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July 9, 2017

**A Christ-like Response  
Patriotism  
Mark 12:13-17**

**1. Be good citizens.**

- Romans 13:5-7; Jeremiah 29:4-7

**2. We can honor God and the government.**

- Romans 13; 1 Peter 2; John 18:36; Revelation 5, 7, 11;  
Genesis 12

**3. The state is not God.**

**4. Our ultimate allegiance is to God.**

- Psalm 24:1; Acts 4; Genesis 1:26

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**Isms: A Christ-like Response**  
**Patriotism<sup>1</sup>**  
**Mark 12:13-17**

Today we are continuing in our summer-long sermon series called “Isms: A Christ-like Response,” looking at some of the different ideas facing us in our culture today. I want to remind you that, as we go through this series, if you have questions, observations, disagreements or concerns, tell us! You can do that in one of several ways: you can use the cards in the seat back in front of you, you can email us at “isms@wvcnaz.com” or you can message us through our West Valley Church Facebook page. At the end of this series, the pastors will take a Sunday morning and have a panel discussion and do our best to respond to your questions and comments.

We’ve just come through a week that celebrated our most significant national holiday. Shelly and I celebrated while we were in Ohio visiting a long time very close friend, Geoff Fuller, who is a professor at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, in biology, biochemistry, molecular biology, and a whole lot of other really smart stuff. It was great to see him. Over the Fourth, we went to a community park and heard patriotic music and watched fireworks, all intended to remind us of the “rockets’ red glare” and “the bombs bursting in air” of our nation’s fight for independence.

So with fireworks ringing in our ears, we are going to take a look at “patriotism.” Patriotism is a very good thing, but can there be too much of a good thing? Is it possible for a Christian to take their patriotism too far? Is it possible for Christians to confuse their Christianity with their patriotism? I remember as a child growing up asking my parents what religion we were, since we didn’t go to church anywhere. Their answer was, “We are Americans, and so we are Christians.” Are those two really the same thing? Despite what you might think, not all of our founding fathers were devout Christians (I don’t want to get into a debate about the history of our nation), still there is no question that our system of government was designed to work best when there is a consensus of commitment to Judeo-Christian principles. But that doesn’t make us Christians, and that certainly does not mean that singing hymns of our nation and hymns of our God are the same thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Resources:

Kevin DeYoung, *Making Sense of Government*, ©2012 Christianity Today International.  
Kent Brower, *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Mark* (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO, 2012)  
David Smith, *Mark: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2007)

Today we are going to learn what our perspectives ought to be from a story about Jesus. We are going to see today a potentially explosive confrontation between three parties: Jesus, the religious leaders, and the most patriotic people of his day, in a situation that seemed poised to set off fireworks. Let's first look at the passage, from Mark 12:13-17, which is going to help us have the right perspective on patriotism. Would you stand with me as I read this, and I encourage you to hear the Word as I read? The Bible tells us in Romans 10:17 that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word," so I'm asking you to listen carefully to God's Word so your faith can grow:

"Later they (*the council of Jewish religious leaders called the Sanhedrin*) sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. 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?'

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.

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." (niv)

I pray today God will open His Word to our minds, and open our minds to His Word. Thank you for standing to honor God's Word – you can have a seat.

The Sanhedrin was predominantly made up of three groups of leaders among the Jews in that time, and they held political, social, and religious power. There were the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians. Pharisees were the religious fundamentalists – they followed the religious laws strictly, so they were the religious leaders. The Sadducees were religious leaders who were a bit more liberal, and were wealthier; they had connections financially and politically. They had the social clout. Then there were the Herodians. The Herodians were Jewish leaders who had strong ties to the Roman King Herod; they had strong political influence. You might say that they were the patriotic group. None of these three groups liked each other – they each wanted all the power. Today, it might be like the Republicans, Democrats, and the Tea Party trying to get along! The only thing that united the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians in the Bible was that they all hated Jesus and were threatened by his growing popularity among the common people and the outcasts.

So in this passage, the Sanhedrin sent some Pharisees and Herodians to try and trap Jesus, and they asked him about politics and religion—a sure bet to be a controversy!

