

# Encounters with Jesus

## Week 7: Jesus's Encounter with Politics

Mark 12

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- February 25, 2024

We're in a series called Encounter with Jesus, and I hope you've enjoyed the series. I certainly have. I've had to study a lot trying to get inside the world of the people that had direct encounters with Jesus of Galilee. And no one walks away the same. For better or worse, you've got to make a decision when you have an encounter with Jesus.

Today I thought, *You know, hey, let's stir it up a little bit.* You're going to love it today. Today Jesus has an encounter with politics. Yeah. I heard we're having an election this year. Let's get fired up for that.

I want you to listen carefully. Here's what to listen for. The context of what we're going to look at today is going to amplify the meaning. The context is going to help us understand the truths that we're out to learn today. And so, today, in the context of what we'll be hearing Jesus speak about, the immediate context is the last week of Jesus' ministry life here on planet earth—the last week.

### Sunday: Jesus' Triumphal Entry Into Jerusalem

It starts with Palm Sunday, and it's called Palm Sunday because the Jewish people are all waving palm leaves at Jesus as He's riding this donkey, making a triumphal entry. And this triumphal entry is the entry of the King, the Messiah, the promised one. And He's bringing about the kingdom of God. And that means bringing about peace and justice; the oppressed are finally heard, the bullies are dealt with that Sunday, Palm Sunday.

The people in power who are involved, both Jewish and Roman, are taking note. While the Jews celebrate, there's a threat to their power, and so they'll be watching very closely.

### Tuesday: The Temple Cleansing

Tuesday Jesus goes to the Temple Mount and does what is called "the temple cleansing." And what that means is that Jesus goes to the mount, and He's looking out as the people of Israel

are doing what God has commanded them to do—the ritual sacrificial system. And some of the men in power have managed to figure out a way to gouge the people in their participation in these required sacrifices. And Jesus will have none of it. The bullies will be dealt with. And He literally turns over the tables and then chases these men out of the Temple. And this is a defining moment, because Jesus shows himself to be a real threat to the Jewish leaders. These are the people who have power and status and comfort, and that’s being threatened.

And there must have been a meeting on Tuesday night. That must have been some kind of meeting, because a group of men come together like never before. There are at least five various sects or ideologies in Judaism at this time. And the reason for this meeting invokes the phrase “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” These groups of people only have two things in common. One, they hated each other. And two, they hate, hate, hate Jesus of Galilee, because He is a threat to their power and their status and their comfort. And they have one goal: they have to eliminate Jesus. They’ve got to some way manage it so that Jesus says or does something that offends the Jewish people and He loses that following. Or, they’re going to get Him to say or do something that will upset the Roman Empire, which will do what Rome does—kill Him.

So, that’s Tuesday. And then Tuesday night they have the meeting.

### **Wednesday: Debates on the Temple Mount**

And then Wednesday Jesus is up on the Temple Mount again and He’s teaching. And in the context of His teaching, He’s stating His absolute authority to teach for God. And while that is happening—that’s the context now—these various groups are going to come together and set traps for Him. There are three big debates that happen on the Temple Mount. Think of it as three rounds of a fight with five different opponents. Spoiler—Jesus is going to do just fine. But today we’re going to look at His debate concerning politics. Here’s how it rolls out.

### **Mark 12:13-15a**

**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 You are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, 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 taxes to Caesar or not? <sup>15</sup> Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”**

“Later they sent some of the Pharisees...”—“they” is the conspiracy against Jesus—“... 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 you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, 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 taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?’”

Insert “it’s a trap” meme right here.

### **Mark 12:15b-17**

**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, “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at Him.**

“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 Him the coin, and He asked them, ‘Whose image is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ And they were amazed at Him.”

