

GIVE TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S

Mark 12:13-17 (Key verse 17)

"Then Jesus said to them, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"

Are we obliged to obey our government? What is our attitude towards the law of the land? How do we feel about paying taxes to our government? In terms of taxes, for students this is not an issue for you, since you do not receive a salary from which the government takes off their tax. However, we all pay taxes one way or another. When you buy food from a grocery store, there is something called VAT. Which is currently sitting at 15% in South Africa. That means from anything you buy you are paying government 15% of that total amount. These taxes are meant to contribute towards the running of the country, e.g. fixing of our roads, education system, public works, social grants and provision of basic services. What happens if the country does not use our tax monies correctly? If our elected officials steal taxpayer's money to enrich themselves? Or if the monies are used to oppress one group of people over another. Do you continue paying the taxes? Do you continue abiding to the laws of the land? Perhaps the real question is? Why do we abide to the laws of the land? In today's passage Jesus reveals the fundamental reason why we should abide to the laws of the land. Moreover, through this passage Jesus is also teaching us what it means to give to God what is God's. May we learn today, how to practically give to God what belongs to God just as we practically submit to the law of the land.

Let me just give a bit of a background. Last week Jesus had gone into the temple courts and rebuked those who had been selling and turned the tables upside down. The Chief priests had come to Jesus, asking him by what authority he had done what he did. As we learned they could not really do much to Jesus since Jesus also gave them a counter question which they could not answer. Last week passage ended with, "Then they looked for a way to arrest him...but they were afraid of the crowd, so they left him and went away". They now had a new plan, look at verse 13, "Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words." The Pharisees were the most religious of the Jewish sect, they were dedicated to the interest of Israel, they were also strict with their religious laws. Whereas on the other hand the Herodians were political, not religious, dedicated towards enforcing Roman laws. So, it is clear from their passions and professions, these two groups did not really like each other. However, for this occasion they got united in order to trap Jesus. How could this be? This is because they now had a common enemy who devastated their vision, plans and establishments. Religious leaders were losing popularity because of Jesus teachings. They were losing their authority over to Jesus. On the other hand the Herodians, heard about Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem and gotten shaken by Jesus influence and popularity. Also, the religious leaders needed the favor of the Herodians in prosecuting Jesus because they did not have legal right to prosecute Jesus. However, the real grand plan for them to be united is because of the trap they have for Jesus. It was important that, not only the Pharisees approach Jesus, or only the Herodians, it was necessary that both Pharisees and Herodians together as one approach Jesus for their grand master plan to work.

Let us see how they approached Jesus, look at verse 14-15, "They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, 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 the imperial tax to Caesar or not? 15Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked.

"Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." Where they really sincere about Jesus. Because it is true the things they said about Jesus, however they were not sincerely telling Jesus those things in order that they may accept and obey Jesus teachings. We all know why they had come to Jesus, it was in order to trap Jesus. So, they were trying to pump Jesus ego and pride so that Jesus may make a mistake which they can then use to imprison Jesus. Jesus had not come to be validated by men, no matter how high ranking they were religiously or politically. Jesus had come for one purpose only, to do not his will but the will of our heavenly father. In this way Jesus could not be swayed by others but taught the way of God in accordance with the truth.

Their taming question was, "is it right to pay the imperial taxes to Caesar or not?" this is a kind of question that is meant to make a person think only in a certain way. Their real trap question is in verse 15a, "should we pay or shouldn't we?" they made their question binary, either a yes or a no. Now, if Jesus says yes, then he loses favor with the Jews who were in favor of not paying the imperial tax. The imperial tax was an additional personal tax that they had to pay and it was worth a one day's wages. They had other taxes which they paid such as the taxes for the army, roads, including the temple tax. They saw this tax as an abuse and oppression from the Romans. And so, if Jesus said they should pay, then he would be deemed a traitor and would anger the whole Jewish nation because now they had this imperial tax to pay. However, if Jesus said No, then the Herodians would easily arrest Jesus for treason against the Roman government for inciting rebellion and lawlessness. However, what was Jesus response instead, look at verse 15b again trough to verse 16, "...bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. A denarius was Roman coin that contained the emperor's image and some inscription. In South Africa, our coins we use animals and plant images. On some of our notes is where we use images of people. But overall, we mostly use animals. So I wonder how would have Jesus responded if he was in South Africa. Anyhow, let us see how Jesus further responded, let us all read verse 17, "Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him."

Jesus did not just say Yes or No in response to the Pharisees and the Herodians. Instead Jesus response is revolutionary, it is so transformative life changing. Let us look at Jesus response carefully. Jesus did not say, pay back Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Instead Jesus says, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. This means that the taxes belonged to Caesar. They were obligated to give back what belonged to Caesar. Here Jesus is teaching us that, we are obligated to pay taxes to our government. It is a non-negotiable. This was not an easy teaching because, Jesus was saying even though the Roman government of the time was pagan, they were obligated to pay taxes. Knowing that these taxes were even used to continue your very own oppression and colonization made it difficult. It did not matter how those taxes were being used what mattered was they belonged to Caesar. Apostle Paul puts it well in Romans 13:1-2, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." This means that the state is an organ that was established by God. To respect the state and give honor to the state, is to respect and honor God. Romans 13:6 further says, "This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing." So from here we can see that our obligation to the law of the land, to obeying the laws of our government, is to actually honor to God. Because Caesar is a servant of God. In actuality, it is

because of the laws of the land, that we can enjoy the freedoms we have. There is law and order in the land. A Kenyan friend, once told me that the one thing that makes South Africa different or unique from most of the African countries is that, we have an independent judicial system. And I still remember in 2011 when the police commissioner was found guilty by the courts and was sentenced to jail. His sentencing proved the rigor and independence of our judicial system. It was a proud moment for me actually for I was still in a foreign country, because a police commissioner is very powerful a person who is well connected with higher authorities. However, our judicial system was able to convict him.