One of the churches that I used to be pastor at was near an air force base. We had a young airman in our church that died tragically in a hunting accident, and the family wanted me to officiate the funeral at the base chapel. They were told, though, that if

anyone besides a chaplain was to officiate, there were two rules: I wouldn't be allowed to talk about Jesus (I could only refer to him generically as "God"), and I couldn't talk about politics. Thankfully, the family decided to have the service in our church. It turned out to be one of the rare occasions that they had a full military service in a church with a pastor instead of a chaplain on base. No matter where you go, people have strong opinions about politics and religion, and to bring it up usually ends up in fireworks!

Today I want to talk about both of them! Because that is exactly what the Sanhedrin did with Jesus by sending these two groups.

So they started by trying to flatter Jesus, saying that he is a great teacher, a straight shooter, and that he always answers wisely. They hoped it sounded sincere on the outside, but on the inside they were really mocking him. The irony is that what they were saying was really true: Jesus really *was* those things. But he saw right through them – they'd tried this before and he embarrassed them with his wisdom and insight. So Jesus' answer is basically, "Really? You are really going to try to put me to the test one more time?" But they tried anyway. In front of the crowd that was gathered, they asked Jesus if he thought they should have to pay taxes. Jesus immediately saw through their hypocrisy. He knew they were trying to trap him, and so he asked why they were putting him to the test.

Here was the trap: if Jesus said they must pay their taxes to Caesar, then the people would be upset. They hated the yearly tax, and they hated the Romans, who oppressed and ruled over the Jews. Jesus was very popular with the people, but if he said they *should* pay taxes to Caesar, then the people would turn against him, and the Pharisees would be able to get rid of him. But if Jesus said they should *not* pay taxes, then he was telling people to disobey the Roman laws, so the Herodians could arrest Jesus for treason. So they thought they had him caught on the horns of a dilemma. They were sure they had trapped him.

Jesus' answer was to ask to see a denarius, a coin that was the equivalent to a day's wage for a workingman. It would be like Jesus today asking for a hundred dollar bill. So someone handed him a denarius. It is a silver Roman coin, and on it is a picture of Tiberius Caesar, who reigned from 14 A.D. to 37 A.D. He was the emperor, or the Caesar, during Jesus' day. So the coin had a picture of his face on one side, with an abbreviated version of this slogan: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus Divi Augusti filius Augustus," which means, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of divine Augustus." On the backside was engraved "Pontifex Maximus," which means "high priest" in Latin. The Jews hated the coin itself because it was a blasphemous coin. It said Caesar was the high priest. It said Caesar was the son of Augustus, the emperor who claimed to be God.



When Jesus asked whose likeness and inscription was on the coin, everyone knew it was Tiberius Caesar's. So Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and

give to God the things that belong to God.” This was a loaded statement, and this one sentence lays the foundation for the Christian perspective on patriotism. It lays the foundation for a Christian approach to politics and religion, church and state, God and government.

The first is this:

## 1. Be good *citizens*.

There’s no question that for a Christian, patriotism means we should be good citizens – even if you think the government is bad. In a few days from the story in this passage, the Romans would kill Jesus. In a few decades – in 70 A.D., the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple. In the years following that, they killed some of the apostles and hundreds if not thousands of Christians. Rome was by no means a Christian empire – not one you would want to be patriotic about. They were like many other empires and civilizations of the day. It’s not that they persecuted the Jews and Christians whenever they wanted; they did it only when they felt like they had to. Rome had many good accomplishments; they did good things, but they also persecuted, and they also insisted on worshiping the emperor. So it’s safe to say that no matter how much you dislike American politics and politicians, Rome was worse. And yet Jesus said, “Pay your taxes. Caesar’s face is on the coin; give him the coin. He has a right to levy tribute, so pay the denarius.”

In the Bible, Paul makes the same point in Romans 13 -

“So you must submit to them (*government authorities*), not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience. Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority.” (Romans 13:5-7, nlt)

In the next verse Paul wrote, “Owe no one anything.” Now, he doesn’t mean you can’t have a mortgage on your house. He is saying you ought to make your payments. Don’t owe people when it’s due to them. So if honor is due to the emperor, give him honor. If taxes are due to the state, pay your taxes. Don’t leave out what you owe. Proper patriotism means to be a good citizen.

When the nation of Israel was in exile in Babylon, this is what they were told:

“This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: ‘Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.’” (Jeremiah 29:4-7, nlt)

You are ethically responsible for being a good citizen and to seek the well-being of

the place you live. Jesus' first point is very simple: be good citizens. Caesar has a tax; pay the tax.

Jesus' answer also implies that being patriotic means...

