

**6/22/25****Whose Image Do You Bear?*****Mark 12:13-17*****Pastor Nathanael Ryan, Brewster Baptist Church**

You know, when the four pastors got together, back in April, to plan this “Rooted in Faith” series, Doug got to preach on Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Joe got to preach on the Supremacy of Jesus, David got to talk about how we share our faith with others. And you know what I got stuck with? The pleasant and joy-filled topic of the separation of church and state. I wonder how that happened? And you know what’s worse? Doug’s not even here! He skipped town. He said, “Yeah... I’m going to go ahead and let you take that one on, Nate. I’ll see you on Monday.” Isn’t that just great?

Actually, that isn’t exactly how it went down. I volunteered to preach on this topic, for better or for worse. As someone whose coming of age has coincided with one of the most divided and politically charged periods in American history, this theme feels especially personal to me. The first election I was old enough to vote in was in 2016, so I’ve never really known what it means to be an engaged citizen outside the deeply polarized environment we find ourselves in today. This reality has really shaped the way I understand faith, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus, in ways I’m only beginning to start to figure out in my life. In many ways, the reason I’m still a Baptist, and not practicing my Christian faith in another tradition, is because I believe in the separation of church and state, which has been one of the foremost Baptist distinctives from its earliest beginnings.

As early as the 17th century, Baptists have upheld the idea that the affairs of the government should not interfere with the affairs of the church, and vice-versa. Grounded in a belief that Christian faith can only be freely chosen and never forced, early Baptists fled religious persecution by a state church that demanded they worship in a particular way. They faced fines and imprisonment, torture, and even death on occasion, because they were religious minorities who worshipped outside the structures sponsored by the state. They sought refuge in the New World to escape their sufferings, and lobbied our Founding Fathers to ensure that no one would ever have to experience them again. The Baptists were champions of a new, radical idea called religious liberty, and not just for themselves, but for all people. “If following Jesus is a choice,” they said,

“one which must be *freely* made, then everyone should have the right to choose what they believe, even if they never come to choose Jesus at all.” This belief, that true faith can never be compelled, is a foundational one to the Baptists. And, thanks to our Baptist forefathers, it’s baked into the DNA of this country.

But in order to preserve that freedom, there must be a line, a boundary drawn in the sand. The government should never have the right to dictate how we worship, but, by extension, we must never ask the government to enforce our faith or privilege Christianity over the other religions of the world. If we want religious liberty for ourselves, then we must want religious liberty for others. Anything less than this distorts the gospel and empties it of its power. A version of Christianity that relies on its government to proclaim its message is no longer good news, it’s something else. Something that doesn’t much resemble the teachings of Jesus.

But here’s the problem, brothers and sisters: we live in a moment when a growing number of Christians are embracing a version of the faith that devalues the separation of church and state, or worse, sees it as a threat to the gospel. We’ve been led to believe that unless we can legislate Christian morals, place Christian prayer back in the public square, or elect Christian leaders who can champion our cause, that the church will somehow fail. It’s a gospel of fear. And in that fear, we start grasping for power, instead of trusting in the Holy Spirit. We begin acting like Jesus is a product that needs government endorsement. He doesn’t, brothers and sisters. Jesus is the Lord of all creation already.

When we start to go down that road, we betray the heart of our message: that faith is a free response to grace, not a requirement set forth by our rulers. Jesus didn’t come to build a political machine; He didn’t seek to advance His kingdom through the mechanisms of worldly power. When we start to believe that deeply, we begin to see that we don’t need the state to carry out the gospel for us. All we need is the Spirit and the Word of God guiding us, as we seek to honor Jesus in the way we love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. That’s why the separation of church and state matters, not to keep God *out* of public life, but to *keep* the gospel unpolluted by the ambitions of political agenda.

But the temptation is still strong, isn’t it? It really is. All we want is to see people come to Jesus, for their lives to be changed, and for the glory of God to be revealed in

the world, because all of that is *good*. But if somewhere along the way, we begin to think that the only way to get there is through the ballot box, or through passing the right laws, or by putting enough Christian symbols on government buildings, we're in trouble. When we exchange the cross for a platform, or the Spirit for the sword, we may think we're helping, but we're actually undermining the very kingdom we claim to serve. God's kingdom does not come through coercion, but through witness. It grows with the subtlety of a mustard seed, not the megaphone of a campaign.

