

The Gospel of Mark ~ Following The Servant King

Week 6: Mark 12:1 ~ 14:11

It is helpful to remember that chapters and verses were not part of the original text of Scripture. Bibles with chapters and verses, as we are accustomed to them, first appeared in the Geneva Bible in 1560.

Why do I bring that up? Because it's important to recognize that Mark 12 is a continuation of where we left off in Mark 11...it's the same day...the same conversation...with the same people (the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders from 11:27).

In the midst of this tense conversation/argument, Jesus told a parable, as Jesus is apt to do (12:1-11). The religious leaders clearly understood that the parable was aimed at them, that they were the wicked tenants of the parable, so *"Then they looked for a way to arrest Him because they knew He had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left Him and went away."* (12:12)

In the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e The Old Testament), the metaphor of a vineyard was a familiar one to refer to Israel. (See Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:7-19, Jeremiah 2:21, Hosea 10:1-2). It would have been unmistakable to the listeners of this parable that the workers/tenants of the vineyard was a reference to Israel's religious leadership, past and present. What would have been particularly galling to the leaders was this part, *"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."* (12:9) Conversely, this would have been encouraging to Mark's Roman audience, as they would be part of the "others".

What we have going on in most of chapter 12 is a parade of different leadership-type folks coming to Jesus with questions (mostly challenges), with the hope of discrediting Him.

- *It is sadly common for religious people, particularly religious leaders, to have an inflated sense of self-importance, and with that a sense of entitlement. Jesus takes such an attitude to task. When have you seen/experienced such an attitude firsthand?*

First up, the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13). Now this is very odd. The Pharisees were a religious populace group and the Herodians were a political group, and these two groups did not like each other or get along with one another. But apparently they found a common opponent in Jesus. They wanted to know about paying taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees were hoping Jesus would say, *"Yes, pay taxes to Caesar."* They could then use that as ammunition that Jesus wasn't really for the common Israelite. The Herodians were hoping Jesus would say, *"No, don't pay taxes."* They could then brandish Him as an enemy of the empire.

Of course, Jesus saw right through it all and cleverly replied, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."* (12:17) Brilliant! Who can argue with that? And He puts the responsibility to discern what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God back on them. Incidentally, everything belongs to God, and He will deal with those who claim something of His as their own.

(I must admit I find it funny/interesting that we're covering this passage the same week that our taxes need to be filed. I hope you've got your done.)

- *How do we live in such a way that we remind ourselves, and those around us, that everything belongs to God? What do you find challenging in doing so?*

Next up, the Sadducees (12:18-27). This is the first and only time they make an appearance in Mark's Gospel. To understand who they were it can be helpful to contrast them with the Pharisees. Whereas the Pharisees represented the common folks, the Sadducees were of the upper class. Whereas the Pharisees were more focused on keeping the law, the Sadducees were more focused on the goings on of the temple. The Sadducees believed that only the Torah (the Pentateuch...the first 5 books of the Bible) were binding, the Pharisees also believed that following the oral law (including the Mishnah and Talmud) was important. And as Mark points out (again for his Roman audience because Jews would have already understood this) the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection from the dead, while Pharisees did.

They approached Jesus with a specific question from the Torah (Deuteronomy 25:5-6 to be precise) in order to discredit the idea of resurrection. The issue at hand is levirate marriage which is when a brother-in-law marries the widow of his brother if they have not had any children. This was a way of preserving the line of the deceased brother. The question the Sadducees bring to Jesus is a "*what if...*?" scenario. What if seven brothers were married to the same woman (in succession...not at the same time...that would be a very different issue), then whose wife will she be in the afterlife (i.e. at the resurrection of the dead). To be clear, their issue was not with levirate marriage but with the idea of resurrection from the dead as part of the afterlife.

Jesus' response, that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "*...is not the God of the dead, but of the living.*" (12:27) is again, brilliant! In other words, if people remained dead, what (or who) is God the God of? God's ultimate plan isn't to rule over a cemetery.