## 2. We can honor God and the government.

Allegiance to God and allegiance to your country are not inherently incompatible. There are some Christians who think that love of country is always a bad thing. But Jesus shows us it is possible to honor Caesar *and* to honor God.

This is especially clear if you understand the history about the poll tax or the census tax that Jesus was being questioned about. It was instituted in 6 A.D. and people hated it. When it was instituted, a man named Judas of Galilee (not the Judas in the New Testament) led a revolt, but the Romans squashed it. Judas of Galilee and the other Zealots believed allegiance to God and allegiance to earthly government were fundamentally incompatible. They said that since God is King, we should have no earthly king. Well, after that attempted revolt, there was a constant conflict between church and state, between God and government, right up to this story.

When Jesus told people to give to Caesar the things that were Caesar's, one of the things he meant was that you have duties to your country and state governments that do not necessarily infringe on your duty to God. It is possible to have allegiance to a lesser authority than God, because the higher authority – God – has instituted that lesser authority. Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2 implies that God and government, religion and politics can be compatible (I encourage you to read those chapters!). However, there are times when civil disobedience is accepted and even required. If the government opposes God and his law, or oppresses groups of people, we must always side with God and stand up for people. Sometimes the most patriotic thing we can do is to oppose the state for the sake of the greater good!

It is possible to be a good Christian and a good American, or a good Christian and a good Guyanese, or a good Christian and a good Ukrainian simultaneously. Patriotism is not a bad thing. Like anything else, it can become idolatrous, but it's not inherently bad. If you get choked up during the National Anthem, it doesn't mean you have tossed aside your love for Jesus.

In this passage, Jesus was acknowledging that there would be *other* governments in this world. But that does not mean that Christ is not Lord of all. He is Lord of all, and he exercises his lordship in different ways. Jesus said in John 18: 36, "My kingdom is not of this world." But his reign will not be fully inaugurated until the end of the age. Revelation 11 tells us one day the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of Christ. Until that happens, there are *other*, lesser governments that are under his authority.

As Christians in the US, we are more like the Israelites when they were exiled in Babylon, and *not* the Israelites in the Promised Land. I think people get that confused. God was the ruler when Israel was in the Promised Land. He was the only government. When they were exiles in Babylon, they were God's people under

someone else's rule. They worked for the peace of the city they lived in, even though the government did not acknowledge God. If it came down to obeying God or man, they had to obey God. They maintained a distinctive culture *within* a culture, but they were *exiles*. According to the New Testament, *Christians* are strangers, aliens, and immigrants. So we are more like the Jews in exile. We are pilgrims trying to make our way through this world. The only *Christian* government will be when Jesus returns. So we must be careful that our patriotism is kept in its proper place because the United States is not the Kingdom of Christ, and the US is not our home. To expect America to be the Israel of the Promised Land is NOT biblical. (*repeat!*)

As citizens of the spiritual kingdom, we have no patriotic allegiance to an earthly nation, but as citizens of the civil kingdom, a healthy patriotism is certainly possible. Jeren Rowell is the district superintendent in Kansas City, and he has been credited as saying this: "Our ultimate salvation is not in the United States of America. The purposes of our country are not equal to the purposes of God. They can share in God's purposes but we dare not think the secular authority can do all the work of the kingdom of God.

So we pledge an allegiance to our nation, but it is never to be confused with our first allegiance as citizens of the kingdom of God. We are not Americans who also happen to be Christian. We are Christians who also happen to be American. We've got to keep that straight." He's exactly right. Patriotism does not mean being solely American, nor is American patriotism a Christian thing; Christians can be patriotic in other countries of this world, too, because Christians belong to a kingdom that is not of this world.

Christianity is not uniquely an American or Western religion. How often does America show up in the Bible? The events in the Bible took place in the Middle East. That's where Christianity started. While Christianity spread throughout Europe during the first centuries, one of the strongest locations for Christianity was in Turkey. St. Augustine, one of the most famous theologians in the history of the church, was a bishop in North Africa, which is now dominated by Islam. In the past hundred years, Christianity's center of gravity is shifting to the South and to the East. The Church of the Nazarene is larger *outside* the US than inside, and is growing at a far faster rate there than here. There are Nazarene missionaries being sent out not just from the US but also from places like Brazil and Korea, and some of those missionaries are being sent *here to the US*.

