

Before we jump straight into what I think is a beautiful piece of art, we first need to frame the conversation. They actually say that in art, for you to either attract eyes or detract eyes, you need to have a proper frame around the painting. And so, before we jump in, I want to frame the conversation of this beautiful text.

The way I want to frame this is to begin with some questions that I want you to examine as we march through the scriptures today. What is the deepest longing of your heart? What is the thing that drives you? What is the thing that you will go to any lengths to get? What is the thing that you desire the most? Now, the Bible makes it clear that all of us today, as believers, are considered exiles. The Bible uses imagery of being East of Eden and being on this sort of pilgrimage. Because we are exiles, we all long for something that's tangible and eternal, something that holds weight.

For instance, we long for beauty. We long for true love, true joy, and true freedom. I think that's why art is so beautiful because it elicits those emotions out of us. As exiles, C. S. Lewis once said in his book *The Weight of Glory*,

It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

Now, it's not that longing for truth, longing for beauty, and longing for joy is wrong. But what C.S. Lewis is getting at is that if we're being honest for a second, our desires and what we long for are not always the purest.

The Bible, time after time, points out that humanity has a heart issue, a longing issue, and a desire issue. Underneath the veneer of our being is a disordered heart that sometimes longs for the wrong things, which the Bible would categorize as idolatry. This half-hearted condition is what C.S. Lewis calls the mud pies. In his book, *Gospel Treason*, Brad Bigney describes our condition like this.

We live day after day, oblivious to the idols that are running up and down the aisles of our hearts, darting in and out of the clothes racks of our thoughts like wild hooligan children running loose

in Walmart while their mother shops. Bigney, Gospel Treason

All of this brings us to our text today. Because as we march through, we're going to be looking at two groups of people. We're going to be focusing on the Pharisees, and we're going to be focusing on the Herodians. To give a little context as we've been marching through Mark 11 and Mark 12, one observation is clear about these two groups of men have a disdain and hatred for Jesus. They hated Jesus so much that it led to Jesus' crucifixion, and they even made it their mission to squander his name after his resurrection and ascension.

Now we must take a step back and ask ourselves, what is it that made these men go to such extreme lengths to try to sabotage Jesus? To have him killed? To have him canceled to a cross. I would propose that upon looking at the data before us, the reason why was that power was the true longing of their heart. Power and authority were what they treasured above all else. Power was the idol that was worth going to any lengths to protect.

Dan touched on this a few weeks ago, but all of us at some level, like knowing and feeling that we're in control of our lives to some extent. We live in the heart of Silicon Valley, the epicenter for innovation, technology, transportation, and medicine. We live in the great state of California, and typically what happens here socially ripple effects across the country. It's for this very reason that the place in which we live can cause us to believe that we actually have control over our lives.

Thomas Brewer calls this the illusion of control because he argues that it's when life hits us and not just hits us, but when it hits us where it hurts when we can't overcome certain things. When the things we put our hope and trust in fail us, we realize that our greatest achievements were only fig leaves to cover up our vulnerability and the reality that we aren't in control as much as we thought we were.

But for the believer, this is actually the beginning of good news, this surrender of power and control. Jesus said that for you to enter into the kingdom of God, you must become like a child. I was with my wife, and we were spending time with my little nephew. He's about two years old. We're sitting at the dinner table. I'm knocking out some homework, and he's eating Cheetos, watching his little show. He calls over to his mom, "Mom, can you come wipe my hands?" Such a small task. So vulnerable, not having power. And Jesus says we must become like a child.

The gospel is a beckon for those who are powerless, who realize that they aren't in control, that they're willing to surrender their power. That is the premise upon which our faith is contingent—grace. It is contingent upon realizing that the one who has the power to change you, sanctify you, and fix you, lies within the hands of another, which is Jesus.

But you see, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, and the Herodians were madly in love with power—being in control, asserting their domain, receiving praise and recognition comparable to worship, and having nobody in their way was what they loved. You might remember Jesus' indictment on them in Matthew's gospel in a separate instance where he gives the seven woes, and he directly attacks the things that they had cherished the most—the longings and desires of their heart.

He said woe to you because they had used their power to tie heavy burdens upon people. They loved the places of honor at the feasts. They loved having the best seats in the synagogues and being greeted and approved by others. They loved power and what came with power. But what happens when a person's idol is threatened? What happens when the thing that you desire the most is confronted?

I think the positioning of where we find today's text is not by accident because in Mark 11, you have the inauguration of a king, the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, followed by the cleansing of the temple. And then this is sandwiched right in between Mark 13, which is the prophetic proclamation of the end times, and the dismantling of temple worship. What is happening is that the kingdom of God is coming with such force that it is challenging their very allegiance. Their idol, their power, was being challenged, the very thing they held dear.