Resurrection is an important concept/doctrine for us to get our minds around. We will not be spending eternity disembodied. We will rise...physically...just like Jesus did. (There's even a line in the Apostle's Creed, "*I believe in...the resurrection of the body.*") This also gives us an understanding of what God is ultimately up to: the renewal/restoration of all things.

- *What would you identify as key/essential doctrines of the Christian faith?*

An interesting comment that Jesus makes in the midst of this discussion is, "*When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage.*" (12:25) It appears, then, that marriage is a temporary arrangement...til death do us part...and does not carry over into the afterlife/resurrected life.

- *How would you describe/articulate a Kingdom perspective on marriage? Or, what do you think Jesus wants people to understand about marriage (and singleness)?*

And that brings us to “*one of the teachers of the law*” (12:28-34). Teachers of the law, or sometimes called experts in the law, or scribes, or lawyers, were what we might call today a “Bible scholars”. Their primary task was to reproduce scriptural scrolls. Because they were constantly reading and writing out Scripture, they were considered experts and the primary people to refer to if you had a question from Scripture.

It’s hard to tell what this guy’s motive was. As the text reads, he doesn’t seem as snarky as the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. Was he asking sincerely? Did he just want to know Jesus’ take on the greatest commandment? Or, was he thinking to himself, “*Let me show these Pharisees and Sadducees how to really put someone to the test?*” It’s hard to say.

It was common to ask a rabbi about their take on the law, or how they interpreted various aspects of the law. So a question regarding what Jesus thought was the most important commandment is a fair one...within the custom of rabbinical dialogue.

Jesus’ response was straight from the Shema—the prayer that dedicated Jews would pray regularly every day. (See Deuteronomy 6:4-5) No one would ever argue with “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” That was iron-clad. But Jesus goes on to add “*...and love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Leviticus 19:18)

The teacher of the law knew that Jesus had nailed it. N.T. Wright adds, “*The lawyer, musing on Jesus’ answer, draws out a meaning which Jesus hadn’t said out loud but which was certainly there. If these commandments are the primary ones; if this is what worshipping, loving and serving God is all about, then all that the temple stands for, the daily, weekly, and annual round of sacrifices and offerings, is virtually unnecessary.*” Jesus went on to affirm him, “*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*” (12:34)

This should cause us pause. Friends, the world does not need more religiously pious people. Religiosity won’t solve the world’s problems. Loving God BY loving our neighbor is the fix and should be the focus. Everything else can easily become a distraction. This is part, a large part, of the reason we’re continually emphasizing the Church as family over Church as institution/organization. Family is concerned about relationships. Institutions/organizations are concerned about policies and procedures. It is far too easy to be an ingrained part of an institution and be a very unloving person. Jesus is concerned about transforming us into people of love—people who can/will humbly, sacrificially, serve others...even enemies, in His name.

- *What are Christians/the Church most known for? Is love for God and love for neighbors what comes to people’s minds? Why or why not?*

So we’ve seen Jesus deal with this onslaught of questions and challenges...He now turns the table with His own question. Whereas the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and this teacher of the law could not stump Jesus, He’s about to stump them (see 12:35-40)

Here's a fun fact for you—the passage Jesus quoted (Psalm 110) is the most quoted passage from the Old Testament in the New Testament. I'd recommend reading all of Psalm 110 in its entirety. Additionally, here's a short article by pastor, author, theologian Greg Boyd...

<https://reknew.org/2016/03/the-most-quoted-old-testament-verse/>

Evidently, the people enjoyed seeing Jesus silence the religious leaders, *“The large crowd listened to Him with delight.”* (12:37). Matthew adds this comment, *“No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask Him any more questions.”* (Matthew 22:46) Apparently the religious leaders did not like being embarrassed publicly.

