

**God, Caesar, and Fly Swatters**  
*Live Like You Were Dying: The Gospel of Mark Chapters 11-16: #3*  
*Mark 12:13-17*

*The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes at him with his teeth. But the Lord enthroned in heaven laughs. For the plans of the wicked will not succeed.*

For anyone who has lived in Florida for any length of time, Summer To-Do-Lists have two very important points of emphasis. Number One: make sure your air conditioner works. If it doesn't, make sure you have ice in the freezer and a box fan ready to go. Number Two: make sure your method for swatting flies and mosquitos is influenced by the latest technological advances. They don't make fly paper like they used to. That's why these are the days of highly efficient of bug zappers. There is an important lesson we can learn about life from fly traps: mankind stops at nothing to eliminate pests. We don't like them inside our homes, or fellowshiping with us around our picnic tables. So, we invent ways do away with them. We will even break out the Venus Fly Trap if we have to.

From the moment he cleansed the temple, Jesus was a pest for the Sanhedrin and the rest of their elitist ilk that had to be eliminated. To do this, they invented a trap on a Tuesday that they thought was theologically advanced enough to accomplish the job. "Let's ask this Nazarene by what authority he can justify doing what He did," they reasoned. "If He says, 'by my Father's authority,' we can kill Him for claiming He is divine." But Jesus wouldn't take their bait! So, what do they do? Do they call it a day, go home, and pull for the Detroit Lions to go to the Superbowl? No! They invented a new, more sophisticated, fly swatter. They come up with a plan to ask Jesus a question about politics. "If he answers in favor of Rome," they reasoned, "then we can point the finger at Him and call Him no Messiah of the Jews. However, if this Jesus of Nazareth denigrates Rome with his answer, we can go to the Prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, and inform him that He is an insurrectionist."

In the passage before us today, Mark 12:13-17, the highest court in the land, the Sanhedrin, is going to construct a despicably wicked trap for Jesus. But instead of falling right into it, Jesus is going to break it with the most politically influential speech in the history of humanity: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." The presence of that statement in your copy of the Gospel of Mark is demonstrative proof that wickedness will never ultimately prosper. It's also demonstrative proof that God triumphs over evil by using it to craft his own story. It is the instance of Passion Week that features the Lord Jesus using a wicked scheme to produce a triumph that only God can come up with. But, friends, it won't be the last. For Jesus will be crucified, but up from the dead He will rise. So today church I want to show you how the wicked scheme worked. It's how they still work today. And I also want to show you how Jesus triumphed over that scheme. For His words of triumph over that wicked scheme still apply to us today as much as ever. So, turn with me to Mark 12:13-17.

*<sup>13</sup> Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. <sup>14</sup> 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<sup>[d]</sup> to Caesar or not? <sup>15</sup> Should 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." <sup>16</sup> They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. <sup>17</sup> 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.*

**How the Evil Scheme Worked:**

**1. Unity of Hostility (13)**

- **Lions, Hyenas, and Warthogs:** In Africa, Lions and Hyenas don't like each other very much. But if a lion and hyena both spot a stray warthog at the same, the enemies become friends focused on one objective: doing away with the warthog that has come into their territory.
- **Pharisees and Herodians Were Like Lions and Hyenas:** (1) The Pharisees believed the OT was the inspired Word of God. They hated the Roman occupation of Judea. They paid their poll tax to Rome begrudgingly. (2) The Herodians did not believe the OT was the inspired Word of God. They had no problem with the Roman occupation of Judea. They paid their poll tax to Rome willingly because the Romans gave them special privileges others did not have. (3) For all practical purposes, they were enemies.
- **But The Pharisees and Herodians Joined Together Willingly and Were Dispatched for a Special Purpose:** (1) Mark tells us in the first phrase: "later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians." This "they" is behind the whole plot. This "they" came up with the idea of a new and improved fly swatter. And this "they" was the Sanhedrin, the Highest Court in the Land. (2) It was composed of 71 people. 70 from 3 walks of Jewish life: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. And 1 high priest: Caiaphas, a Sadducee. They were commissioned to make righteous judgments for the people. And the majority decision ruled the land. But here two opposition parties of the court are acting in unison. Why? (3) Because the day before Jesus chased them all out of the temple with a whip. And earlier on this day, he refused to answer their question. (4) As a result, the Pharisees and Herodians found common ground. They were united in their hatred of Jesus. So they became partners.
- **App:** Darkness is real. (b) It's well-coordinated. (c) It's well researched and put together. (d) It makes sworn enemies friends. (e) It looks like it is going to prosper. It gives the appearance of being victorious. (f) It may even prosper for a while. But it will not emerge as the victor. For the Lord in Heaven foils the plans of wicked.