When Jesus comes into the life of us, he attacks the very things that we hold dear. Whenever idolatry is present, fear is the immediate response. Aung San Suu Kyi, who's a Burmese politician and human rights activist, once said, "It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it." And so, with all of this framework, we now approach the text.

"Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words" (v. 13). Now, there are a couple of things we have to take note of. The first thing that stands out is that the Pharisees and Herodians are in the same sentence because, historically, these two groups did not see eye to eye on anything.

We're very familiar with the Pharisees. I know some theologians say that we all got a little bit of Pharisee in us at times, depending on the situation you put us in. The Pharisees were the separatists. They were the good boys. They held a minority position on the Sanhedrin. They had a major influence. They were steeped in Jewish tradition and law.

The Herodians were a political power that submitted to the Herodian dynasty. And if you know anything about the Herodian

Dynasty, they were essentially puppet kings for Rome. They corroborated with the enemy in the eyes of the Pharisees. And so because of this, they never saw eye to eye on anything. One thing that fused these groups together was their hatred for Jesus. He had threatened their power.

So they send these two groups on a mission to trap him. Now, at least in my mind, when I hear they sent them to trap Jesus, it can sound kind of passive. You know, when you were younger, if you had siblings, you would try to catch your siblings saying a bad word or try to get them in trouble in some way.

Idolatry Makes Us Fearful And Desperate

But the force of this Greek verb actually has this imagery of hunting. I don't know if you've ever been fishing or if you've ever been hunting, but it takes up a lot of your time. You devote a lot of time and energy. You have to be methodical. You have to place the buoys, and it's a whole process. They were on a mission to not just trap Jesus; they were on a mission to hunt Jesus. They wanted him out. What this all shows us is that idolatry makes us fearful and desperate. The Pharisees and the Herodians, because their power was threatened, it made them fearful and desperate. And when the thing that you long for the most is above the position of God, when that becomes threatened, it makes us fearful and desperate.

A real-life example of power idolatry that's viewed and worked out in the world can be found in Robert Green's book, *The 48 Laws of Power*. It's a New York Times bestseller. It sold 1.2 million copies, which is kind of scary. He's an American author who writes on strategy, power, and seduction. In the summary of his book, he views power as this.

"Feeling powerless is a miserable experience. If given the choice, everyone would opt for more rather than less power. Yet, to be so overt in attempts to gain power is frowned upon. To attain power, you need to be subtle, cunning, and democratic yet devious." Consequently, in his controversial book, *The 48 Laws of Power*, best-selling author, Robert Green, argues that if you manage to seduce, charm, and deceive your opponents, you will attain ultimate power. Elle McFarllen on *The 48 Laws of Power*

Green's view on power is that power is amoral. It means it's outside of the framework of what is right and wrong. Power is limited to a game that you must master. A couple of examples of Green's laws are: 3. Conceal your intentions. 5. The guarding of your reputation is the greatest good. It is the cornerstone of power. 12. Use selective honesty and generosity to disarm your victim. It sounds kind of familiar to the Pharisees and Herodians. This is a real-life example.

If we begin to look at power as a game, because all of us in this room hold some sort of power, whether you're a parent

or a teacher, you have some sort of power or authority, but the minute power becomes your idol, and you begin to use it as a means to gain something, people seriously get damaged and get hurt. If power, our job title, our status, our tax bracket, our position in the church, our authority as a parent, or any idol for that matter, if that is the thing that makes us feel good about ourselves, if that is the thing that gives us meaning, makes us feel important, and is the greatest good in our lives, then it's no wonder that rage, fear, and anger are emotions that ensue when it's threatened. And it's no wonder that the Pharisees and Herodians were seeking not to trap Jesus but to hunt him in fear and desperation to protect their power. They finally find Jesus and come up to him.

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? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"
Mark 12:14-15a

Now, on the surface, this question seems legit. This was actually a point of contention with many Jews in regard to this tax. Depending on which group you belong to, you had your opinion of how you should navigate this. If you were part of the Jewish zealots, they were in fundamental opposition to Caesar, and they felt that paying taxes was actually an act of treason. It was already bad enough that Jews were under the authority of a gentile nation. But then, to go and have to pay taxes to that nation left this whole other level of begrudging.

