



Sermon – June 23, 2019  
Philip Bethancourt

**Verses Covered**

*Mark 12:13 - 17*

Amen. And as you grab your seat, let's grab our Bibles together. We're going to spend our time this morning in the book of Mark chapter 12. Mark 12. And it's great to be back here with you. It was a joy to be with you back in October. I was just with Chris and a number of pastors that have come through Central just a couple weeks ago in Birmingham at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. And it's such a joy to be back here at this church. It means so much to me and my family through the ministry that we were a part of during my season in college and serving on staff here back in the 2000's. Now during the introduction, Bill hesitated from describing the name of our organization because it's so complicated. It's the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. And what we do is we serve southern Baptist churches just like Central in equipping you to navigate the challenging questions in life from a cultural and ethical, political and a moral standpoint. And we have an office in Nashville and Washington, D.C. where we serve that. So we get the chance to be a voice for southern Baptist churches just like this and to equip you on how to think through life's big questions in light of the Bible.

And this morning we're going to do exactly that as we spend our time thinking through a familiar passage in Mark chapter 12 beginning in verse 13 as Jesus is responding to those who are trying to trap Him. And so if you'll follow along in the text with me, here's the way that Mark describes it. Mark chapter 12 in verse 13.

<sup>13</sup>And they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians to trap Him in His talk. <sup>14</sup>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. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? <sup>15</sup>Should we pay them or should we not?" But knowing their hypocrisy, He said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring Me a denarius and let me look at it." <sup>16</sup>And they brought one. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at Him.

Let's pause to pray.

Father, as we meet You in Your word this morning, we're praying now that You would change our lives and make us more like Jesus. That Your Spirit would fall on this place and stir in our hearts in a way that conforms us to the image of Christ. That we might live more faithfully in the public square just as You have called us. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.

Well, I'm not sure if you're keeping track of your calendar, but it's only two months from college football season. Does that excite anybody else? Imagine between now and the end of August the federal government passed a new law that forbid you from expressing your fandom anywhere outside the stadium and your home. You can be a sports fan, you can wear your team colors, if you're an Aggie fan you can don the maroon, you can carry that Aggie ring on your finger, but only in the privacy of your own home and only in the stadium during the game. Now that wouldn't make any sense, right. Because when you're a fan of a team that's, in a sense, a part of who you are. You can't separate that out just to the stadium and just to your home. It's reflected in the way you live your life. I know some of you college students are saying, "If I can't wear maroon, what am I going to wear?" Now there is one exception, I would not be opposed to this legislation passing if it was targeted only towards the Longhorns, right. We can go for that. But imagine that scenario. Wouldn't make any sense because you can't compartmentalize the home and the stadium from the rest of your life. But so often, when it comes to the way that people in our culture around us think of the way that Christianity should relate to how we engage to culture, they treat it the same way. They say, "It's fine for you to live out your faith as long as you do it in the privacy of your own home and in the confines of your church or your faith community. But you need to leave that when you come into the public square." That that's not acceptable. In the same way it wouldn't make sense to compartmentalize who you are as a fan, it doesn't make sense to compartmentalize who you are as a Christian. And the way that you live out your faith in the public square. And the good news for us this morning is that Jesus has a word for us about understanding what it means to live out our faith in the culture around us.

And so think about happening in Mark 12. Jesus is already entered into Jerusalem in the triumphal entry. He's cleansed the temple and He's just told the parable of the tenants that is sending a signal to the religious leaders of the day that He will not submit to them. They recognize that Jesus is a threat to their power and so they want to arrest Him, but they are afraid to take action because they don't know what's going to happen. And instead, what they do, instead of attempting to arrest them, they attempt to trap Him. And what we're going to find this morning in Mark 12 is that Jesus, in this passage, reveals how we as Christians should relate to the world around us. So notice what happens. Look back at verse 13. It tells us that they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians. Now if you know your New Testament, you know the Pharisees, they're the religious leaders in that time period. But the Herodians were those that were devoted to a certain political tribe. So you have powerful religious leaders and powerful political leaders who were often in opposition to one another. But what happens here is that a common enemy brings together foes to work together. And it tells us what they're trying to do there in verse 13. Why did they come to Him? Look at the end of verse 13. It says: to trap Him in His talk. They can't stop Him so they're going to try to trap Him. And how do they do it? Beginning in verse 14, you're going to notice the way that they, before they attempt to trap Him, they begin by trying to butter Him up. Saying nice things to Him. Make Him feel good about Himself in order to set Him up for Himself to be trapped. And while they do that, these Herodians and Pharisees lay out four

