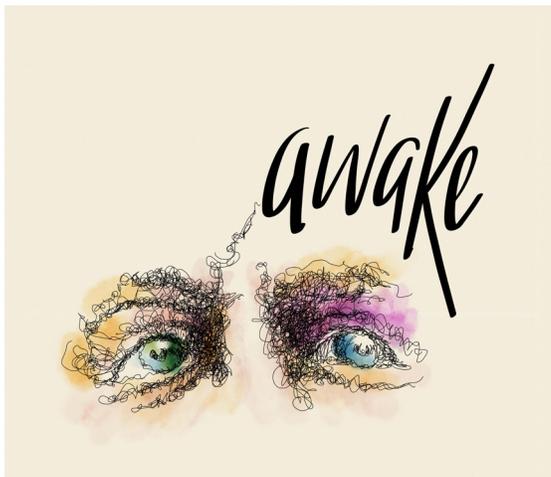


Sermon Growth Guide

May 15, 2022
Awake to Politics



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Mark 12:13-17

Key Verse: Mark 12:17 Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

Big Idea: You belong to Christ, not Caesar.

Foundations

Once again, the religious leaders try and catch Jesus in His words, this time by putting religion and politics head-to-head.

Jesus doesn’t run away or ignore hot topics. Christianity is a worldview grounded, in part, by truth. “There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.” (James 1:17, *The Message*) This is the Scripture that anchors the line “there is no shadow of turning in Thee” in *Great is Thy Faithfulness*.

Jesus, **Awake**, responds: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

We’re focusing on Genesis 1:27 throughout the *Awake* series: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Just as the coin Jesus asks for bears an image, so you bear an image. You are made in God’s image. Just as the coin belongs to Caesar, you belong to God. Therefore, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

Pray that the Spirit guide and guard your hearts, minds, and discussion this week.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Mark 12:13-17.

Drawing from your Life Group’s collective knowledge, why are the Pharisees and Herodians trying to “catch Jesus in his words”?

Why does Jesus want to see a denarius (a coin)?

Going along with our series, how does Jesus demonstrate living **Awake** this week?

Applying God’s Word

Our first allegiance must be to Christ, not Caesar. Host an honest conversation about times when you have disordered your temporal-national allegiance with your eternal-Kingdom allegiance. How can you think differently about politics so that your first allegiance remains faithfully to Christ?

Witnessing God’s Word

It is easy to follow American culture into allowing political topics to become divisive and alienating. How can you, as one who belongs to Christ and not Caesar, bring the healing of heaven to bear upon political conversations?

“Michael, we want you to preach in the Awake series.” “The Awake Series,” I respond, “is that the hot topic one coming up?” “Yep, that one. Tell you what, preach the politics one. Are you okay with that?” “Great!” I reply. Great. O boy! What was I thinking?! Politics. What are the two things you’re told not to talk about to “keep the peace” in the highways and byways? Or at your Thanksgiving dinner table? Faith and politics. Well, we’re doing both this morning, so buckle up!

Why is politics a hot topic? Well, politics gets to how we ought to treat one another. One way of thinking about politics is understanding that politics gets down to worldview, your system of understanding reality and responding to it.

There’s so much at stake today. How many of us have been wounded by a political conversation gone haywire? I’ve had grandparents ask to meet with me because of feeling isolated and even cutoff from their children and grandchildren around politics. A woman told me her extended family won’t talk to her again until she publicly apologizes for voting for a presidential candidate other than the one of their preference. I’ve had conversations with some of our young people who are confused and frustrated by what they feel to be a severe lack of concern by the generations above them for the moral integrity of candidates.

Friends, something is wrong here. We can’t stay like this. What is our future when basic civil engagement becomes the frontline of our societal fragmentation? We can’t keep on operating in a way where relationships are destroyed because we don’t know how to function when someone tries to bridge a conversation with us on politics.

Too often, politics leave us feeling like a cornered mouse. It feels as if someone is intentionally trying to catch us off

balance. It feels like someone is waiting for us to say the wrong thing so they can slip the noose around the friendship and fellowship we once enjoyed. Is there a way out when we feel cornered? Is breakthrough possible when the wolves encircle?

“Later they 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.’”

Wolves encircling. Called here “Pharisees and Herodians.” Wolves encircling Jesus. To catch Him in His words. To trick Him into saying something that will give them all the leverage they need to hang Him in the town square. The trap is laid. A trap that, no doubt for most people, works every time. How many of us like being called out in front of others with no head’s up?