## 2. Flattery in Speech, War in the Heart (14-15a)

- **The Evolution of Our Response to Flattery:** When you are young and someone goes out of their way to say “ah, you are so great,” your response is “thanks.” (2) When you get a little older, your response becomes “thanks, I guess.” (3) When you get further down the road, your response becomes “uhm, what can I do for you? What do you want from me?” (4) There’s a reason for that evolution: We’ve learned truth of Proverbs 29:5 “One who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet” and 26:28: “a flattering mouth works ruin.”
- **The Evil of the Pharisees and Herodians Started with a Flattering Mouth:** In 14v they pay Jesus a series of three compliments, all of which are true of Jesus: (1) You are a man of integrity (He is); (2) You aren’t swayed by others (He isn’t); (3) You teach the way of God in accordance with the truth (He does). The number 3 is one of completion. That’s why in the ancient world compliments usually came in threes. The problem is they were not giving him compliments because they cared. They gave him compliments because they wanted him dead.
- **Where There is Flattery in Speech, There Is War in the Heart:** (1) Immediately after the flattery, comes the dagger. (a) Is it right to pay imperial tax to Caesar? Should we pay? Or shouldn’t we? (2) They’ve asked this question about taxes in a public setting. And in the Roman world, a public question about Rome to a public figure requires a public response. (3) Jesus is indeed going to answer. But not before he rebukes them publicly: “Why are you trying to trap me?” (4) There’s an important lesson here for us: When someone puts you on the spot in a public setting, you have every right to rebuke publicly with the truth.
- **Satan’s Greatest Trick:** I used to think Satan’s greatest trick was to convince people he doesn’t exist. But now I think different. His greatest trick is to convince people to compromise their devotion to Jesus by taking themselves more seriously than they do Jesus. He does this by exposing them an infinite number of compliments. For where there is an infinite number of compliments and flattery in speech, rest assured that there is war in the heart of the one(s) dispensing them.

### How The Triumph Worked

## 3. Citizenship: Render unto Caesar What Is Caesars (15b-17a)

- **Great Political Statements in History:** There have been some great revolutionary political statements in history: (1) “If you do not take an interest in the affairs of your government, then you are doomed to live under the rule of fools” (Plato). (2) “When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another” (The Declaration of Independence). (3) However, both of these are rather small in influence when compared to Jesus’ statement in this passage. It’s the most significant political statement in human history.
- **“Render unto Caesar” Means Government is an Institution Ordained by God:** (1) Even the bad examples of government serve a purpose. (2) That’s why Paul says to the Romans: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established” (Rom 13:1). (3) The Zealots (like the disciple Simon the Zealot) wouldn’t have liked to hear that for they thought “no rule but God’s rule.”
- **“Render unto Caesar” Means Part of Being a Good Disciple is Being a Good Citizen:** (1) The Essenes refused to pay taxes and retreated from everything that was citizen oriented in Judea. The Pharisees paid taxes reluctantly, but like the Essenes, were inclined to retreat from being an active citizen on the grounds they thought the government was corrupt. (2) But Jesus’ statement here is that it is our duty under God to be a good citizen under Caesar. We do what is right and required because we do so as unto the Lord.
- **App and Transition:** That which makes men and women good Christians is that which makes them good citizens as well. With that said, it’s important to remember “Render unto Caesar” is just the first half of the statement. There is an ending.

## 4. Lordship: Render unto God what is God’s (17b)

- **Picture on the Dresser:** (1) I ran across an interesting picture this week while doing some cleaning. I liked it so much I put it on Facebook. (2) It’s an image of my wife and I with Miller still in her belly. (3) At the bottom of the picture is a phrase that says “I am my beloveds. And my beloved is mine. (4) God’s portrait on his dresser is very similar. We are all on it. For we are created not in the image of Caesar, but of Him.
- **Render to Gods What is God’s Means:** (1) That while you are a citizen, Caesar doesn’t own you. God does. (2) You are never called by Jesus to let Caesar play the role of the God. (2) You are never called to surrender to Caesar your God given responsibility to raise your children. (3) You are never called to surrender to Caesar your understanding of what the Bible clearly speaks about issues that Caesar and those in his court may disagree. (4) You are never called to surrender your conscience to him either. (4) For those things belong to God.
- **Render to God What Is God’s Implies:** (1) If Caesar asks for something that belongs to God, it is your responsibility to say no and rebel against Caesar with dignity and respect (like Daniel). (2) It is your responsibility to say, like Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, “you judge for yourself whether it is right or not. But we can’t help but testify to what we’ve seen and heart.” (3) It is your responsibility to say, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, “No. Nebuchadnezzar. We will not bow before your golden statue. For we render unto God what is God’s.”
- **App:** What Sanhedrin meant for the greatest of evils, God meant for the greatest of Gods. It may be the first time in the Passion Narratives God has used for good what people meant for evil. But it won’t be the last. For up from the grave, He arose. But not before saying “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. And render to God’s what is God’s. Evil will never triumph. But the King, His Kingdom, and His Kingdom People will. Amen. Thine the Glory.