

Jesus, Politics & Us

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And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. 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? 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." And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." 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 (Mark 12:13-17).

We live in a contentious time. Our culture is in a constant state of outrage. The outrage is amplified in media, social media, and even at school board meetings. Sadly, the divisiveness of our culture has impacted Christians. Some have been divided by political convictions. How can Christians engage politically without damaging the unity of believers? How can Christians engage politically and be consistent with the intent of the Gospel? Let's go to Jesus to tread through this choppy subject.

In Mark chapter twelve, Jesus was asked hot, political questions. The Jewish political groups banded together in an attempt to discredit and humiliate Jesus. Each group posed what they considered an impossible question: a question with no good answer. The Herodians asked Jesus a question about taxes and political loyalty. To better understand the question, consider a brief history lesson.

About twenty-five years earlier, a Jewish revolutionary emerged: Judas of Galilee. He revolted against the Roman Empire and their census tax. He and his followers were known to burn the homes of Jews who registered for the census. They declared that God was king and that the Roman Emperor was to be rejected. As we might imagine, Judas and his revolution were short-lived. Scholars believe the "false Messiah Judas" referred to by Gamaliel in the book of Acts is Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:37).

Now, another self-proclaimed Messiah had emerged from Galilee. The Herodians, who had politically aligned themselves with the house of Herod/Romans, wanted to know if Jesus was another revolutionary. If Jesus said, "Don't pay your taxes," the Herodians could accuse Jesus of being an insurrectionist. If Jesus said, "Pay your taxes," He would disappoint His followers.

Jesus' response was astounding and caused the Herodians to "marvel." Jesus did not give a direct answer. Instead, He rejected the political construction of the question. Jesus' response gives insight into how Christians are to engage politically. Notice three features of Jesus' teaching regarding politics.

1. Jesus rejected political simplicity. Jesus is simple and direct when answering questions concerning our relationship to Him. He commands: “unless you repent, you will perish”. He gives clear options: “the wide gate or the narrow gate”. However, Jesus is not simple or direct when answering a question about our relationship to government. Jesus rejected the simple political constructs of His time. As far as He was concerned, things were more complex than the simplistic choices the politicians were offering.

We must be cautioned against making political declarations about Jesus. Well-intentioned Christians have used Jesus to promote every political party and platform under the sun. This results in division. Of course, this is the nature of politics. However, we are not the first people to live in a politically divisive time.

Jesus lived in a politicized culture. Among the Jews, religion and politics/faith and politics were inextricably linked. Surprisingly, Jesus did not join or promote any political group or cause. Therefore, we must not do with Jesus what He did not do Himself. He had a different cause, a different message, and a different approach. Rather than side for or against the Herodians/Romans, Jesus presented a different method of political engagement.

2. Jesus rejected politics as identity. Jesus asked for a coin. The coin He was given was engraved with the image of Caesar Tiberius. Coins of this era were minted with the inscription, “*Son of the most high god Augustus, King, and High Priest.*” Jesus acknowledged that the coin belonged to Caesar; therefore, He said to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Mark 12:17).

The word “render” is significant. The term means paying what is owed or deserved. What was Caesar owed? What did he deserve? Money. The coins were minted from his treasury. However, was Caesar owed allegiance? Did he deserve support for his unjust and corrupt policies? Absolutely not! Regrettably, this is exactly what the Herodians had rendered to Caesar. They had given their wholesale endorsement to Caesar. In so doing, Caesar had become their Lord. Their identity was formed by Rome. Caesar’s image had been written on them rather than the image of God.

Jesus gives us a different method of engagement. This form of engagement requires us to think in step with the Gospel (Gal. 2:14). We are to give our government what it deserves. Regarding our responsibilities to the government, Paul teaches us to pay taxes and respect our leaders (Rom. 13:1-8). However, we need to heed the warning of Jesus in giving governments, politicians, and or political parties our wholesale allegiance. They do not deserve our hearts. They typically are exploitative and self-interested. For the Herodians, their entire identity was defined by their politics. They viewed political loyalty as being all or nothing. Jesus rejected this false dichotomy. Jesus rejected politics as identity.

3. Jesus rejected political complacency. Jesus’ response to the Herodians would have also surprised another religious/political group: the Essenes. The Essene approach to the politics of their day was to withdraw from society. They did not pay taxes. They lived like hermits in the

wilderness. They devoted their lives to contemplative prayer and copying Scripture. The Dead Sea Scrolls were composed by the Essenes.

Some Christians may be tempted to withdraw from political engagement. Some may be tempted to withdraw from engagement with society. The interests of Jesus cannot be served if we become politically complacent or indifferent. When issues are raised in our political culture, we must use the opportunity to express how the Gospel addresses the topic. In so doing, our political philosophy will not likely fit neatly into the mainstream. However, our engagement will challenge the status quo. This is what Jesus was doing with the Herodians. He showed a new method of political engagement by challenging them to think in a new way.

Conclusion

Christians should be politically informed and engaged. Politics contribute to the formation of culture. Being informed and engaged is necessary for Christians to influence the people around them. We cannot ignore immorality, injustice, deprivation, corruption, or neglect. These exist because of sin. Learning from Jesus' discussion with the Herodians will help us to advance His rule in the lives of people; thereby, impacting the broader society.

Additionally, Christians must not be naive to the perils of politics. Politics appeal to human pride. They can distort and corrupt. The proper rendering to Caesar demands careful analysis and fairness in distribution. Caesar deserves some things, not all things. Don't give him your all. God alone deserves that.