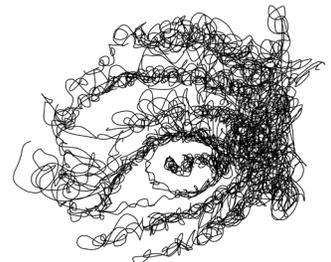
But Jesus. Jesus is different. Jesus never seems surprised by these surprise-attacks. In fact, He always remains so calm. In fact, and this is going to sound crazy, but it seems like He always knows what’s coming, like He has a bird’s eye view on the whole thing. He is “always prepared to give an answer, in and out of season.”

This was not the Pharisees and Herodians first rodeo with Jesus:

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” (Mark 3:6)

“The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven.” (Mark 8:11)

“Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (Mark 10:2)



Jesus amazes the religious power-holders in chapter three of Mark. He does the same thing in chapter eight. And the same thing again in chapter ten. But here, in chapter 12, surely now Jesus is trapped. The mouse is cornered. Fourth time's the charm?

Our passage today takes place in Jerusalem, at the temple. For about thirty years, Jerusalem has been under Roman occupation. The Jews are a conquered people. As the ruling government, Rome now demands tribute, taxation. How are the Jews feeling?

Well, if you're a Zealot Jew, the fight is still on. There's no way you're giving your hard-earned money to Caesar. No way! You're ready to fight to the death before you declare Rome the victor and give Caesar tribute.

If you're a Pharisee, you're heart-broken, confused, resentful, but you're willing to play along. You hope for a brighter tomorrow. In the meantime, you wait. You study the Torah. You make sure everyone else in the city is following the Torah. After all, as soon as all the Jews, together, are following the Torah, Messiah will arrive and drive out the Romans, won't He? And yes, you're willing to pay taxes to Caesar in the meantime. But isn't our ultimate allegiance to Yahweh?

If you're a Herodian you support the imperial tax on principle. Like the Sadducees, you're more than willing to dive into the political landscape. After all, it's just a piece of reality, right? And, hey, it's not exactly an all-you-can-eat buffet out there. It's more like, "hurry to the table and grab something before it's all gone." And hey, someone's gotta steward the power, right?

If you're an Essene (think John the Baptist), you're probably not in Jerusalem at all. You're probably living several day's travel outside the city,

having built a self-sustaining community in an area where you might pay taxes, but, come on, what Roman magistrate is going to bother coming to find you? You pose no threat to Rome.

What if you're Rome? What if you're Caesar? Do you care if the conquered peoples across the Roman empire pay their taxes? You bet.

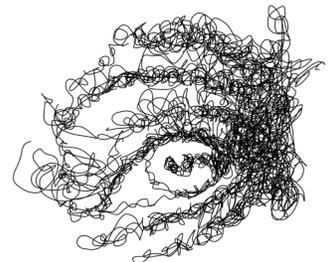
The Pharisees and Herodians have their eyes locked on Jesus. "Listen close and answer now; today, your ministry ends." Picking up toward the end of verse 14: "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

Simple question enough. Of course, seeming simplicity is a prerequisite of a trick question, right? If Jesus answers "yes," He risks enraging the Jews on theological grounds. Is Caesar the ultimate authority or is God? If Jesus answers "no," He risks enraging Rome on political grounds. After all, Rome is the ruling government and hasn't God established government for the good of the people? The Pharisees and Herodians have played their cards well: theology and politics are laid face-up on the table to put Jesus out of the game.

What do you think? Is Jesus trapped? Can Christianity answer both the question of politics and the question of theology? Does Christianity really respond to the world we live in better than any other worldview?

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."

Jesus knew their hypocrisy. We're



square in the middle of our series **Awake**. If Jesus had of been metaphorically asleep when approached by the Pharisees and Herodians they would have been able to overcome Him with their destruction—craft and cunning ways. But again and again we see Jesus living fully awake to the issues of the day. Jesus is found awake; may we too be awake and be “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,” (1 Peter 3:15). How do you live awake? Stay close to your Good Shepherd, church. Stay close to your Good Shepherd.

Upon His request, Jesus is handed a denarius, which He holds up to the noonday sunlight to examine.