They come to Jesus and cloak this question in flattery, and in Matthew Henry's commentary, he says this was supposed to do two things. First, it was supposed to disarm his suspicion, and second to trap him and cause him to stumble. That would ruin his reputation. Now we have to realize this question was so masterfully put together on paper. If cunning had a picture next to it in the dictionary, this would be it. This was masterfully put together. This was the cage. This was the hole that had the stake ready to impale Jesus. This was the buoy. This was the bait. Because if Jesus was to say, "Yes, you should pay taxes to Caesar," then they would begin to put doubt in the people of Israel's minds and make them question his authority. It would paint him as cooperating with the Romans. But if he says, "No, you're not to pay taxes to Caesar," Well, power is the thing that they hold onto, and they would go to any lengths. They would have started pulling strings, concealing their intentions, and call upon the Roman government, painting him as an anarchist. This is what idolatry does to us.

Defending Idols in Overt And Covert Ways

What is evident is that defending idols in our lives can be expressed in overt (open) or covert (hidden) ways. Now we may

be familiar with the overt. To give you a prime example, we see this in Acts 19. Paul's message to the Ephesians literally causes a riot in Ephesus.

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty." When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. Acts 19:23-29

And so it's obvious Paul's message threatened the very thing that they held dear, but sometimes like the Pharisees and the Herodians, defending idols in our lives can be hidden. It can be undetected even to our own eyes. Underneath the ornate robes and tassels and even underneath this question was an attempt for the Pharisees and Herodians to defend their idol.

As the people of God, we must be most aware of this type of idol defending. See, the problem was not with the question itself. I think it was a good question, but it was the motive behind the question. It was the heart. It was the sin underneath the sin. So, for instance, when we insist that being doctrinally sound is all in the name of Jesus until we realize that we use doctrine as a weapon to demonize others and vindicate ourselves. Or another example is that we take up political activism, not for policy's sake, but as one blogger wrote, to sit in the place that says what is right, what is worthy of praise, and that what all others should bow down and worship.

These are the mud pies I was referring to earlier. This is the convoluted desire of the heart. On the surface, it looks good. Like we're really trying to navigate the world, really trying to have some sort of theological reflection as exiles. How do we mingle with the Romans? But their motives were insincere. And my prayer for us is that we would echo what the psalmist says in Psalm 139. *"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."* Psalm 139:23-24

So defending idols can happen in covert or overt ways, but our Lord, our Savior, the master physician, sees right through this devious plan.

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Mark 12:15b-16

He sees the trap. He sees right through it, and Jesus specifically says that he saw their hypocrisy. Hypocrisy comes from actually Greek theater, which is described as when actors would raise their tone of voice or put on a mask to play the part of a person who they really weren't in real life. He saw past their insincerity. He saw past duplicity. He saw past their dissimulation. What he saw was what they were really after, which was to trap him and defend their idol.

After detecting their duplicity, he then asks whose inscriptions was on the coin. The reigning Caesar at this time would've been Tiberius Caesar. And on that coin would've been this inscription that said God, Augustus, Caesar.

Now this is a big moment of tension because the Lord of all the Earth, who Isaiah says, measured out the waters in the hollow of his hand, marked out the heavens, and holds the dust of the earth and weighs the mountains on the scales and the hills and the balance, the one who regards the nations as a drop in a bucket. This is the same title being accredited to Caesar as lord.

So how does Jesus navigate this trap, this hunting technique? What we see is that Jesus diffuses this tension with a clever response of his own. "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." (v. 17).

Now, this is a very broad statement, but it has a lot of significant impact on us today. This statement that Jesus makes is revolutionary for a few reasons. First, Jesus unties the knot. At this time in the Greco-Roman world, the religious and civil authorities were one, and he created a distinction for the believer of the hierarchy of allegiances.

So first, I want to talk about what it means to actually render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Jesus first recognizes the God-given ordination of government. God has established three institutions on the earth in order to restrain the madness of the human heart. The first one is conscience. Conscience backed up with a proper belief system, either, as the Book of Romans says, accuses us of when we do wrong or excuses us when we do something worthy of praise.

The second institution that God establishes to restrain the madness of the human heart is parents. The Old Testament has much to say about the beauty of disciplining a child. And how disciplining a child, and being involved in the child's life, sets them

up for success. Number three is the government. Paul would testify to this in Romans 13 that all should be subjected to the governing authorities.

Government has a place in society to which believers ought to respect and submit to. Submission is recognizing the way that God has ordered society and having respect for that order, having respect for the institution of government. To not use our Christianity as an excuse to ignore or rebel against its normal commands.

So as believers, we pay taxes, we fulfill our civil duties, and we contribute to the shalom of the place in which we live. The problem occurs, though, when we render to Caesar that which belongs to God, which is essentially our very selves. When Caesar or our party of preference becomes our hope and longing, when it takes the position of God, you can expect fear, agitation, and anger.

In Shayne Looper's article in *The Columbus Dispatch* entitled, "The Power of Idolatry and the Idolatry of Power," he summarizes our predicament in America.