### **The Trap Explained**

Let me explain this trap with more context that will help illuminate this truth. The tax they’re referring to is called a head tax or a poll tax. In 6 A. D. Judea is enveloped into the

Roman Empire. And once it became a Roman province, every single head is required to pay an annual tax. The tax is not expensive. It's not a lot of money. But it stings. It has a terrible sting attached to it. Because, while it doesn't cost much, it embitters the person paying it because the tax says, *I belong to the Roman Empire*. And so, they're asking Jesus, *What are the people of God, the Jews, who belong to God Almighty, supposed to do with this head tax, this poll tax that says we belong to Rome?*

And not only is the tax itself a trap, but look who's listening. At least four of the five groups of people are here listening. The first group is called the Zealots. When the Zealots looked at this tax, they had a violent response to it. As a matter of fact, it goes back to 6 A. D. when the tax started—twenty-five years previous. Judas the Galilean was a man who starts this revolt. It's a violent revolt; it's armed. And he says, "We're not paying this." And Judas the Galilean leads a group of people, and he does three things that are important to our understanding. First, he refuses to pay this poll tax. Two, he goes on the Temple Mount and has a temple cleansing; he clears out all the Roman and Gentile people from being in there. And third, he teaches as a messiah the coming of the kingdom of God. He talks about how the Day of the Lord is upon us, and he's going to teach about bringing in the kingdom of God.

And so, Rome is threatened by that, and Rome did what Rome does. And so, Judas the Galilean is hunted down. He is captured and executed. They have hammers and nails for just this sort of thing.

Now here, twenty-five years later, here's Jesus. The cornerstone of His teaching is the kingdom of God. And He's the Messiah. He does a temple cleansing the day before on Tuesday. And now on Wednesday: *Are we going to pay this tax? Do we pledge allegiance to Rome here?* And the Zealots are thinking, *You better say no, or we're leaving*. And the Romans are saying, *You better say yes. We've got a way to deal with this*.

Another group of people who are listening are the Essenes, who are like monks, but Jewish. There's a probability that John the Baptist was one of them. The way they responded to the politics of the time and being under Roman citizenship and having to pay this tax was to say, *We're done. We're out of here. We're leaving*. And they lived in these communes completely separated from society. And they awaited the Day of the Lord (that's the day of judgment that's talked about quite often in the Old Testament and some in the New Testament). And they were just going to wait for God to come back and make things right.

So, the Essenes are saying, *You better say no. We're not part of this world, Jesus.* And the Romans are saying, *You better say yes.*

Another group, one of the two that are mentioned here, are the Pharisees. They have tremendous religious power amongst the Jews. And they paid the tax with gritted teeth. And there's mutual hate between them and this other group, but they're working together to eliminate Jesus in this context—the Herodians. And the Herodians paid the tax gladly because they had tremendous political power. They have significant political power; they are involved with the Romans and have kind of abandoned their Jewish faith but kept their Jewish culture. They were in it with Rome. So, both of these groups say, *Pay it—pay it gladly.*

Ultimately today, they're saying, *Jesus, what party are you in? A or B? Whatever you pick, you're losing either way. And so, Jesus, what's the answer?*

“Bring me a coin.” He says, “What image is on it? And whose inscription is on it?”

And they say, “Caesar's.”

And He says, “Well, then render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and render to God what is God's.”



It talks about a denarius. He holds this denarius up. He holds it up and He's looking at it as if to see who's image it is. And then the inscription is this: "Tiberias Caesar, son of the god Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, high priest." It's saying that Caesar is the king, the son of god, and the high priest. That's who Tiberias says he is: a king, a son of god, and a high priest.

And so, Jesus holds it up and says, "Who is this? Give it back to him. It belongs to him anyway." But He doesn't leave it there. He says, "What belongs to God--render unto God what is God's." *What's your image? What is the image on you? We're made in the image of Jehovah. We belong to God. The coins belong to Caesar.*

And they're amazed, as you might imagine. It's a simple answer with profound consequences. And He slipped through another trap. *He did it again to us.*

## Application

There are some obvious applications for us in the context of politics. They say it twice, either/or, yes or no. And Jesus says, *Look, this is a false dilemma*. We know informal logical fallacies. It's neither. It's both. He answers with neither or both. And the reason is because Christianity, the teachings of Jesus, this teaching, summarize that. Christianity cannot be constrained, cannot be confined, to some kind of political bucket. It can't fit. It's too profound. It's multidimensional. His teachings are not even from this world.