Jesus' warning is appropriate then and now, to paraphrase, *“Watch out for religious leaders who care more about appearances and reputation than they do about loving others.”* (12:38-40, paraphrased)

- *What does loving your neighbor as yourself look like in your life currently?*
- *In what ways are you tempted to strive for the admiration of others, or to manage your image in such a way that people think highly of you?*

As Mark likes to do, he sets up another compare/contrast to wrap up this section. It was generally assumed that rich people were blessed by God. But Jesus draws attention, instead, to a poor widow. (12:41-44). Just as Jesus wasn't impressed by the religious leaders, He's also not particularly impressed with the rich folks. Rather, He is impressed by the trust and sacrificial nature of this poor widow. If anyone had reason to hold back giving (which is a form of loving others) it was her. But she gave what she had, even though it was all she had.

- *What are some ways in which we highlight the rich and overlook the poor? How might we turn our attention to the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the needy and see them as equals?*

Mark chapter 13 (which parallels Matthew 24 & Luke 21) can be a very challenging passage to understand. Many people mistakenly believe that the bulk of what is being discussed is the signs of the end times, or perhaps the Second Coming of Christ. (It doesn't help that some translations have added section headings that basically say that.)

So what is going on here? Well, first let's notice that it was all a response to a brief exchange between Jesus and His disciples. When one of them pointed out the impressiveness of the Temple, Jesus essentially said, *“Don't be impressed, its days are numbered.”* (see 13:1-2) Privately they asked Him, *“Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”* (13:4)

We need to have a clear understanding of what they were asking about. They were asking about the destruction of the Temple. Jesus' long response that makes up the rest of chapter 13 is His answer to that question. Which, incidentally, happened in AD 70 (though things had been brewing since AD 66). The disciples weren't asking anything about the end of the world or the

Second Coming (that was not even on their radar), nor did Jesus offer anything about that. Again, this is all about the destruction of the Temple (as well as the sacking of Jerusalem). In my opinion/understanding, the only part of this chapter that might (emphasis on “might”) be talking about something beyond the destruction of the Temple is the last few verses (13:32-37).

- *As you read chapter 13 (also known as the Olivet Discourse, because they were sitting on the Mount of Olives having this conversation), what questions come to mind? What parts of it are hard to understand?*

I would love to take a deep dive with you into this chapter, but that may be more pages than you'd want to read. So allow me to comment on just a couple of verses...

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And He will send His angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.” (13:26-27) It is understandable that people could interpret this as having to do with Jesus' return. But what we need to realize is that this is an image pulled straight from the book of Daniel.

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and people of every language worshiped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14, emphasis added)

So notice this “coming” wasn't to earth, but rather into the throne room of God. The destruction of the Temple would be yet another vindicating sign that Jesus' kingdom is now present, and He is now the rightful King. Remember, the basic thrust of Mark's Gospel is to show that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah, the Son of God. The era of the Temple, and all that it represented, was coming to a close, and would end within a generation. This is what Jesus was predicting/foretelling.

As N.T. Wright says, *“...the fall of the Temple would be the sure sign that God had vindicated Jesus as the true representative of His people. As a prophet, Jesus had predicted its destruction. As Messiah, He had solemnly enacted it. He had hinted at an even stronger reason: the Messiah was identified with David's Lord, who would sit at God's right hand until those who had opposed Him were defeated. Now He brings in the final devastating biblical text: Daniel 7:13... From Mark's point of view, it is about the complete vindication of Jesus: His resurrection, His ascension, and the outworkings of His prophecies against the Temple as sealing the whole process.”*

It is hard for us moderns to understand the full weight and significance that the destruction of the Temple had on the Jewish people. Jesus describes it in very prophetic and apocalyptic terms because that's how it would feel to them. Again, N.T. Wright has this to say, *“...the destruction of the Temple itself can only be spoken of through prophetic words, summoning up the image of cosmic catastrophe. Consider what was happening. In the year AD 69 one Roman emperor succeeded another—four in all, Nero, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian—each time with violence,*

murder and civil war. And as Vespasian made his way to Rome to receive the crown, his adopted son Titus entered Jerusalem, burnt the Temple, destroyed the city and crucified thousands of Jews. What language would one use to describe such a year? It won't do simply to list the events, ghastly though they are. The only way of doing justice to such a time is in prophetic language...This is not a prediction of the 'end of the world', though many in Jerusalem at the time must have wished it was."