But this phenomenon is by no means new. This tension between faith and power, between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world, has been around for a long time. There's nothing new under the sun. Even in Jesus' day, people tried to drag Him into the political debates of His time. Was He *for* the Roman occupation of Israel, or not? How strictly should we observe the ritual purity laws, especially on the Sabbath? Or when is it appropriate to issue a certificate of divorce? Was Jesus going to pick a side in any of these cultural issues? Or was His kingdom entirely about something else?

In one brilliant moment in the gospels, Jesus sidesteps the trap, not with a platform, but with a question — a question that reveals the nature of God's kingdom and the condition of every human heart. From *Mark 12:13-17*,

“Later [the chief priests and teachers of the law] 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.”

In his book [Spiritual Direction](#), Henri Nouwen writes that when Jesus was asked questions, “He rarely gave the person He was talking to direct answers. He always responded to other people’s questions with His own questions, and invited others to discover the truth for themselves in the depths of their own hearts.” That’s exactly what Jesus does in this passage. When a group of Pharisees and Herodians — Jews with very

different understandings of the relationship between faith and empire, church and state — come to question Jesus, it's not a genuine inquiry, but a trap. The text makes this clear. They've come to trap Jesus in His words, hoping to force Him into taking a side on what was a very hotly contested, and potentially dangerous, political debate of the time. But Jesus doesn't give in to their demands. He doesn't take the bait. Instead, He asks a simple question, and it radically changes the trajectory of the conversation. Instead of trapping Jesus, Jesus invites them to look inwardly at themselves, to test their fears and desires, and to discover whether their true loyalties belong to God or to somewhere else.

But let's set the stage: in the first-century Roman world, everyone had to pay this thing called the imperial tax — everybody. If you weren't a Roman citizen and you came from one of the lands the Romans conquered, you had to pay the tax. It didn't matter if you were from Italy or from Egypt, from Britain or from Greece, it didn't matter. You still had to pay it. Taxes stink, right? Nobody likes paying taxes. But for the Jews in ancient Israel, this was more than just a hefty financial burden, it was a spiritual crisis. You see, the imperial tax could only be paid in cash with one specific type of coin: the Roman denarius. On its front side, it had an image of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman Emperor at the time. Surrounding him, you see Latin inscriptions, which say this: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." The coin claimed that Caesar was the son of a god. To the Jews, this was idolatry, blasphemy. There's only one God, right? "You shall have no other gods before me" (*Exodus 20:3*). So, what were the Jews supposed to do? Were they supposed to pay the tax, or not? Was paying the tax an endorsement of what the coin was saying? This was the question the Jewish leaders brought to Jesus and expected Him to answer.

On the one side, you had the Pharisees, who were religious purists. They saw paying the tax as an act of idolatry, a sin of the highest order. In order to be faithful to God, they said, the Jews should have as little to do with the Romans as possible. But on the other side, you had the Herodians, who thought very differently. They were supporters of Herod, the King of Judaea, who was appointed by the Romans to do the Romans' bidding. They believed that having a relationship with the Romans was vital to preserving their people. They supported the tax, regardless of what the coin may have claimed.

In the end, both groups came together under the same mission, to trap Jesus and force him to pick a side. They knew that if Jesus opposed the tax and admitted to it, He could be charged with treason, He could be put into prison, and His ministry career would be over, or worse. But if Jesus supported the tax, He could lose the support of the crowds, who followed Him and expected Him to be the long-awaited Messiah who was going to restore the glory of Israel. They thought they had Him. But instead, Jesus asks them a question in response to *their* question, that cuts through the noise of their debate and changes everything: “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” After the Jewish leaders reply, “Caesar’s,” Jesus says, then “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” With that one simple question, Jesus refuses to play their political game. Jesus isn’t evading the issue, He’s clarifying where His ultimate allegiance lies, and where yours should.

What does it mean to “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”? It means we have a responsibility to live faithfully, in two different realms, at the same time, without ever confusing the two. It means we can inhabit the nation we live in, contribute to the common good, serve, vote, and participate in civic life, while knowing that our true citizenship is in Heaven, and not here. Our identity should be rooted in Christ and in the new creations God has made us out to be. Our self-worth, and our value as human beings, shouldn’t come from whatever nation we were born in, or whatever political party or ideology we ascribe to. It should come from God. The coin belonged to Caesar because it had his face on it. May I ask you, brothers and sisters: whose image is on *you*? Whose image do *you* bear? When people look at you, *whose* image do they see? Do they see *Caesar’s*? The *country’s*? Or *God’s*?

