

The Real Jesus, "The One About Death and Taxes", Mark 12:13-27, 11/20/22

Remember where we are, this is Wednesday of Passion Week. Tensions are at an all-time high, and 4 religious powers of the day: The Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, Scribes- join forces to send an all-out blitz on Jesus. Now they ultimately resort to violence by the end of the week, but first they attempt to take him out by tripping him up through hard questions, they play stump the Rabbi with Jesus. They are trying to get him to say something that would discredit him, make him look stupid, make him look like a traitor so they can tear him down and prove that he's not the Messiah. Today we will look at two of three questions: The first question is about taxes and the second about death and the afterlife.

Mark 12:13 *Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.* Now it may not strike us as shocking to hear that the Pharisees and Herodians were working together to conspire against Jesus, but it would have been in 30 AD. The Pharisees and Herodians were political sworn enemies. The pharisees were deeply conservative and were trying to preserve the Jewish way of life and religious traditions, the Herodians were very liberal, all about progressing with the times and adapting to the Roman way of life. And yet, Jesus brings them together. In Jesus they see an existential threat to conservative and liberal power and way of life. ¹⁴ *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." You see the smoke screen? This is kind of like our phrase "now having said that." Everything that comes before that phrase is flattery to get to what we want to complain about, or tear down someone. That's what they are doing.

Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?" But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. Jesus sees through the smoke screen. Now, to understand what's going on here we need to talk about some history. This wasn't a question about taxes in general, but a particular tax of one denarius for every subject of Caesar. A denarius wasn't much, about a day's wage, but the controversy was about what it represented, Roman power and authority over them. When this tax was imposed on the Jewish people there was an attempted revolt led by Judas the Galilean. He refused to pay the tax, led an armed band into the temple courts, cleared the courts of all Roman occupation and said only God will be our King, not Caesar. He was caught and executed and the rebellion was squashed. That was just 25 years before Jesus. Do you see what's going on? Now Jesus the Galilean is leading a movement, claiming authority, he just cleared the temple three days ago, although in a different way. They knew this was the perfect trap because this is the lightning rod issue of the day. It's like what people tried to do with BLM- for or against? Will you pay the tax? If no- the religious leaders will have evidence that he's an insurrectionist and Rome will crush him just like they did Judas. If he says yes- then everyone that's following will know that Jesus is all teeth and no bite. It means that Jesus is just about spiritual platitudes, but wasn't willing to deal with real issues and his followers would leave him. Tight spot. *"Bring me a denarius and let me look*

at it.”¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied.

¹⁷ 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. When politicians are put in tight spots, they usually sidestep, they change the subject, they spin it in some way and of course it leaves you frustrated and annoyed. But when Jesus answers, noticed it left everyone amazed. And it is an amazing answer. Jesus doesn’t sidestep, or spin, he answers the smoke screen question they were asking, but also answers the real question they refused to ask.

Let’s unpack this profound response. Notice that Jesus answers their question with a question of his own in typical Jesus fashion. “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” Here’s the denarius [picture] Jesus was looking at- the image is Tiberias Caesar, the inscription said- Tiberias Caesar, son of the god Augustus, Pontifus maximus...in other words- king, son of God, High Priest...we will come back to that- the coin was literally his, and so Jesus responds- “Give back to Caesar”, “render”- word means give him back what he deserves. This is his coin, from his treasury, so give it back to him. Now that’s genius enough of a response, Ahhh...but then he says and “render to God what is God’s.” Jesus answers the more important, the heart question they refused to ask and were avoiding. The coin is made in the image of Caesar, but we are made in the image of God, therefore Jesus is inviting them to ask the question- “What does God deserve from His image bearers?” Our full loyalty and devotion, our heart, our lives, our bodies, our minds.

Jesus tells both the Caesar opposing AND Caesar supporting religious leaders that political authorities might deserve your taxes, your good citizenship, but never your heart, never your ultimate loyalty. And this was precisely the problem- neither group had God reigning in their hearts and this question revealed their true heart condition. And this is a great starting place to form a theology on politics. Jesus is teaching an important lesson about limited government. What do we owe our government? Pay our taxes, obey the laws, be a good citizen. Yes. But don’t give the government your heart. Don’t give them your loyalty and devotion, don’t give them your body, your mind, all your time and preoccupation. That belongs to God. And when they come in conflict, it’s always obeying God not political authorities.

So the Pharisees and the Herodians couldn’t stump Rabbi Jesus and he turned it back on them. Next up, the Sadducees. ¹⁸ Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. A little background. The Sadducees aren’t mentioned much in Scripture, but they were the aristocrats of Judaism. They were financially benefiting from the Roman occupation and held the power of the temple and the priesthood. Theologically, as Mark comments here, they didn’t believe in a resurrection. Now, most Jews, including the pharisees taught that there would be a resurrection when the Messiah returned to the Mount of Olives, which by the way religious Jews today believe as well, which is why just below the Mount of Olives there are literally thousands of burial plots [Picture]. But the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection.

