
The Servant-King Challenged

Mark 12:12-44²

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Introduction

The religious leadership of Israel has challenged Jesus' authority,

Verse 12 sets this text up.

¹² And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away

They wanted find something to charge Jesus with so they could arrest Him.

They were driven by public opinion and "polls".

They were publically rebuked with a simple story that Jesus had told.

They went away to regroup and rethink their attack strategy.

Now, Mark brings forward each of the main political and religious parties in Israel who challenge Jesus.

A Question about Paying Taxes (v. 13-17)

First, the religious conservatives and supporters of Herod zero in on Jesus.

¹³ And they sent to him some of **the Pharisees** and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. ¹⁴ And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" ¹⁵ But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶ And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." ¹⁷ Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him.

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An Odd Coalition (v. 13)

This is an odd collation. The Pharisees were the very conservative, religious leaders. The Herodians were a very liberal political party who supported Herod, the apostate and wicked king of Israel. It is a testimony to how much Jesus was feared and hated that these two parties have come together to try to trap Him. On the surface it looks like they are asking Jesus to resolve a debate that has been going on between these two groups.

An Entrapping Question (v. 14)

They ask a “gotcha” question. They think Jesus’ answer will either violate the Mosaic Law or the Roman law.

But they preface their question with sarcastic statements about Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus doesn't care about public opinion - what is the point? They are pushing Him further into the corner. They are disallowing an answer that would appeal to the people.

Jesus teaches the true way - so why don't they believe? If Jesus really teaches the truth, then why are they questioning Him? Why don't they just believe Him?

So here is their question: Is it morally right under the Mosaic Law to pay taxes to a foreign government?

What is the trap?

If Jesus says *yes*, then the people, who hated the Roman tax, will reject Jesus. The conservative religious leaders will be able to charge Him with not honoring Yahweh as the true King.

If Jesus says *no*, then He is inciting rebellion against Rome can be arrested. The Roman government charged a head tax on every adult. To teach against paying that tax was sedition.

An Ingenious Reply (v. 15-17)

Jesus’ response is ingenious. He tells them to bring a Roman denarius which was the coin issued by the Roman government. That they had one is interesting in itself. The Pharisees taught that owning or carrying Roman money was contemptible and corrupting.

Now Jesus’ own question as He holds the coin up between His fingers and rotates it slowly in view of everyone. Who issued this coin? Whose likeness and inscription is on it? The clear and simple answer is, Caesar. His image was on one side. His self-acclaim to deity was inscribed on the other. I can see Jesus just nodding then flipping the coin back to the person who handed it Him.

Give to Caesar what he is due *and* give to God what He is due.

Pay the tax to Caesar. God has allowed Israel to come under the dominion of Rome. To not pay the tax is to defy Rome and disobey God.

Give God what He is owed. Give belief, obedience and allegiance to God. Give God your true worship and your true offerings.

They marveled at Jesus' answer. It did not play to popular opinion. It certainly conformed to the Scriptures. And it pressed home to *everyone* a call to allegiance to God.

A Question about the Resurrection (v. 18-27)

And now it is the turn of the religious liberals who do not accept the Old Testament as being accurate and having authority

¹⁸ And **Sadducees** came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, ¹⁹ "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁰ There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. ²¹ And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. ²² And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died. ²³ In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife."

²⁴ Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵ For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶ And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? ²⁷ He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong."

A Dishonest Question (v. 18-23)

They are religious liberals who don't believe the Old Testament. They don't believe in the resurrection of the dead at the end of days. They say, "Once dead, always dead."

They pose a complicated question about multiple brothers marrying the same woman after each brother dies. They are framing this within the Levirate laws where the brother of a widow who had no children would marry the widow so as to preserve the family line. So the dear woman is married to a succession of seven husbands. She has no children with any of them and finally both the woman and her last husband die. So, who will be her husband in the resurrection?

The idea is to show how stupid it is for Jesus (and others) to believe in the resurrection. Look at the conundrums you find yourself in.

A Blunt Answer (v. 24-27)

Jesus's answer is quite blunt. He has usually answered these kind of "scenario" questions very directly in the past. Jesus says that they don't know the Scriptures. Therefore their scenario is wrong. There is no marriage in the resurrection. Rather, we will be like the angels who do not marry. Jesus is **not** saying that in the resurrection, in the new heavens and new earth, that there is no gender. Your gender is a part of your identity. And angels are all male. What Jesus says is that *there is no marriage in the resurrection*.

Furthermore, Jesus tells that they don't know the power of God. They don't believe that God has the power to give life to the dead. The resurrection depends on the power of God to bring the dead back to life. Furthermore, they don't know the Scriptures which assert that God is the God of people who are alive even though they have died long ago. For the immediate recipients of this book, this statement assures and comforts them that Jesus has been raised from the dead. IF there is no resurrection, then our faith is empty and we are foolish and stupid to go on believing and living as we do.

Jesus' answer? You are just *wrong*.