Scripture is clear: we’re made in God’s image, and not in any manmade nation or ideology. And if we bear *His* image, then our whole selves — our lives, our thoughts, our decisions, our dreams, our talents, our allegiances, and our worship — belong to *Him*. There is no second. He is our all in all.

So ask yourselves this morning: have you given your full allegiance to God? Or have you, perhaps without even realizing it, given to Caesar a little more than his share of your life? God requires everything, our full devotion. The two cannot be wedded together. Jesus says, “You cannot serve two masters, either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (*Matthew 6:24*).

This is just as true with national identity as it is about money. At the end of the day, we don't bear the image of the country and the image of God, too. Our identity and worth, our value and allegiance, belong to God.

Earlier this week, as I was reflecting on this passage, I happened to reach into my pocket and pulled out some spare change, and in the change was a quarter. We've seen a quarter a million times, right? It's an image we all know well. As I was looking at this quarter, it shocked me just how similar it looked to the Roman denarius we saw earlier. Washington's profile is centered on the coin, just like the Emperor Tiberius' was on the coin that Jesus looked at so many years ago. But on our coin, it says something different. It says, "In God we trust." It doesn't say what god it's referring to, it's intentionally ambiguous, but the point it's trying to make is clear: it suggests that God and the nation are one. That, somehow, to be a believer is to be a patriot. And it was in that moment, brothers and sisters, that a light dawned on me: maybe this isn't such an ancient issue, after all. Maybe the tension Jesus describes between earthly power and divine allegiance, between national identity and God's image, is still right here in our hands, today. Literally. Maybe this little coin is still trying to tell us a story about who we are and who we belong to. And maybe, just like the Pharisees and Herodians of long ago, we're still being asked the same question: whose image is this? And whose image are we?

Friends, don't be fooled. That phrase "In God we trust" etched onto our coins is not a confession of faith. It's a slogan, a veneer. It's a way of making patriotism sound like a religion, like God somehow is the mascot of our empire. But Caesar is not Christ, and the United States is not the Kingdom of God. Jesus didn't come to sanctify an empire, He didn't die to preserve a flag, and He didn't rise from the dead to secure a national identity. He came to reconcile all people, from *every* nation and tongue, to God and to one another, in a glorious kingdom that has no borders and will not end.

So, when you hold this quarter in your hand, may it remind you *not* of how closely God walks with America, but of how *easy* it can be to confuse the two. Let it remind you that the kingdom of God is not found in any capital building or constitution, but is written on the hearts of all those who bear His image and live out His gospel of love. So, yes, give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Engage. Vote. Participate. Be salt and light. But never, *never* confuse Caesar with God. You bear God's image. Give Him your life.

Let's pray:

Father God, we are Your image bearers. You call us Your own. May we find our true identity, our true purpose, in who You've called us to be. May we not find it anywhere else. We want the world to come to Jesus and bow down and confess Him as Lord, but we cannot force it, so help us to resist the urge and temptation to seek out the walls of worldly power to advance Your kingdom on our own. May we remember and advocate for the separation of church and state, so we do not confuse the knowledge of whose image we bear. We love You, and You are the one true God we trust. Give clarity to our confusion, as a church that seeks to be salt and light in our country and our world. Show us where the line is, between being civic contributors and idol worshippers. May we seek the common welfare of all in Your name, and in no one else's. We pray these things in the name of the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Desire of *all* Nations, Jesus Christ, Amen.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Growing up, how were you taught to understand the separation of church and state? What were you taught it was for? Has your perspective since changed?
2. How do you respond to this claim: "If following Jesus is a choice that must be freely made, then everyone should have the right to choose what they believe, even if they never choose Jesus at all"?
3. Pastor Nate claims, "The separation of church and state matters, not to keep God out of public life, but to keep the gospel unpolluted by the ambitions of political agenda." Can you think of any contemporary examples that have proven this to be true?
4. What does advancing God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" look like to you? To what degree do you think it involves the church's reliance on the powers of government?
5. What might it look like to live as though your identity is rooted in Christ and not the country you live in or come from?
6. When people look at you, whose image do you think they see — God's or someone else's?
7. Reread *Mark 12:13-17*. What does "giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" practically look like for you?