[v.18 slide]...They essentially were annihilationists, no afterlife, no angels, no salvation...just dirt nap like many people think today. That's why they are "sad you see." One of the reasons they didn't believe in a resurrection is because they only trusted the first five books of the OT- the Pentateuch. And they didn't think those books addressed the afterlife. And so, naturally, you would expect that they were all about getting as much out of this life as they could. And that's how they lived- power and comfort and opulence. And Jesus was a threat to their way of life. Why? Jesus was constantly teaching against storing up treasures in this life, but in the next life. He called the rich, young ruler- who very well could have been one of the Sadducees, to sell his possessions and follow him.

¹⁹ "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother." OK, that seems weird to us, but this was part of the Mosaic Law- Deuteronomy 25, levirate marriage. And this was actually put on place to do two things: A way of caring for widows to make sure they have security in a home. But also to carry on lineage of that family line so that it wouldn't be cut off. Remember our study in Ruth a little while ago? This is what was going with Ruth and Boaz, Boaz was a relative of Ruth's late husband, and faithfully upheld this responsibility. Now this is legitimate, but they raise a prosperous situation to try to make Jesus look stupid and discredit him, and the idea of an afterlife.

²⁰ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹ The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third.

²² In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³ At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" Do you see the spirit of this question? It's mocking. It's trying to point out just how ludicrous it is to believe in an afterlife. People would be running around heaven all the time, trying to figure out who was married to who. It's the tone that Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher have used to try to paint Christians as anti-intellectual, backward, holy rollers. But Jesus isn't intimidated by their pseudo-intellectualism. He sees through the smoke screen.

²⁴ Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵ When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Notice Jesus has no problem being clear and direct- you are wrong. You are way off. Jesus isn't like our politically correct, post-modernism of today- "Well you have your truth and I have my truth, and they are both equally valid." Nope- You are wrong. And Jesus tells them they are wrong for two reasons: 1) They don't know their Bibles, 2) Even if they knew their Bibles, they don't believe in the power of God to raise the dead. Now let me address the two corrections that Jesus points out, but briefly, because we don't have time to make this the main point. Jesus says that there will be no marriage in heaven...and in that way, we will be like the angels. We won't be angels, we just won't be married like the angels. Now for some of us that sounds sad, others of us are like, I can't wait! And some...it depends on the day☺ Why won't we be

married? Paul says in Ephesians 5 that marriage is an earthly portrait that points to the ultimate marriage between Christ and His bride, the church- all the redeemed throughout history. And so the love, loyalty, union, intimacy, joy, pleasure at their best moments on earth will pale in comparison to the ultimate marriage experience in eternity.

But then Jesus points them back to their Bibles for proof of the afterlife. ²⁶ *Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?*

²⁷ *He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!* Notice he references Exodus, one of the books they can agree on. And says, what did God say to Moses in the burning bush. I AM- not I WAS. All the English teachers are high fiving. Grammar! Present continual tense vs. past tense. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob- these patriarchs of centuries past, are in the present with God when he’s speaking to Moses. He is the God of the living! These Sadducees were so caught up in trying to live their best life now, in the pursuit of wealth and power that they refused to see the more important truth right in front of their eyes. If the Sadducees had been asking the deeper questions about God- if they were concerned about who he was and his power, then they would have recognized what they failed to see: that hope in God is not simply for the immediate enjoyment of life...but that in Jesus, all of life, including the most tragic and sad and painful moments as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17 *are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

[Title Slide] Jesus 2, Religious Powers 0. Next week the Scribes will give it a shot. That’s as far as we want to go in the text today, but I want to take just a moment to bring this all forward to our lives today. What was the problem with all these religious groups? The problem wasn’t their opinions about politics and taxes, even though that’s what they were focused on. The problem their opinions about the afterlife, even though that’s what they were focused on. While they were busy asking Jesus the questions they thought were most important, Jesus showed them the true question they should have been asking.

Who’s image is on the coin? Caesar. But who’s image is on us? ¹⁵ *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*

¹⁶ *For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

Jesus is the image of God, and we are the image-bearers of our Creator- Jesus Christ. Render what is made in the image of God to God. There are two claims of king: Caesar and Jesus. One has all the coins in the known world. Ironically, the other has none, he had to borrow one. A king without a quarter. The richest king in the universe gave up everything, to become poor so that we could become spiritually rich. King Tiberias deserves his coin back, but *what does King Jesus deserve?* The answer is our whole heart.

Today is an opportunity to right size what we are rendering. What does Jesus deserve and what does anything else deserve? What that means is your career and your boss? Deserves a quarter.

Your political party? Deserves a quarter. Your social club? Deserves a quarter. The influence of your friends at school? A quarter. Your fandom to the Philadelphia Eagles? Two quarters. Don't give these other things your heart and your loyalty. Jesus deserves your heart. He deserves your ultimate loyalty.