And if you look, even within my lifetime, you can't say that Christianity is liberal or conservative. If you go back to the Civil Rights issues and segregation—I know the academics in New England would love to take responsibility for ending segregation, because they're liberals, and that's what liberalism looks like—but what ended segregation? The Southern Black Protestant movement. It was the Church that did it. It was the Southern Black Protestants with all the dressings of liberalism, because it was the right thing to do.

If you cross the ocean, you can see that Poland beats the USSR. And how did they do that? It's what the world would call conservatism. It was a conservative, traditional Catholic movement. It was called solidarity. And it was because of the conservative, traditional Catholics, unified together. They broke the Soviet Union's atheism and communism that had a death grip on them.

The point is, it can't be controlled and it can't be labeled. And so, Jesus' answer here, the answer itself, is, actually, the foundation for what we call the theory of limited government. Jesus is saying here, *Give Caesar what he owns. He owns the money—give him the money. But don't give complete allegiance to the government.*

If you look carefully, you can see that Jesus is changing the verb where it says, “Do we pay this tax?” And in the Greek, I think it literally says, “Do we give this tax to him?” And Jesus says, “Render.” Giving is a gift to somebody that doesn't own it and now they do. Render means to give back something that belongs to them.

And so, Jesus is saying, *Hey, look at the coin. It's his. Just give back to him what belongs to him*. And He doesn't leave it there. He says, *And give to God--render to God--what belongs to Him. Whose image is on your soul? Yahweh, Jehovah. Well, then give Him that*. This simple but profound answer says, *Right, you have a duty to the government that oversees your country. But*

*you have a higher duty to God himself. Your soul, your children, belong to God. The other stuff—just give it back.*

Here's an interesting observation. It can be found in knowing that Mark, the writer of this gospel, loves irony. And I've got to tell you—I don't know if you saw it—I didn't see it. Columbo would see it. Monk would get it. Tim Keller saw it. So, I quote Tim Keller on this. Watch this. Jesus says, "Bring me a denarius." And then He says, "Whose image is on it? Whose inscription is on it? And what does the inscription say?"

The point is, there are two claimants here, and they're both saying they are king, son of God, high priest. They both say, *I'm the king, I'm the son of God, I'm the high priest*. Tiberias says that—it's on the coin—his image is on it. And the coin literally is his. All of the coins in the Roman Empire at this time are minted from the silver that he owns. So, this is Tiberias' silver, minted into a Tiberias coin, and it belongs to him. So, just give it back.

Now what's funny, in contrast to that, is that Jesus says, "Bring me a denarius." Do you get it? He's got to ask for one. He doesn't even have one. A denarius is like a quarter, and He doesn't even carry a quarter. And so, here's what Tim Keller calls Jesus. He's "the king without a quarter."

And so, the two claimants are in contrast. We've got Tiberias, who owns all the quarters—the king with all the quarters; and Jesus, the king without a quarter. That's the contrast. Those are the two claimants. And Jesus is saying, *I'm a different kind of king*. And not just in degree—he's a different kind. Jesus will say, "The foxes have holes, the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." *And not only am I different kind of king, I have a different kind of kingdom.*

And when Jesus explains and teaches His kingdom, oh, it's a lot different than the kingdom of Tiberias where it's about power and notoriety and comfort. Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied." He says, "Blessed are those who weep—you're going to laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you and they persecute you on account of me; you're going to jump for joy, because you'll be rewarded for eternity." That's the kingdom of Jesus.

Caesar's kingdom was power, status, comfort. And Jesus says, *I'm a different kind of king; I have a different kind of kingdom. I don't care about power and status and comfort.*



And if you want to become like Christ in all of life, you're going to follow this King and this kingdom. And here's what happens. You take on the values of this kingdom, and you don't care about what the other kingdom cares about. You're set free from the addiction of this power and status and comfort. You're not driven to have those things any longer. And if you get them—power or comfort or status—then you just use them for the glory of God, for the kingdom of God. And then, if you happen to lose those things, they're not going to ruin your life and decimate your soul, because they weren't yours. When you live in this kingdom, you are free. You are free from the addiction of these other kingdom values.

And so, this beautiful contrast between the king who has all the quarters and the King doesn't have a quarter, and He's saying, *Choose*. He's also saying, *Give this king what belongs to him, and give this King what belongs to Him—your very soul*.

