

# GIVE TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S

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.’ And they were amazed at him.”*

I read a funny story in a famous economics journal.<sup>1</sup> It is a conversation between a preacher and one of his church members.

**Preacher:** "Brother Brown, I want to make sure you understood my sermon on charity today. If you had two farms, and Brother White had no means of support, wouldn't you give him one of your farms?"

**Brother Brown:** "I most certainly would."

**Preacher:** "What if you had two tractors, and Brother White had no way to harvest his crop. Wouldn't you give him one of your tractors?"

**Brother Brown:** "Why, sure I would."

**Preacher:** "What if you had two horses and Brother White's only horse died. Wouldn't you give him one of your horses?"

**Brother Brown:** "Well, no. You see, I *have* two horses."

In today's passage, some religious leaders cook up a trick question to entrap Jesus. But Jesus knew what was on their minds. In his answer to their question, Jesus teaches us an important principle in giving. He says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Let us meditate on Jesus' words so that we may accept the truth and practice it.

## I. JESUS KNEW THEIR HYPOCRISY (13-16)

Look at verse 13. *Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.* As we study the gospels, we find that one word that captures the problems of the Pharisees is "hypocrisy." The Pharisees were strict legalists who insisted on keeping the details of the laws and "the tradition of the elders" (Mk 7:3). They looked holy and righteous, as they fasted twice a week and prayed loudly on street corners. The problem was that they did not love God from their hearts. They also put burdens on God's flock by requiring them to keep the law and traditions meticulously, while they had all kinds of loopholes to avoid them. Once Jesus pointed out their problem by telling them, *"And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them"* (Lk 11:46). Another time, Jesus told them, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Mt 23:24). We can find many other references in the gospels that showed their problem. For example, Matthew 23:1-7 says the following: *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do,*

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<sup>1</sup> Dahl, Gordon B. and Michael R Ransom. 1999. "Does Where You Stand Depend on Where You Sit? Tithing Donations and Self-Serving Beliefs." *American Economic Review*, 89(4). pp. 703-727.

*for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'*" The Pharisees looked very religious and dignified outwardly, as they wore purple robes and various religious accessories, and as they made a lengthy prayer (Mk 12:40), but they had no love for God or for his people.

The Pharisees had a good beginning. It is believed that the Pharisees were originated from the spiritual movement led by Ezra and Nehemiah after the exile to Babylon. After the exile, the people of Israel suffered from a severe slave mentality. Their only concern was their physical survival. God's word was long lost. But Ezra found the Scriptures and began to teach them the word of God from early morning till late night. People responded to the teachings by repenting their sins. Among them was a group of people who wanted to preserve the Law by keeping it strictly in their everyday life. They were called the "Pharisees" which means the "separated." Ezra 6:21 says: "So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the LORD, the God of Israel."

The Pharisees had a good influence on the people of Israel by observing the law of God strictly. They gained people's respect. They also became a group that garnered enormous political power, especially after the Maccabean period (167-63 BC). But gradually, they lost the spirit of the law of God. They began to only enjoy their elite status and neglected the work of God. They became very political. This religious group of leaders became like professional politicians. They became useless in the sight of God. This serves a warning to us that we can become like the Pharisees if we live before the eyes of men rather than before the eyes of God.

Verse 13 tells us that the religious leaders dispatched some of the Pharisees and Herodians to spy on Jesus (Lk 20:20). This shows that the Pharisees allied with the Herodians. This political alliance was unusual because the Pharisees were ardent nationalists who opposed the Roman rule while the Herodians were supporters of Rome from which the Herods received their power. Naturally the Pharisees hated the Herodians for supporting the Roman government. But now the Pharisees were willing to collaborate with anyone if it was for eliminating Jesus who they thought was threatening their political fortune.

Look at verses 14,15a. *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? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"* They approached Jesus with flattery, not because they believed in Jesus but because they had an ulterior motive. They tried to put Jesus off guard with their flattery. It was a setup. They flattered Jesus first and sneaked in a trick question. If Jesus answered "no" to their question, he would be arrested by the Roman authorities for treason. On the other hand, if he told them they should pay taxes,

he would offend the people of Israel who suffered so much under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. They thought they had a perfect question to trap Jesus.

Look at verse 15b,16. *But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.”* Jesus did not fall for their flattering words. He saw through their duplicity (Lk 20:23). He knew their inner motive. Amazingly, he used the opportunity to teach them a precious spiritual lesson.

## II. “GIVE TO GOD WHAT IS GOD’S” (17)



Look at verses 16-17. *They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him.* The common Roman coin of that time was denarius. It had the portrait of Emperor Tiberius with the inscription in Latin: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.” Jews in Judea were required to pay taxes to the emperor. The taxes were highly unpopular, and some Jews flatly refused to pay them, believing that payment was an admission of Roman right to rule.

In reply Jesus told them, *“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”* Jesus did not say that it was okay for them not to pay taxes to the Roman government. On the contrary, he taught them that they had their basic duties to state and to God. Most of all, he taught them that about the value of giving.