America is not being torn apart by politics but by the idolatry of politics. Politics is good and right in its place and America has as good a system for doing politics, because of our constitution, as any in the world. But while politics is right in its place, it is wrong in God's place. Shayne Looper

So, by all means, fulfill your civil duties, vote, pay your taxes, and if you're like me, you probably have a fat stack of fast-tracked tolls that need to be paid. Make sure to pay those. But do not make policy or government the idol in your life.

Render to God Your Heart

Jesus, in this latter part of his statement, gives us the solution to be free from the idols in our life. He says, render to God that which is God's. You see, the inscription had Caesar's image on it, but you, being made in the image of God, have God's image on it. Therefore, you are to render to God your heart. You are to render to God all of yourself.

In this statement, Jesus lays out the supreme allegiance that Caesar, the church, and even you and I must submit to, which is himself. He is the sovereign ruler over all of the earth, in which every power and authority cannot escape his jurisdiction. But our Lord doesn't just want to be a boss. Jesus tells them, and he tells us to render to God what is God's. Give yourself to God. Why do we render to God what is God's? Why do we give him of ourselves? Because he gave everything. There's a song by the Perrys called "I Owe Him Everything," and I just want to read a couple of lyrics for you.

Why would a king decide to leave his throne in heaven? Why would he come so far to save my heart from sin? And how it hurts to know the worst he had to suffer was just he chose to die for what

I did. I owe him everything all because he took my place that day at Calvary. His willing sacrifice gave me brand new life. How could he love me? So, I owe him everything. I Owe Him Everything, Perry

So what does that mean practically? I want to tell you about a man by the name of Clarence Jordan, as we begin to conclude, that I think gives us some direction of what it actually looks like to render to God your heart.

Clarence Jordan was a man of many talents. He was very well educated. He had two Ph.D.s in Greek and Hebrew and agriculture. He was gifted. He could have chosen to do anything, but what he chose to do was to start a farm in the 1940s in Georgia. He named it Koinonia Farm. Clarence was white, but he wanted it to be a community for blacks and whites in the deep south.

Now you can imagine this probably wouldn't go well given the location and given the time period in which he lived. But ironically, much of the resistance that he felt was from his own church folk, who submitted to the laws of segregation as much as any other normal person in town.

The townspeople tried to stop Clarence. On multiple occasions, they harassed him. They slashed his tires; they tried to get him out of the game. This continued for 14 long years, and finally, in 1954, the KKK had enough of Clarence Jordan. They decided to round up everyone, and they went to his farm at nighttime with torches and guns. They completely decimated the place. They ran everybody off of the farm and destroyed it. And one of the most sickening things is that he recognized many of the voices, which were his own church folk.

One of the men who were there was a local newspaper writer. He came the next day to visit Clarence. He wanted to report on what remained of the farm and what had happened. He sees Clarence in the field, hoeing and planting. He says, "I heard the awful news." He said, "I came out to do a story of the tragedy of your farm closing." But Clarence kept on planting and hoeing. The reporter kept prodding him and prodding him, trying to get a reaction out of him, but Clarence was determined. Finally, the reporter said in a haughty voice, "Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of those Ph.D.s. You got 14 years on this farm, and you have nothing left at all. Just how successful do you think you've been?"

Clarence dropped his tools, turned to the reporter, looked at him with his blue eyes, and said in a quiet, meek confident voice, "I'm about as successful as the cross. Sir, I don't think you understand us. What we are about is not success but faithfulness. We are

staying. Have a good day." He rebuilt the farm, and Koinonia Farm has been going strong until this very day.

So what do we learn from that? What does that mean to render to God our hearts? Rendering your heart to God means not making success the idol of your life. If success was the thing that gave him his importance and validity and determined his identity, he would've been devastated. Rendering your heart to God means not letting power become your idol. We see this in Clarence's church folk compromised to the prejudice of the day because the Klan had perceived power.

Power can be eluding. Power can be a temptation. But rendering your heart to God means not compromising and not letting power become an idol. Rendering your heart to God is submitting and trusting him as a vindicator and judge.

You think about those who read this gospel in the early church under Roman persecution. How do we navigate? Render your heart to God. Submit to him even when things aren't going your way.

And lastly, rendering your heart to God is persevering through this crooked world. As movements and turmoil and tensions continue to rise, as wickedness becomes more pervasive, we as believers are to be committed to the author and perfecter of our faith with our eyes set upon him.

So, in conclusion, if we're being honest, we are living in the tension of cultural angst. As exiles in a landscape where rival gods exist on every corner, the tide is strong, threatening to pull us down under. And so, I have a final question to propose that I want us to reflect on. Will you render your heart to God? Will you give to Caesar what is Caesars, but give God your very selves?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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