### Personal Application

The personal application is pretty obvious, isn't it? Whose image is on your soul? Say it out loud. It's Jehovah. Whose image is on your soul? Then render unto Jehovah what belongs to Jehovah. You belong to Him. You're just giving it back. Just render what is already His.

And the point is that you give all of yourself to Him. You become like Christ in all of life. That's the ambition for every believer in Christ. Not just some parts of life, not just aspects of our life so that we can feel a sense of the illusion of control, a feeling of safety, just enough to kind of have the wife and kids turn out fine. You know, like three dollars' worth of God.

“Three Dollars' Worth of God” is a beautiful poem by Wilbur Rees. Here's the poem:

I'd like to buy three dollars' worth of God, please.  
Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,  
But just enough to equal a cup of warm milk, or a snooze in the sunshine.  
I don't want enough of God to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant.  
I want ecstasy, not transformation.  
I want warmth of the womb, not a new birth.  
I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack.  
I would like to buy three dollars' worth of God, please.

Jesus is not going to allow that to happen. What's the image on the coin? Give it back to him. What's the image on your soul? Give it all to Him. It belongs to Him—you're just giving it back.

## Jesus Exposes the Religious Leaders

After three rounds against five opponents, there's not a mark on Jesus. Now, if you can just picture the post-fight interview, if Jesus could just leave the stadium quietly, He might have made it. But then He says these things and it seals His fate.

### Mark 12:38-40

**As He taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,<sup>39</sup> and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.<sup>40</sup> They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”**

Verse 38 says, “As He taught, Jesus said, ‘Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses ...’—they are bullies, they are evil—“... and for a show they make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”

This is a perfect example of the two kingdoms and the two tenants of those kingdoms. And Jesus bullied these five oppositional sects, and then He says those things about those five groups of people in leadership who have all this power and status and comfort. He says, “You will be judged the most severely.” And at that, He just walks right into this trap. At that, they can't leave Him alone anymore. And they'll lie and cheat and make sure that He is framed for things that He doesn't say or do so that the Romans will do what Romans will do. They have hammers and nails for just such things. Because He says, *You are going to be punished most severely. You steal widows' houses.*

## The Widow and Her Two Coins

### Mark 12:41-44

**Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. <sup>42</sup> But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny.**

**<sup>43</sup> Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. <sup>44</sup> They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”**

And then, speaking of widows, look what happens. “Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper”—not silver—“coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Jesus calls His disciples over and says, ‘I tell you the truth ...’” That means, *Now you listen to me*. “ ‘This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.’” Here’s the thing. “ ‘They gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.’”

This story concludes this segment. And Jesus says that this impresses this King without a quarter. This impoverished widow, a widow without even a penny, is what draws Jesus’ attention. He tells His twelve, *Come here, come here! Truly I say to you, listen to me—it’s an upside-down kingdom, and I’m the upside-down King. I’m the King without a quarter, and I say to you, Verily, verily, truly, truly, you listen to me. That widow without so much as a penny will be rewarded in heaven and made rich. She gave nothing, not even a penny.*

She gave everything. She’s part of His kingdom. And that’s what He wants all those twelve and all of us to read about. That’s what it looks like to be part of that kingdom, to be a tenant of that king.

You run up to her and say, *Hey, penniless widow, whose image is on your soul? Yahweh.*

*Then you render to Yahweh what belongs to Yahweh.*

She says, *Well, yeah, you don't have to use that tone. Sure. Of course, I render to Yahweh what belongs to Yahweh—all of me. It all belongs to Him.*

*Okay.*

And so, she does.

## **Jesus' Feet Anointed with Oil**

If you continue reading the Book of Mark, it happens very fast (that's the nature of his writing), and the next encounter with Jesus is that He goes from the Temple Mount to Bethany, where Simon the Leper is having a party at his house. It's hosted by Lazarus. Simon the Leper is having a party. He's Simon the former leper. Simon the Leper—he can't get rid of his nickname. *I'm Simon the former leper, please.* And then the host is Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. And just to understand the insanity, the grip of the addiction of these men in leadership that are puppets to the kingdom of Satan, that live and die and will kill for power and status and comfort ...