**First, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.”** The Pharisees hated paying taxes to Rome. But Jesus taught them that they had certain obligations toward the worldly authorities. Likewise, we have certain duties toward our government. We Christians have dual citizenships. We are citizens of the kingdom of God. We are also citizens of a nation in this world. We have basic duties toward our nation, such as education, armed service and the duty of paying taxes. St. Paul teaches us in Romans 13:6-7: “This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” We should not ignore these obligations to the state as long as they do not infringe on our obligations to God. Then we can be a good influence to others.

**Second, “Give to God what is God’s.”** We must give God what is God’s. Some people maintain that whatever they have in this world is theirs. But we learn from the Bible that God is the owner of the universe, because he is the Creator God. All the mountains and hills are God’s. All the oceans and rivers are God’s. Our life is a gift from God. Our life is not ours. Our children are not ours. We’ve been appointed as the stewards of God’s creation. We should not be like the evil tenants in the parable of the vineyard. We should give to God what we own when he says to us, “the Lord needs it.”

What does it mean to give to God what is God's? We must give 10 percent of what we earn to God as an expression of our thanksgiving to him who provides us with everything we need (Dt 12:11). The Bible says that we are robbing God if we fail to bring our tithes and offerings (Mal 3:8-9). But we should know that God does not actually need anything from us. He is not a charitable entity. So, no matter how much material things we bring to God, they would not mean anything to God unless we offer our hearts with them. God is the Creator of this universe. He is the owner of everything (Dt 10:14). Then what can we give to God? We can give our love to him. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." We can give our hearts to God.

The problem with the Pharisees was that they did not know how to give to others. They did not like to give to others. They only wanted to receive from others. Sinful men want to receive rather than to give. They constantly ask, "What do I get out of this? What's in it for me?" But Jesus says, "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*" He wants us to learn how to give.

How can we learn to give to God and give to others? First, we should know what God has given us. John 3:16 says, "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." We can say that Christianity begins with the word "give." God gave his one and only Son to be our Savior. Jesus' life in this world was literally a life of giving. Mark 10:45 says, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." Finally, Jesus gave his life on the cross to forgive our sins.

The apostle Paul grasped the meaning of giving and quoted the words of Jesus in Acts 20:35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Still, there are many people in this world who like to receive than to give. An ambitious young man told his pastor he had promised God a tithe of his income. They prayed for God to bless his career. At that time he was making \$40 per week and tithing \$4. In a few years his income increased and he was tithing \$500 per week. He called the pastor to see if he could be released from his tithing vow, saying it was too costly now. The pastor replied, "I don't see how you can be released from your promise, but we can ask God to reduce your income to \$40 a week, then you'd have no problem tithing \$4."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones told a story about a farmer who went into the house one day to tell his wife some good news. "The cow just gave birth to twin calves, one red and one white," he said. He continued, "We must dedicate one of these calves to the Lord. We will bring them up together, and when the time comes, we will sell one and keep the proceeds and we will sell the other and give the proceeds to the Lord." His wife asked him which he was going to dedicate to the Lord. "There's no need to bother about that now," he replied, "we'll treat them both in the same way and when the time comes, we'll do as I say." A few days later, he entered the kitchen looking unhappy. "What happened?" his wife asked. "I have bad news," he replied, "The Lord's calf is dead." "Wait," said his wife, "you didn't decide which calf was the Lord's." "Yes" he said, "I decided it was the white one, and the white one died. The Lord's calf is dead."

It is not easy to give to God what is God's. When we fail to pay taxes, we will get a threatening letter from the IRS. We will have to pay a heavy penalty or even go to jail. But God does not send his collection agency right away. Our giving to God should not be based on fear but on gratitude towards him. He has given us life, and we should bring a thankful heart to him. Those who learn to give to God tend to give generously to others who are in need.

While reviewing our treasurer's report for last year, I learned that one of our coworker families brought their offerings to God beyond their means. Their family is more challenged financially than others, but they showed what it means to give to God what is God's. Not only they gave to God sacrificially, but also helped another family who was in need sacrificially. One time, they came home from grocery shopping and discovered that they had picked up meat and other expensive items that they had not paid for. Some people might have said, "Well, this is God's way of helping us!" But they did not assume that. They called the store and explained what had happened. Then they learned that the items belonged to an old lady. This lady was in tears because the items she had paid for were gone. This way, our coworker family could wipe the tears from the face of the old lady.

Some of us may say, "Well, I will give money to others when I enough. I will devote more time to God's work when I have more time. I just don't have enough money or time." But we know the truth. Very rarely we see such people actually give more when they have more. Jesus said that the widow who offered only a few pennies actually gave more to God than the rich did (Mk 12:41-44). It is about our spirit of giving. When we accept in our hearts what God has given us, we can practice the spirit of giving even when we have very little.

What can we give to others? We can give them a helping hand when they are in need. We can buy them a hamburger when they are hungry. Above all, we can give them the word of God that will lead them to eternal life. It is the best thing we can give to our friends.

May God help us to come to know Jesus personally who gave his life as a ransom for us! May God help us overcome our selfishness and give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's!