characteristics of Jesus as they talk about who He is. Do you see Him right there in verse 14? The first one that they commend is His integrity. It says in verse 14: we know that You are true. In other words, your reputation matches your reality.

Then second, they praise His humility. They say there in verse 14, “You do not care about anyone’s opinion.” He recognizes who God has designed Him to be. Third, they praise His authenticity. When they say in verse 14, “You are not aswayed by appearances. There’s no one around You that can sway Your perception of reality. You are living in accordance with God’s design for Your life.” And fourth, you see it in verse 14, they praise His accuracy. They say, “You truly teach the way of God.” Which we should notice the irony there. That these same people that are commending Him for teaching the way of God, just a few chapters later will be charging Him with heresy and seeking to condemn Him to die as a criminal on the cross. They praise His integrity, His humility, His authenticity, and His accuracy. And before we move on in the text this morning, we should stop to wrestle with the question right now. Would someone describe you that way? If they had to say, “Here’s what their life is about. Here are the characteristics that stand out to me most.” Would they describe you as a person of integrity, of humility, of authenticity, of accuracy? See those of us that are following Christ by the power of the Spirit should seek to emulate these attributes that the Pharisees and Herodians commend. Now we know that their words were not genuine. They were just designed in order to set Jesus up for what is to come next because what they do after that is they put a question before Him. Do you see it right there in verse 14? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them or should we not?

So here we are. We’re right on the front end of a new presidential primary season. Doesn’t it seem like the last one just ended? The first debates are coming up this week in the presidential primary. And during this whole cycle of presidential politics, there’s often an attempt to ask what’s known as “gotcha” questions to a candidate. Ways you’re trying to trap them into an answer that will not look flattering for their presidential hopes. And that’s exactly what the Herodians and the Pharisees are doing here. They come to Him with this question. They’ve been gathering together behind the scenes coming up with, “What’s the perfect way that we can try to trap Him?” And they finally figured it out and they think this is the moment, they’ve got Him. They ask about taxes. And it’s not just any tax. The tax they refer to here is a poll tax. It would be a once a year tax that the people in the area would pay to the Roman government with a cost of the equivalent of one denarius. Which is the equivalent of one day’s wages during that time. And the reason why the people of Israel resented this tax was not because it was so large, but because it was an annual reminder that they were in submission to another ruling authority. That by paying that tax, it was showing that they had submitted to a foreign power. And at the root of what they’re asking Jesus, they’re asking Him, “Is it right to pay it? And is it required to pay it?” And they’re sitting there waiting for His answer because they know they’ve got Him trapped. Why? Because Jesus is now faced with a dilemma. If He says, “Yes, you should pay this tax.” He will lose credibility with His followers who can’t stand it. But if He says, “No, you should not pay this tax.” Then He would lose credibility with His adversaries who might seek to arrest Him for subverting the political order of the day. So how does Jesus respond in this moment? How does He confront this dilemma? Well we see it there in verse 15. He starts with an observation and then a question back to them.