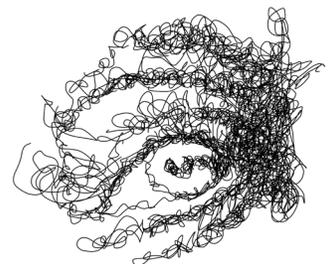
Jesus would have seen the image of Caesar and an inscription that reads, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus: Pontifex Maximus.” Blasphemy. Surely Jesus will not side with a secular State, a State that is unjustly conquering its neighbors, exchanging civility for even more power. Rome gives divine status to a mere mortal, promotes polytheism, and ascribes Caesar the status of Pontifex Maximus, “greatest priest.” “Whose image is this?” Jesus asks. “And whose inscription?” And then Jesus gives us the line that has echoed down the halls of history both within and without Christianity, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”



Stop getting sucked into greed. Stop the pretense that human government isn’t a form and freedom of grace under the context of the fall. Stop pretending like you are your own Caesar. Instead, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. Pay your taxes. Pay your taxes when they’re due! They’re not yours, they belong to Caesar. “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” (Romans 13:1) Here, by recognizing the relative autonomy of Rome, Jesus utterly rejects the notion that His present mission is to turn secular States into one Kingdom theocracy. One day, yes, the One who is called Faithful and True will arrive with all power to strike the nations and to rule with an eternal rod of iron (Revelation 19), but it is not this day. This day: “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”

If Jesus stops here, Jesus will be found out to be no more than a puppet of the empire. When you acknowledge with your life nothing beyond human government you blasphemy the Kingdom that is without end. But what else is there to say? He has said it. He has sided with Rome, hasn’t He? Perhaps in this hair of a moment as Jesus is unknowingly drawing breath to finish His response, perhaps in this hair of a moment the Jews, the Pharisees and Herodians, think they’ve won. A puppet maybe, but no longer our problem. We’ve uncovered Him for His true self, a puppet of the empire of Rome. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” puppet talk. The Jews will side with us now, He’s out of here. “We’ve gotten rid of Jesus,” they think.

But Jesus wasn’t finished, καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῷ θεῷ, “and to God what is God’s.” If there was a Roman officer leaning against a nearby temple wall listening in on the conversation, this is



the moment when he drops his cup of coffee, his mug shatters, as the smile on his face disappears and his hand reactionarily touches his sword's handle.

And to God what is God's. There is a higher authority than Rome. There is an allegiance due above all others and it is not to the secular State or to the secular self, it is to the personal Creator God, revealed throughout the Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ, Lord Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest for all the world, the true Pontifex Maximus. Jesus speaks truth to power. There is only one true king whose rule and reign is from everlasting to everlasting who overcomes all the kingdoms of the world not with columns of tanks, but with the very breath of His mouth (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

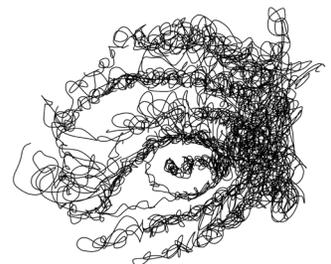
This is Jesus, who in the inhale says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," and in the exhale will publicly call His governor, Herod, a fox for the ways Herod demonstrated the anti-Christ characteristics of being conniving and deceitful. "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people.'" (Luke 13:32) "Prayer for leaders and criticism of their practices are not mutually exclusive ideas." (Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 53).

Two weeks ago, Pastor Tim stated that "there is one term you're going to need in order to survive this series, "image bearer." "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) O, that you would understand who you really are! Rocks are material, but have no agency. Animals have agency, but have no self-conscience. You, above all the creatures of the earth, made in the image and likeness of God, exercise

volition—from the moment of your conception, you, a human, made in the image and likeness of God.

Moreso, if God's saving grace has been poured into your heart by grace and through faith then you're not only an image bearer, but a dwelling place. Jesus, standing in the temple, knowing He is about to relocate the temple to the hearts of His bride, the church, declares that you belong to God, declares that just like Caesar's image appears on a coin, so the very face of God appears in you. Therefore, render to God what is God's. "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). And: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9) Watch out church, I grabbed my apologetics hat on the way out the door this morning. A worldview, the foundation of one's political thought, must answer four necessary questions of the human heart: origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. Christianity speaks to origin: you are made in the image and likeness of God. Christianity speaks to meaning: you are a temple of the Holy Spirit, a dwelling place of the divine, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. Christianity speaks to morality: "therefore honor God with your bodies." And Christianity speaks to destiny: eternal dwelling with God and His people:

"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will



wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'" (Revelation 21:3-5a)

A worldview, the foundation of one's political thought, must answer four necessary questions of the human heart: origin (how did all this get started?), meaning (what's my purpose?), morality (how do I live responsibly?), and destiny (where am I headed?). In turn, these answers must be correspondingly true on particular questions and, as a whole, all answers must be collectively coherent. Friends, the Christian message, the gospel of Jesus Christ, is utterly unique among all other worldviews and meets the demands of truth. "'Come,' says God, 'let us reason together.'" (Isaiah 1:18)

God has provided salvation in Jesus Christ. The cards of politics and theology are placed on the table. Christ says, give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In Christ, the most troubling of questions are reconciled and you are filled with utmost dignity and worth as you walk as a child of God before a watching world.