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was God's judgment upon a people who would not repent, the verdict some might say, between Israel and Jesus—the focal point of Israel destroyed, and Jesus exalted.

Now, we must be very careful here. This in NO WAY validates anti-semitism. This was an issue between God and Israel and we're just spectators. We are called to love all people. At the same time we need to humbly acknowledge that all of us, everyone, will be judged based on our response to Jesus.

- *What changes for you to understand that chapter 13 has more to do with the destruction of the Temple than it does with end times?*

Moving on to chapter 14 (at least the first eleven verses), Mark is thoughtful enough to give his readers a time stamp, of sorts—two days prior to the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so Wednesday of Holy week.

The religious leaders were still fuming and trying to formulate a plan to get rid of Jesus. Initially, they didn't want to do it during the feast because "*...the people may riot*" (14:2). Ironically, it did end up happening during the feast, because an opportunity arose that they apparently couldn't resist, "*Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money.*" (14:10-11)

For centuries people have wondered what Judas' motivations were. Was it simply money? Was he disillusioned with the type of Messiah Jesus was turning out to be, and was hoping to force Jesus' hand into becoming a more military-style Messiah if the threat of arrest and death were presented? Was his ego bruised because of the reprimand Jesus just gave him? (Mark's account doesn't specify, but John's account specifically names Judas as the one who objected to the woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume—see John 12:4) All of the above? Some other reason? We are left to speculate.

- *What do you think Judas' motivations were?*

Speaking of John's account...it differs a bit from Mark's and Matthew's. By John's account, the unnamed woman was Mary (sister of Martha and Lazarus). John is also unclear about who was hosting this meal...John's readers could easily conclude that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were hosting...and he doesn't mention Simon the Leper. (Incidentally, this had to be a leper healed by Jesus, otherwise there was no way people would be coming into his home.)

Recall, Jesus knew His death was just a couple days away. So He tied the significance of this anointing with the preparation for His burial (14:8). This was a beautiful and extravagant act of love, devotion, and worship.

The objection that arose—that the monetary value of the perfume could have been used to help the poor—does pose a pragmatic question. How do we determine how to use financial resources to both Love God and Love Others? This is not an easy question to answer. Or, to say it another way, there is not a one size fits all answer to this question. Personally, I would say that loving God BY loving our neighbors is the general guideline, but not an absolute. As Jesus points out, the opportunity to do so is always present (in fact, all the need out there can be quite overwhelming). The anointing of Jesus can be seen as a “once in a lifetime opportunity”, thus not something to necessarily build a regular practice or habit around. But it is good to stay open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and keep a loose grasp on our money/possessions, so should an unexpected opportunity arise, we are prepared to express love financially.

Additionally, if nothing else, this passage ought to cause us pause in how we judge other people’s use of money. Even if it may not be the way we would choose to use money, let’s leave the judging to God.

- *When have you been tempted to judge someone else’s use of money? Have you ever felt judged, or misunderstood, for your use of money?*
- *How do you determine how you Love God & Love Others with the money at your disposal?*
- *How can our use of money point people to the reality of Jesus and His Kingdom?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Fast (from food)

As a way to observe Holy Week, and if health concerns don’t preclude you from doing so, fast from food for a 24 hour period. (Drink plenty of water and other fluids.) We are easily ruled by our desires and appetites. In commemoration of Jesus taking up His cross, let’s show solidarity with our King by denying ourselves for 24 hours.

Fill the time you would have spent eating (as well as preparing and cleaning up) to spend time with Jesus—in prayer, in meditation, in worship or song, in reading Scripture—whatever helps you to focus on our Savior and Lord. May He be our greatest desire.