The first is the observation there. He says, knowing their hypocrisy. Matthews version of the story, He actually calls them hypocrites. He recognizes that there's a separation between what they just said to Him and what they're asking now. In other words, Jesus sees right through it and that's why He answers their question with another question. Have you ever noticed how often in the gospels that Jesus meets the questions of others with a better question than the one they originally asked? And He does that right here. He asks them, "Why put me to the test?" He confronts them about the trap that they're laying out. But after He asks that question, He tells them to bring Me a denarius. So if you haven't had a chance to visit Israel with Chris and Peggy or in some other setting, and it's an amazing place. In this day and age, their currency that they use now is now known as the shekels. But back in that time period, the common coin of the Roman empire was known as the denarius. As I mentioned, it's the equivalent of one day's wage. And He tells them to bring Me one. And He says, to let Me look at it. And so you can imagine them grabbing a coin, they hand it to Him, He's holding it up in front of Him. Now Jesus is not examining the coin because He doesn't know what's on it. He's examining the coin so that He can use that to examine their hearts. And that's exactly what we find Him doing there when He again asked another question and says to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And what He would have done is when He showed them that coin, on the face of that coin would have been an image of Caesar. An image of the Roman emperor. And then on the back side, on the equivalent of the tail's side in our day and age, would have been two inscriptions. And on that coin it would have been inscribed along the top, Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus. Or translated another way, son of God. And then on the bottom of that, it would also have the inscription, High Priest. And so even in the coins of the realm, the Caesar of the Roman empire was claiming a sense of authority and even divinity in his responsibility. And so as Jesus holds that up and He says, "Whose image is on that coin?" The Pharisees and Herodians respond and they say, "Caesar." And I imagine at this moment, they're thinking, "This is going pretty good. We've got Him right where we want Him. He's got the coin out. He sees that Caesar's on it. He's stalling for time by asking us all these questions because he's not sure how He's going to answer." But what they don't know was what was about to come next. Because what Jesus does, Jesus doesn't just give them a simple answer. He gives them a substantive principle. What's that principle? You see it right there in the text when it tells them, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. And render to God the things that are God's. And that's a common phrase that you've probably heard in countless situations. But do we understand what it means for us this morning? The word render, let's start with that. What does Jesus mean when He uses the word render? Well the easiest way to explain it is to think about a shopping experience. Let's say you head over to Post Oak Mall. And sometimes you go to the store and when you check out, the cashier, you can tell they don't want to be there. They just take your merchandise, they scan it, they swipe the credit card, and you're out the door. No interaction. No conversation. But if you ever noticed some other times, it's like you're in a CIA interrogation? And you go and you hand them your merchandise and they say, "Can I have your phone number please?" "No." "Can I have your e-mail address please?" "No." "Would you like to join our rewards program?" "No." "Would you like to open a credit card with us?" "No." And they ask you question after question after question to the point of near exasperation. And in your mind what you're thinking is, "All I want to do is give you the money I owe you for the merchandise that I am going to purchase. That's it. And nothing more." That's the image here that Jesus is speaking of when He speaks of rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. That we give to Caesar the things that are owed to Him, but nothing more. It is placing

a limit on Caesar's control on our life. And it's a principle that even applies not just in that time period, but in our day and age.