I wish you could have seen the 35,000 Nazarenes gathered at General Assembly from all over the world. The church is international, and we need to understand that you do not have to be an American or disown your country in order to follow Christ. Two of our six general Superintendents retired this year, and we elected two new generals – one is a woman – Dr. Carla Sunberg who was president of our seminary, and the other is Dr. Filimao Chambo, our regional director from Africa. I have a video for you to watch – it is in the lobby of the convention center during General Assembly, and it is patriotic Africans, patriotically celebrating the election of one of their own – an African - to be our general superintendent (*play video*)

In Genesis 12, God promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations. Revelation 5 and 7 say people of different languages, cultures, and nations will gather together around God's throne. You can be from *any* country and worship Jesus.

Which takes us to the next part of the statement Jesus was making, that we must remember when it comes to patriotism:

### 3. The ***state*** is not ***God***.

Think about the second half of Jesus' statement: "Give to God the things that are God's." Some things belong to Caesar; other things belong to God. We must keep them separate. And this is where many Christians in America get into trouble: we begin to think that America is a Christian nation, so our patriotism moves us to worship our country as if they were both the same thing.

There is another "ism" that is **syncretism: the combination of different forms of belief or practice.**<sup>2</sup> We must keep our patriotism in check with our Christianity. Patriotism that is syncretism is idol worship. Do you understand this?

Remember the denarius – the coin with Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of Divine Augustus? Jesus said go ahead and pay that coin to Caesar. However, he did *not* say when you give to Caesar you are giving to God. He said give to Caesar *and* give to God. Caesar is not God. The United States is not God and therefore should not be worshiped.

If we are not careful, we might start to believe that Caesar is God, that the state can provide the solution to all our problems. Jesus said respect government, honor Caesar, but know this for sure: the state is *not* God. The government does not have comprehensive authority. The United States is neither God nor is it Christian. Do not commit syncretism. Because...

### 4. Our ***ultimate allegiance*** is to God.

Here is the final implication: We owe our ultimate allegiance to God. The power of the state is legitimate, but it is limited. Our allegiance to our country should never be absolute. On the other hand, our allegiance to God is absolute. When Jesus said, "Give to God what belongs to God," everyone there knew that ultimately, *everything* belongs to God. God will allow us to acknowledge and support governments, but our ultimate allegiance is to God – everything belongs to God:

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him." (Psalm 24:1, nlt)

Do you see that? All the people – that means all the nations and all the people groups.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism>



Acts 4 tells us Peter and John would not stop preaching about Jesus, even though the authorities told them to stop. Daniel was thrown in a lion's den by the government because he prayed. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego chose to obey God rather than the king of Babylon. Our allegiance to the United States is limited; our allegiance to God is ultimate. Giving God his due is always more important than giving Caesar his due.

In verse 16, Jesus asks whose likeness was on the coin. The Greek word used for "likeness" is *eikōn*. It sounds like the English word icon. It means, "image." Here's where it gets interesting: that word is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament translation of Genesis 1:26, when God said: "Let us make man in our image [*eikōn*]." So what are the things that belong to Caesar? Taxes. Honor. Respect. But what belongs to God? *You* - your whole self. Caesar gets some of the coins, but God has a right to *all* of you. Caesar's image is on the coin; God's image is in you. Imagine standing before God's throne, and Jesus says to you, "Come up here. Let me look at you. Whose likeness is on her? Whose image is in him?" The answer is God's. You are made in God's image. You owe your life and existence to God. You are like that coin—dirty, rusted, turning green. You may be tainted by sin, but you are still worth something to God, because his face—his image, his likeness—*is on you*. You belong to him. The only way to give to God the things that are God's is to give God your very self.

So you must ask, "What am I holding back?" If it is an offense to withhold taxes from the United States Treasury, how much more offensive is it to withhold what should be given to the one who made you, from the King of the universe, the one whose image is stamped upon you? You might be able to hide a few things from the IRS, but you cannot hide from God. You belong to him. Have you been putting off complete submission to him, thinking you can hold things back from him? He made you in his image. His inscription is written all over you. So come to Christ. Quit holding back parts of your life. Surrender the fight and give to God the things that belong to God. Give God all of who you are.

### *Pray*

While we were at General Assembly, we saw a powerful demonstration of what it means to be a part of the kingdoms of this earth but still giving our complete allegiance to God. Here is a video of a part of one of the services. The video won't have the same power as being present among 25,000 Nazarenes from all over the world, but I think you will still get the idea. Pay attention to the words in the lower right corner that will tell you the different languages that are being sung.

### *Play video*