A Question about the Greatest Commandment (v. 28-34)

Now one of the religious clerks/scribes steps up to ask a question. He has heard the arguing. He has heard Jesus' careful use of the Scriptures and His penetrating questions and answers. But it seems his attitude is different.

²⁸ And one of **the scribes** came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.' ³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. ³³ And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

A Thoughtful Question (v. 28)

His is a thoughtful question that had been asked of Jesus before. In all of the Mosaic Law, what commandment is the most important?

A Scriptural Answer (v. 29-31)

Jesus' answer is to point the prologue to the Ten Words or as we typically call them, the Ten Commandments. The most important commandment *is hear what the one and only true God says*. The one and only true God commands that we love Him with all our being and existence and to overcome self-love by others-love.

An Insightful Response (v. 32-33)

The scribe gets it. His response sounds a bit congratulatory at first. Jesus, I'm glad you gave the right answer, the one I was thinking. But then you realize that isn't this scribe's attitude. He hears Jesus' answer and connects it to other texts. To love God and neighbor is greater than the whole Levitical system of sacrifice designed to deal with not loving God and neighbor. Obedience is better than sacrifice and confession.

A Wonderful Affirmation (v. 34-35)

Jesus wonderfully affirms the scribes' response. The scribe has responded wisely. His words are evidence that He understands the Scripture and thus is near the kingdom of God.

Are you? Do you hear God's word? Do you love God with all your being? Do you love others in a way that overcomes self-love? Or do you excuse yourself from such radical, life-transforming commitments because, well, after all, God forgives?

A Question about the Deity of the Messiah (v. 35-37)

So the true teacher from heaven, Jesus, asks a question in return exposing their inconsistency rejecting Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.

³⁵ And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? ³⁶ David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, " 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." ' "

³⁷ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" And the great throng heard him gladly.

The Accepted Truth (v. 35)

This is a "how" question. The scribes were responsible to carefully copy and reproduce the Old Testament. They also were relied upon to understand the Old Testament. They were supposed to be careful students of the Old Testament, but their approach was often academic and lacked spiritual understanding. Yet, they asserted that the Messiah (the Christ) was the Son of David. How did they do this?

The Problematic Text (v. 36-37)

So, what are they going to do with a problematic text? This is a very famous text that would have been well-known to Jewish people. It was a proof text of the eventual ascendancy of the Messiah and His ultimate victory over all. Jesus asserts the accuracy of the text. David is the speaker. David is speaking in the Spirit. So what David says is true.

But he also raises a question that needs to be answered. The reasoning in the text runs like this.

David is the writer. He is one speaking. Yahweh speaks to David's Divine Lord, the messianic promise. So God is talking to the Messiah. But the Messiah is addressed as deity by David. So the Messiah is God. If the Messiah is God, then how can the Messiah be David's physical son?

The Unspoken Issue

Is Jesus just dazzling the crowd with his knowledge of the Bible? Is the crowd marveling just because Jesus has knocked the scribes back on their heels a little? Or is there something else going on here? All through the gospel of Mark, Jesus has claimed to be the Messiah, the promised King. He has also asserted that He is deity, one with Yahweh. Yet, most of the people, the religious leaders and the scribes have challenged and rejected His claim to be the Messiah.

Yet, their own scribes say the Messiah is David's Son. And this text clearly asserts that the Messiah is deity. He is God. So, why are the religious leaders rejecting Jesus' claim?

An Authentic Worshipper (v. 38-44)

The next two paragraphs confirm that Jesus is aiming the text at the religious leaders who put on great airs of being true worshippers of God.

The Hypocritical Worship of the Scribes (v. 38-40)

³⁸ And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Jesus warns against the scribes, but in doing so is warning against all the religious leaders who have confronted Him in this text. They love to put the great show of their religion. Their clothes, their loud use of titles in public, their selection of seating in the market and at the religious feasts all designed to elevate themselves. Yet they mistreat the widows and make long public prayers.

But their religion will not save them. Because they ought to have known better, they will be judged more severely.

The Authentic Worship of the Widow (v. 41-44)

Mark once again concludes his argument by telling us of a speech-act of Jesus.

⁴¹ And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Here is what the true worship of the Servant-King is. It is the giving of one's all in simple trust. Mark contrasts the ostentatious displays of the scribes and the large amounts given with the simple, humble, gift of the widow. She gave out of her poverty signifying she was rich in her soul.

The contrast of the haughty scribes and the humble widow brings this section to a conclusion. It highlights the futility, folly and deadliness of outward religion without inward realities. And it highlights the humble act of giving that is evidence of hearing God's Word and loving God with all of one's being.

Reflect and Respond

Do you love God supremely? Do you love neighbor sacrificially? That will be reflected in:

Humbly hearing and heeding God's Word.

Rejecting all forms of empty outward religion and cultivating a true relationship with God.

Submitting to Jesus' wisdom in all matters of life and living. This means giving to the government what is due them while giving to God all that is due Him.

Committing to a life of obedience to Jesus that does not seek to excuse sin while still living in the forgiveness God grants through the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Being willing to sacrificially please God with all your life and living.

May God grant that the kingdom of God will be yours.