So my family, we grew up with my dad in the oil business. We moved all around Texas including here and College Station for a season when I was very young, but we also had to live in exile in Connecticut for 6 years. And we lived right near a town called Danbury that you probably would have no reason to know what it is. But you probably would recognize the letter that was written to the Danbury Baptists in 1801 by President Thomas Jefferson. Because in that letter to the Baptists in Danbury, Thomas Jefferson first used the phrase, speaking of a wall of separation between church and state. Does that ring a bell? The wall of separation between church and state. And in our day and age, it's common to think of that meaning that there's a total separation and isolation between the church and the state. It's similar to that idea that I have brought up in the beginning about legislation that would forbid you living out your fandom outside of the home and the stadium. It's the idea that you leave your faith at church and at home and the state is entirely separate from that. That is not the picture that Jesus is giving us here when He says to render to Caesar what is Caesar and to God the things that are God's. So if that's not the case, then what does this principle mean? Well, the, what's happening at the root of what Jesus is doing here is He's rejecting two extremes about the way that we might engage in public square. And so for some of us, the extreme that we may be drawn to is the end of the spectrum towards apathy. You look at what's going on in the political climate around us, the cultural climate that's happening, and it's exasperating. It's discouraging. It's exhausting and you just say, you wipe your hands of it and say, "I want nothing to do with it at all." That's one end of the spectrum. But then on the other end of the spectrum, there's not apathy, but activism. Where you recognize the high stakes of political and cultural realities. And for you, instead of the public square being nothing, the public square can be tempting to be everything. We've got to win this election. We've got to see this legislation pass. We have to see this thing stopped. We have to see this cultural tide no longer shifting in the direction that it's moving. And so there is such a fever pitch and passion about it that the public square is everything. And Jesus, when He is speaking here to us this morning in Mark 12, is calling us not towards apathy and not towards activism, but instead to be ambassadors. Do you know what an ambassador does? When the United States appoints an ambassador and sends them to another country, an ambassador functions as a representative for the country that he is an ambassador for. And so they take up residence in the embassy and when an ambassadorship is functioning in its proper manner, then when the ambassador speaks, it is as if he is speaking on behalf of the governmental leaders who sent him. It is coming with the same authority as if the ruler of that nation was declaring it himself. And when we look at the New Testament, that is the picture of what God has designed the church to be in the public square. That we are ambassadors of another kingdom. That we are declaring to the culture around us that Jesus is king even though we do not yet fully see everything under His feet. And that transforms how it is that we engage in the public square. It means that we understand that we render to Caesar what is Caesars, but that we render to God the things that are God's.

So what are the things that we should render to Caesar? What does Jesus have in mind here? It's important to recognize that when He says this, He's not limiting God. He's limiting Caesar and the role of government in our lives. Because what He is pointing out and helping us to understand is that God has designed government to function primarily in the realm of exerting civil authority. To passing laws, regulations, taxes, providing services, law enforcement, military protection.

Those things that come together for the sake of the common good. And in that day and age, when Jesus is speaking this, we should be asking ourselves the question, “Who is Caesar?” And in that day and age, it was the Roman emperor. At that time, Tiberius Augustus was that man. And they had full authority over the realm. But it’s important to know that they were not only hostile to the nation of Israel, they were hostile to the fledgling group of Christians in that time period. Jesus and His disciples. And that hostility would grow in the years to come in the early church. That’s who Caesar was then. But in our day and age, in America, we live in a democratic republic. And so who is Caesar now? Caesar is not some emperor from on high. In a democratic republic, Caesar is you and me. Because we are the ones who are electing the government that rules on our behalf. And that has all sorts of implications for how we engage the public square. That’s why we at the ERLC are so committed on behalf of Southern Baptist churches like this to represent God’s design for the public square on behalf of Southern Baptists, it’s because you and I are Caesar. And part of what it looks like to render to Caesar what is Caesar is to faithfully live out our calling to engage in the cultural world around us and in the public square that God has put us in.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He could have just ended His comment by saying render to Caesar what is Caesar’s. That would have answered the question about the taxes. He could have moved on into other things. But He doesn’t finish His statement there. He doesn’t just say render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. He also says render to God the things that are God’s. And as we think through it this morning we should be asking ourselves the question, “OK. What are the things of God?” And what I want to wrestle with this morning is that when Jesus marks this out. There are four key things that we are called to render to God. The first one of those is our character. And so I had an opportunity this week in preparation of being down here with you to listen to Chris’ sermon last week on Father’s day. An amazing message that was centered on the idea of dads demonstrating character. And that’s precisely one of the things that Jesus is highlighting here. That we should render to God our character, who we are when no one’s looking, the reality that doesn’t just reflect our reputation. The integrity of our lives should be the thing that we render to God. That we seek to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. That we do everything we can to apply the gospel to every aspect of our life by the power of the Holy Spirit. But I think Jesus doesn’t just have our character in mind. The second thing that we should render to God is our convictions. So when I was here on staff, working as the university ministry associate under Kyle Hoover, one of the things that I loved about this church that is still true today is its commitment to missions. And every year we would send a team to China on mission trips on a regular basis. We had college students that came through our ministry that have served as long term missionaries in China. This church has made profound impact on the gospel around the world, but even especially in the country of China. Which is all the more reason it should have grabbed our attention back in December when a tragic thing happened in China. We feel the secularism around us now and the way that oppresses our Christianity. How much more so in a communist state like that where Christianity is functionally outlawed? And news reports came forward about a pastor named Wang Yi that you might have never heard of. But he was in a major city named Chengdu. And back 15 years ago, he was rising to prominence. He was named one of the top 50 leaders in his region. He was a university professor. And at the same time that I was here, a part of the college ministry in 2005 sending mission teams to China, that was the same year that Wang Yi met Jesus. And he came to a saving faith. He was baptized. He was raised up and began leading some of the underground church there and has been pastoring a church called the Early Rain Covenant Church for years. And they knew that the government was closing around them. They knew that their