Imagine what it will be like to be responsibly and passionately engaged in politics without losing your soul in the process. How? Because you're engaged for the Kingdom of God as an ambassador of the one "by whom kings reign" (Proverbs 8:15); not for personal power, but for kingdom come.

Imagine what it looks like for you to keep government and God in the proper order in your heart. Imagine what it looks like to submit to government, but to worship God wholeheartedly in all you do. If you only remember one thing today, remember this: your taxes belong to the government, but your worship

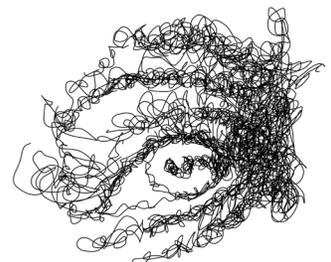
belongs to God alone. In other words: You belong to Christ, not Caesar.

What about today? What about American politics? How do we live awake today? How do we, like Jesus, submit to Caesar, but worship God alone? How do we thank God for the grace of government, an American government nonetheless, while at the same time, following in the footsteps of Christ, speak truth to power?

Well, for starters, we must understand where we are. This is not 1776. Some of that is for the better. Racial equality, women's rights—better, not best, but moving forward. We must press on. But here's what I need you to hear. 250 years ago a group of people got together to create a government structure with a balance of form and freedom unparalleled in the world at the time marked by liberty, freedom of thought, and representative democracy – a government governed across time by the people and for the people—as foundational rights.

Moreso, there was a clear submission to the ultimate authority be God's alone. Without this belief of "State < God," phrases like "in God we trust" and "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"—without a divine infinite reference point—these lines simply would not be found on our founding documents and currency.

Friends, please don't throw things at me when I tell you this: we're not there anymore. We've fallen from a Deistic framework to a humanistic framework. Humanism is the sole worldview that we've taught our students in our state schools for two full generations. And with the decline in the coherence of our national worldview has come the decline of our democracy. This year



The Economist Democracy Index dropped the U.S. once again on the “top democracy list” to number 26. That is to say, if we were indeed number 1 in the late 1800s, there are now 25 nations ahead of us in walking out healthy democracy: freedom of thought, freedom of speech, free election, liberty, peoples led policy, etc. Moreover, only the top 21 nations on the list, making up only 6.4% of the world’s population, fit the metrics for “full democracies;” America now ranks in the “flawed democracy” category. (bloomberg.com)

Brothers and sisters, what I’m not saying is to give up. What I am charging us to do is live awake in the present. Understand that we are in an uphill struggle for our national worldview and for our democracy. And our fight for our nation and our democracy is utterly subordinate to our allegiance to the kingdom of God. Understand that we’re called first and foremost to walk as citizens of heaven. Here, yes here in America, we are to walk not as the central power-holders, but as the foreigners and exiles that we are (1 Peter 2:11). We must have our allegiances in the proper order. There is so much to continue to be proud of as Americans. But get the order right. Miss the order, miss the whole thing. You belong to Christ, not Caesar.

And don’t give Christian Nationalism an inch in this congregation. The Christian Nationalism we saw on January 6, 2021 was extreme, but don’t get sucked

into thinking that you’re immune to Christian Nationalism. Christianity is about self-giving love. Christian Nationalism is about self-protecting power;” (Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*). Eliminate from your life all obsession with power, unbiblical triumphalism, and the notion that America is a theocracy.

Jesus listens to the Pharisees and Herodians. But He’s not trapped. And you don’t need to be trapped by the politics of today. Jesus affirms the rightness of living as subjects of governmental authority. And Jesus affirms that those governmental authorities are utterly subordinate to God and His Kingdom, that is above all earthly authorities and without end. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15) Bear witness to the kingdom, church. Bear witness to the kingdom.

Lord Christ, we belong to you above all else, not Caesar. Yet you call us to give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s. Help us bear witness well. Help us come up under our governmental authorities. Help us as well to know how to speak truth to power. May we be obsessed with You and Your eternal reign, not the powers of this age. Tear from our hearts the lust of power. Grant us the ability to extend Your loving kindness. O God, we see the coming of the Lord. Come Lord Jesus, come.