A crowd gathers around the house of Simon the former leper, and looks what happens. The Jewish leadership says, *We can't just get rid of Jesus. We have to eliminate Lazarus as well.* This is right out of the biography of John. "So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of Lazarus many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him." So now, they're putting up a hit list. And they put Lazarus on it. I would love to see these religious leaders confront Lazarus and threaten him with death. *I've already done that. It wasn't as bad as you might make it out to be. First time? Huh.* You can't threaten to kill a man who's already died!

In the midst of this party, Mary suddenly runs and gets an entire pint of what is described as extremely expensive perfume. It's worth a year's wages. And she pours it all over the feet of Jesus as Jesus is reclining at this table, which is the way they would dine. And she pours it all over His feet and then starts spreading it around and wiping it on His feet with her hair. The entire house is filled with this beautiful aroma.

And then, one of the disciples says, "Oh, that perfume is worth a lot of money. We could've sold that and given it to the poor."

And Jesus says, "Judas, you and your values. Leave her alone."

Because here's what's happening. Jesus knows that Mary knows. It's hard to say if anyone else does. The purpose of her pouring that perfume on His feet is that she's anointing Him for burial. He says, "It was intended to be saved for my burial anointing."

The Jews would anoint the dead after they passed away. They would anoint them with perfume before they would bury them. But not if you're a criminal. Not if you've died a criminal death. And so, His Spirit must have spoken to Mary and said, *We've got to do this while we still can.*

So, here's Jesus now saying, *Here I am, a King without a quarter. And here you are, Mary, my daughter without any more perfume. We'll be talking about this for a long time.*

### **Mark 14:9**

**"I tell you the truth, wherever the good news is preached throughout the world, this woman's deed will be remembered and discussed."**

This is what it's like to be in His kingdom. He says this: "I tell you the truth, wherever the good news"—the gospel—is preached throughout all the world, this woman's deed will be remembered and discussed." Yep.

From that point on, the next set of encounters are going to be with Romans who do what Romans do. And Jesus died. And the reason is because, even though He avoided these other three traps, He walked into a fourth.

Who trapped whom? Who's doing the trapping? Think about it. Satan and his kingdom, using his little puppets who live and die and now will kill for the power and the status and for comfort, were led into a trap. They were the ones who were trapped—by Jesus—King Jesus, who lives and dies for the will of the Father.

And it says that Jesus did not consider power and status and comfort as something to be grasped, but relinquished that for the love of the Father. Why would He do that? Because God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten, born-from-above Son, that whoever believed in Him would not perish. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world. He sent His Son into the world to release them and to set them free from the kingdom of slavery and stupidity.

Listen. Jesus, the King without a single quarter, is the only one with the righteous wealth to pay the ransom to the holiness of God the Father, so that our debt payment, our shame payment, our powerlessness, could be paid and be paid in full. The King without a quarter—all He has to offer is His personal righteousness. And with that, those who believe in Him are set free. They're set free to become servants of this great King.

Whose image is on your soul? Say it out loud. Whose image is on your soul—Jehovah's? Render unto Jehovah what belongs to Jehovah. It's bought and paid for. Render all of you to Jehovah. He owns you. He bought you. That's the lesson of this encounter with Jesus. Let's live for that end, right? Let's pray.

*Lord, in this story of Jesus having an encounter with politics, we're reminded again how petty and shallow we find ourselves, drifting into debates about politics. And Jesus said, I never met her. We get lost in concerns of this world and this kingdom. We take our eye off of Your King and Your kingdom. For that we repent. We're consumed with the temporal and the flashy. And we miss the eternal and the dense profundity of who You are and what You're like.*

*Lord, I'd ask that You would help us be completely surrendered to You, as You have given us Your image and You have bought us out of a slavery and a kingdom that belongs to this world. We are to celebrate the freedom that we have; that we're now no longer addicted to the power of power and the corruption of popularity and the lust for comfort, so that we can live for You and You alone. Lord, help us become like Christ in all of life, and become like Christ as a follower of the King, that we'd be like Mary, that we would become like this very wealthy, eternally rewarded widow. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*