time as a church may be short. That the government may seek to arrest them. And so back in the Fall, pastor Wang Yi drafted a letter that he asked his congregation to release if he was ever put into prison for living out his faith. And sure enough, back in December, he was into jail and this letter was released and made headlines around the world. Now it's a long letter. I encourage you to check it out on your own time, but I just want you to listen to this one portion. Because when we say that Jesus is calling us to render our convictions to God, Wang Yi, this pastor in China captures it. Do you hear what he says here?

As a pastor, my disobedience is part of the gospel commission. The great mission of Christ requires our great resistance to the world. The purpose of resisting is not to change the world, but to witness to another world. There is a higher authority than their authority. And there's a freedom that cannot be held by them full of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Wang Yi in China was not just rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, he was rendering to God the things that are God's. He refused to give up his convictions to the state. They could arrest him, but they could not take his convictions. And when we look back at Mark 12 when Jesus is saying render to God the things that are God's, the third dimension of what He's referring to there is our conscience. In other words, Jesus is saying that Caesar can have our coins, but he cannot take our conscience. Living in Nashville, we get the chance to come down here to visit College Station once or twice a year and every time I'm here, I'm blown away by how much this area is growing. Isn't it crazy? I mean I drive around campus and there's new buildings going up on campus. It seems like South College Station is about to stretch into the outskirts of Houston. Bryan is being revitalized. There's growth everywhere around us. But you know where I'm so glad I don't see growth happening? It's a little plot of land on East 29<sup>th</sup> Street where the Planned Parenthood clinic used to be. Remember right where that was? When I was a student I would drive by that every week and like many of you, prayed that one day it would be closed; it would be out of business. And I rejoice that that's true. And I rejoice that God is raising up a pro-life generation who will not give up our conscience to what the culture is calling us to conform to. Because what we know is that the Bible teaches that every person is made in the image of God. And that they are worthy of dignity and respect. And that means that every life should be protected in the womb. And Caesar may be able to have our coins, but he cannot take our conscience, including when it comes to some of the most crucial issues in our culture. Standing for the lives of the unborn around us. Jesus tells us to give our consciences to God. But notice the last thing that He speaks of here. He speaks when He talks about rendering to God the things that are God. He doesn't just talk about our character or our convictions or our conscience. He also speaks of our calling. What we as Christians are called to do. Now it was right here in this church back in 2003 that I experienced a call to ministry. I was at Impact Camp which is a camp for incoming freshmen to learn what it looks like to be a Christian in college. I was helping to lead that. I was heading to the business world. I wanted to be a successful Christian businessman like my father, like my brothers, and to live out my faith in that business world. But God had different designs for me. And it was through this church, through Chris' ministry, Kyle Hoover, the College ministry, that God shepherded that young call to ministry in my life and put me on a new path. And I imagine even this morning, there are people in this room wrestling with that call to ministry. And I'd encourage you to take the same step as I did and reach out to the leaders of this church to help you discern that. Because for some, God is calling us to vocational ministry. But when we speak here of not rendering our calling to Caesar, but instead giving it to God, we don't just have

in mind those that are called to full time ministry. Instead, we are saying that all of us have the same calling, even if we have different professions. And that calling is the great commission. To make disciples of all nations. To raise up the next generation of the church that will follow after Christ. And it doesn't matter what Caesar seeks to do with us, we must give that calling over to God.