However, in recent years we have had complaints regarding our government mainly on corruption. Complaints that our tax monies have been mis-used for personal gains and funding state enterprises that are going down the drain. Last time when I was in Kuruman, the clinic in Mothibistad has deteriorated, they had even run out of a sanitizer. Yet people pay taxes in order to have basic services such as good health care. What does one then do when it appears as though our institutions and officials are failing to use our tax monies appropriately? Do we stop paying taxes and stop abiding to the law of the land? No, we should remember Jesus teaching, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar..." paying our taxes is not a choice. We should do it out of reverence for God and not because of the good conduct of the institutions or government. Same time, what if our government has a law that prevents us from doing the will of God? What then do we do in that case? A similar situation happened in the book of Daniel. Three men Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego were faithful servants to king Nebuchadnezzar. They honored and respected king Nebuchadnezzar and served him with integrity, until Nebuchadnezzar asked them to bow down to the Golden image. When the king asked them to do something against God's will, they could not. Although Nebuchadnezzar was a servant of God and was given a kingdom to rule over, ultimately all his authority and power was given by God. Same time God cannot therefore contradict himself by commanding us through the laws of the land to do what is against His will. We submit to the laws of the land because we seek to do the will of God and honor God. Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego kept their spiritual identity and integrity. They lived in the sight of Lord and lived to glorify God.

Moreover, Jesus response to the Pharisees and Herodians did not end there. Jesus also said, give to God what is God's. Let us look again at verse 16-17, "They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. 17Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." and they were amazed at him. Jesus used the image of Caesar on the coin as a sign/stamp of whom the denarius belonged to. This means the same way we give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, we should also give to God what is God's. However, what are the things that belong to God? How can we know what belongs to God? We also know from the book of Genesis, the book of the origins of man and the world. That we are all created in the image of God. And likewise, we belong to God. Just as the people owed Caesar the tax, we too owe God our lives. We are living today because God lives and allows us to be alive. Remember when God created us in his image, he gave us his very own spirit so that we may become a living being. Genesis 2:7, reads, "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." So the truth is that we are living with a borrowed spirit of God. We are indebted to God. We have life because God exists. It is sad sometimes when we meet a person and then they say they are too busy to learn about God or to be involved in the things of God. Not realizing that the very ability to be able to say what they are saying is because of the grace of God. They are making life choices using the spirit of God while they carry the very image of God. We owe

God everything, our time, worship, thanksgiving basically our hearts. In fact the way we use our time reveals a lot about who or what we are devoted to. Our lives are measured through time. At work our salaries are measured through time, as students your exam, projects are measured through time. There is a story of businessman who was invited to come learn the bible and know about the salvation work of Jesus. Basically, to commit to a local church. His response was that he was too busy and though he had desire he said unfortunately he did not have time. One day he was diagnosed with cancer. Now he had to schedule for chemotherapy which can take some good hours on a weekly or monthly basis. It did not matter how busy he was, he had to make the time for the therapy. He needed his life in order to do all kinds of things he used to do. When his life was at stake, he could make the time. Our lives are in God's hands, God is the owner of our life, we owe God our life. It is not our own to keep. The cancer is like sin, and unless we make the time to study and practically obey what the Bible teaches, we will live a meaningless life, a loss of eternal life. We are all sinners, never wanting to give to God what is God's, and not even abiding to the laws of our government. However, as we learned last week, God has been sending messages throughout history for us to repent and accept God as the owner of our lives. John 3:16, tells us that, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." 2000 years and so ago, God sent Jesus Christ his one and only begotten son, as a sacrificial lamb of God for our sin. So that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. God loves us greatly because we are his property, we are his creation whether we believe it or not. May we give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's.

In conclusion, in today's passage Jesus is teaching us that we have dual obligation. We are obliged to submit to the laws of the land. Same time we are also obligated to our God. God wants our hearts to be completely dedicated to him. In other words, by abiding to the laws of the land, which is something practical, we can also learn to practically give to God what is God's. How can we give to God whom we do not see, what belongs to him, if we cannot practically abide to the laws of the land which can be practically observed? In truth actually all things belong to God. God desires what is His, Jesus said in Matthew 22:37, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Last week Msn Daniel and Miso left South Africa mainly because of health issues. From their young age they gave their lives to serve God. One would have thought that now in their old age they would go rest and enjoy life. However, they came to South Africa as missionaries. They wanted to give their whole life to serving God. Their lives challenges my life, seeing that the wanted to give more their lives for Africa but now because of their health they cannot, how about me who has good health and youngish. Their key verse coming to Africa was, "Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."—John 21:16. I pray that we may repent today and give to God what is God's. May we put our trust in Him and render to Him what is His. Amen.