sacrament. He goes forth to his labor, and therein exercises the office of the priesthood. His breath is incense and his life a sacrifice. He sleeps on the bosom of God, and lives and moves in the divine presence. To draw a hard and fast line and say, “This is sacred and this is secular,” is, to my mind, completely opposed to the teaching of Christ and the spirit of the gospel. Peter saw a sheet let down from heaven in which were all manner of beasts and four-footed creatures, which he was forbidden to kill and eat, and when he refused because they were unclean, he was rebuked by a voice from heaven, saying, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” (Acts 10;15) The Lord has cleansed your houses, he has cleansed your bed chambers, your tables… He has made the common pots and pans of your kitchens to be as the bowls before the altar –if you know what you are and live according to your high calling. Your labor is holy if you serve the Lord Christ in it, by living unto Him as you ought to live. The sacred has absorbed the secular.”

**Second**, we have to live as dual citizens. How do we live as citizens of two kingdoms – a heavenly one and an earthly one? Jesus’ answer is profound. Pay your taxes to Caesar, but give yourself to God. Fulfill your obligations to the government, but worship God and God alone. In fact, a believer in Christ should be a better citizen than most. Daniel is a good example of one who lived as a citizen of the kingdom of God under evil rulers. When his country was destroyed, he was forced to serve evil rulers who killed many of his people, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar. But he did not try to join a rebellion or assassinate the king. He served the kings and even prayed for them. But he resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he kept himself pure. He also prayed three times a day even though it was against the law. His enemies used it against him to put Daniel in the lions’ den. But Daniel was faithful to God to the end. God protected Daniel, and through this event, God was honored and glorified and the unbelieving king Darius became a believer.

In the county of Lancan Lahu, Yunnan province, in the mid 1990s, Chinese government officials became so fed up with sky-high rates of crime, drug addiction to opium. Their addiction made them weak and sick. But they noticed that in some villages in the county, people were prosperous and peace loving. There was no drug problem, or any stealing or social order problems. Households had a plentiful supply of pigs, oxen, and chickens. So they commissioned a survey to find out why these villages were different. To their astonishment and embarrassment, they discovered that the key factor was that these villages had a majority of Christians. Officials launched a daring experiment in 1998, the likes of which would have been unthinkable in China 10 years previous—they sponsored Christians to go into the troublesome villages and share their faith. They started by picking out the worst village, which had 240 people, 107 of which were hopelessly addicted to opium. Christians were bussed into the village at government expense, and the villagers were herded together by the police and made to listen to the testimonies of the Christians. A year later, there were 17 converts in the village, and they began to grow rich because they stopped spending money on drugs. Eight of the 17 converts even had enough to own sewing machines and start small businesses. These Christians were model citizens even in a country where the government opposed their values. And that’s what Christ wants us to be wherever we are, because it brings glory to Him. So pay your taxes, obey the laws of the land, and pray for your government officials. It is what it means to live as a citizen of heaven while we are citizens here on earth.

Lastly, it means not giving to others what belongs to God. In ancient times as I mentioned, it means not worshipping Caesar as God or a Son of God, because worship belongs to God. In modern times, we don’t worship, bow down or kill animals as sacrifices as they did in ancient times, but we do put other things in God’s place, we let other things become our top priority, the thing we care most about. As our Creator, as the one who gave everything he had for us, as the Sovereign Ruler of the universe, as the one who loves us and wants the very best for us, God has a right to be our top priority and the number one. We should honor God in all we do. Give to God what is God’s.