Now look back at verse 17. Notice the way that this passage ends. You and I have heard this phrase render to Caesar the things that are Caesar and to God the things that are God's, so often that it's so family we can just respond to it with a yawn. But do you see how they respond in the moment? Verse 17 tells us that they marveled at Him. They were blown away by this principle that Jesus gave to them. But as we finish our time together this morning, what I want us to recognize is that in Mark 12, Jesus is not just giving them a principle, but He is also establishing a pattern that will culminate on the cross. Because at the cross of Jesus Christ what our Messiah does is exactly what He commands here. He renders to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Now think about it. Jesus is tried and convicted as a criminal. He takes on our sins. He is nailed to a cross. He dies a criminal's death. Rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's; his body, in judgment for those sins that He is falsely accused of. But even in that moment as He is rendering to Caesar those things that are his, what is He doing? He is also rendering to God the things that are God's. He is dying on our behalf. Taking on the punishment that we deserve for our sins. He is laying in the grave. Three days later He is risen by the power of the Spirit. Raised to walk in newness of life. Set free having defeated Satan, sin, and death and thereby rendering to God the things that are God's. He doesn't just give us a principle. He gives us a pattern and He calls us to believe in Him.

Now living in Nashville, Tennessee the last six years, one of the things I love about it is that we live right in the heart of the SEC regional footprint. And within four hours of our city, we can be in and out of five or six different stadiums. And so we'll go on the road to see Aggie football play on a regular basis. And it doesn't take a sophisticated sports fan to know this reality. Teams almost always perform better at home than away. Because in a home game, when you're at Kyle Field, the crowd's with you. They're cheering you on. They're energizing you. They're for you. What's happening on the field and what's happening on the stands has good alignment. Those home games are a little bit different than a neutral site game. Let's say it's a bowl game or a national championship game where the teams are divided. The stands are split 50/50. There's some cheering for you, there's some against you, and it's about an even split. It's an even break. But everybody knows the most difficult area to compete in is an away game. Because instead of having everybody with you, now you have everyone against you. They're in resistance to you. They are seeking your failure. They're desiring to take you down. They are resisting what your goal is. And even if you've got a small block of fans there, it often feels like you're drowned out by the opponents around you. And I don't know when it happened in American culture, but it used to feel like we were playing home games as the church. The culture was with us. There's a lot of alignment between what Christianity believed and the way that people lived. And then back a decade or two ago, it felt like we shifted to more of a neutral site game where some were with us, some were against us. But doesn't feel on a regular basis like we're playing away games? Like the church is a small pocket in an increasingly secularized culture around us that is often against us? That should not cause us to live in fear, but to live in hope. Because Jesus knew even when He spoke these words what was to come in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. And in this moment as we close



from this passage, Jesus is not calling us to apathy or to activism. He is calling us to be ambassadors of another kingdom who render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

Let's close in prayer.

Lord as we come to You this morning, there are times where we feel overwhelmed by the world around us. There is so much discouraging things that happen in the news and in the culture, in our community and it's as if we don't know how we will stand. But, Lord, You are our Rock and our Redeemer. You are faithful to sustain us even when we experience the headwinds of the culture around us. And I pray that You would raise up the people of this church to be faithful to live out the calling You've given us right here. No just to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, but to God the things that are God's. And if there are people that have not given themselves fully over to You this morning, I pray that You would do it right now. That You would rescue them in salvation. That You would restore them in repentance from sin. And that You would refine their heart, that they might walk in a manner worthy of the gospel in all that You've called them to. And we ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.