

Mark 12:13-34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 April 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 12 verses 13 to 34 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians to trap him in his talk. 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? But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.

And they brought one. And he said to them, Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's. Jesus said to them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him. And the Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, 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. There were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. And the second took her and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all, the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife. Jesus said to them, Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 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? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong. 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? Jesus answered, The most important is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, 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. The second is this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. And the scribe said to him, You are right, teacher, you have truly said that he is one, and that there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. 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. In chapter 12 of Mark, Jesus is engaging with his opponents in the context of the temple. And here the Pharisees collude with the Herodians to trap him. The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem, but Jesus came from Herod Antipas' territory, and Herod Antipas was in

Jerusalem at the time for the feast. Tax to Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question. To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy, and, by extension, of the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land. And the denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Caesar's being the son of God. One way or another, Jesus seems to be caught. Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and the revolutions against Rome, or he will seem to be like a compromiser or an accommodationist with Rome. The Pharisees and the Herodians begin with flattery. They're trying to put Jesus off his guard, and perhaps to tempt him into the radical answer by praising his virtue of fearless candour. The statement that Jesus is not swayed by appearances also means, quite literally, that he does not look at people's faces. And it was precisely the face of a person, Caesar, that was part of what was at issue here. Jesus' answer is a profoundly shrewd one. Before he even addresses the issue, he asks them why they are testing him, connecting what they are doing with Satan's testing of him. Then, as he answers their question more directly, he deals with it in some very clever ways. First of all, he asks them to produce a coin. They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession, compromising them. The Jews could enjoy their own coinage to some degree, but they clearly had one of these coins in their possession, so they were in a difficult position if they were going to ask a question that was designed to trap him, because they were caught too. The statement, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, is ambiguous but brilliant. To some, it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him. To others, pay your taxes. However, there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There's a willingness to be dispossessed of such an item.

There are dues also to be paid both to Caesar and to God. You need to recognise what Caesar is owed, and what God is owed. There may be opposition between those two, but Caesar is owed something.

Some have seen in the identification of Caesar's image, an implication that we are supposed to render the image of God to God, as in our persons and other persons. The reasoning of Jesus, however, is that the coin is Caesar's, and so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, but something given for services given. Those dues could be paid while still having a certain ambivalence in relationship to Caesar. Jesus' answer is neither that of the accommodationist or the compromiser nor that of the revolutionary. He treads a line between compliance and resistance.

[6 : 08] Rendering to God limits what you render to Caesar. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Following this, Jesus is challenged by the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection.

They present an elaborate account of the performance of the leveret marriage, in this case of a woman who's gone through a number of different husbands who have not born her a child. And the question is, in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges their presuppositions. They see the resurrection almost as a perpetuation of the existing form of life, whereas for Jesus it's a transformation. Marriage and giving in marriage function to fulfil the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and also served to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death. This is one of the significances of the leveret law. The leveret law was to raise up seed for the dead brother. Of course, the resurrection is a different way of raising up seed from the dead.

The resurrection involves a new principle of generation or regeneration. It's no longer marriage through which people are born, but through the rebirth from the dead. The angels don't marry, but are a non-procreating living host. Here it might be interesting to see Jesus' teaching against the background of something like 1 Enoch 15, 3-10, apocryphal literature that would provide an understanding of how angels were viewed by many at the time.

Why have you forsaken the high heaven, the eternal sanctuary, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men, and taken for yourselves wives, and done as the sons of earth?

You were holy ones and spirits, living forever. With the blood of women you have defiled yourselves, and with the blood of flesh you have begotten, and with the blood of men you have lusted, and you have done as they do, flesh and blood, who die and perish.

Therefore I gave them women, that they might cast seed into them, and thus beget children by them, that nothing fail them upon the earth. But you originally existed as spirits, living forever and not dying for all the generations of eternity. Therefore I did not make women among you, the spirits of heaven. In heaven is their dwelling, but the spirits begotten on earth. On earth is their dwelling. Humanity is a race, but the angels are a living host. They do not reproduce. They are created as a complete host. The angels are also presented as if a band of brothers. There are no women among them. There are no fathers and sons. The resurrection then isn't just revivification, and return to our existing form of life. It is a transformation of life, where we will no longer be faced by the reality of death, or the need to procreate and fill the earth.

[8 : 59] And in that context, there is no longer the need for marriage. This doesn't mean that we cease to be male and female, but it does mean that procreation ends. Jesus' reference to Exodus chapter 3 seems very odd here. The statement that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would not seem to imply that resurrection will occur. However, it presents the action of the Exodus as being done for their sake in part. It suggests that they haven't just simply ceased to be. They have a destiny still to be worked out. A destiny in their descendants, but also a destiny in their own persons. The event of the Exodus is a new birth. It's a birth event occurring through the events of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. God is raising up Israel from slavery, and raising up in them the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And there's more going on here. There are themes of resurrection within it.

The bones of Joseph are being taken up with them, raised up out of Egypt, brought into the promised land and buried in Shechem. The great attention given in the story of Genesis to burial of the patriarchs and their wives from Genesis chapter 23 onwards is already an indication that the body is not just to be discarded, that the body has some destiny remaining to it. And what happens to that body after its death is a matter of extreme importance? Jesus' response to the testing of the Sadducees here might also recall his response to the testing that he received earlier concerning Moses' teaching concerning divorce. In both cases, Jesus highlights a problem of perception in his opponents, and also the way in which the proof text that they brought forward needs to be relativised. Finally, a scribe presents a third question to him, although Mark doesn't present it as a testing question in the same way. It seems to be more genuine. The scribe has seen that Jesus answered the other question as well, and he wants to see how he will answer this question. Is Jesus going to choose some particular law that reveals an imbalance in his teaching? Perhaps the greatest commandment is you shall not murder, or maybe the greatest commandment is remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Whatever Jesus answers, maybe he's going to tread on some toes, open himself up to some criticism, suggests some imbalance at the heart of his belief. But Jesus' answer once more is shrewd. The greatest commandment, and there is a greatest commandment, is the summary commandment of the Shema. In this commandment, the entire law is encapsulated, and the second great commandment arises from it, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. These two commandments sum up the entire ten commandments, and all the other commandments. The law is not just a collection of miscellaneous laws that are assembled together. There is a logic and a unity and a system of truth summed up in the call to love God and neighbour. The whole purpose of the law is encapsulated in these things, and then it's refracted into these specific commandments, which explain what that actually looks like.

The statements that Jesus identifies are also taken from the law itself. They're taken from summary sections of the law. Leviticus chapter 19 is a summary of key elements of the second table of the law, the way that we relate to our neighbour. And Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 5 is at the very outset of chapter 6 to 26, which unpacks the ten commandments which are given in chapter 5.

The law and the prophets all arise out of this. By contrast, the scribes and the Pharisees' approach to the law is so often one that takes bits and pieces and abstracts them from a larger system of truth that is ordered around a central principle, the loving God and loving neighbour. The commandments that Jesus identifies express the positive truth at the heart of all the thou shalt not's. While the scribes and the Pharisees nullify the law on account of their tradition, Jesus fulfils it. He highlights that reality that lies at the very heart, the centre, the weighty matters of the law. The scribe responds to Jesus' answer with great approval and actually expands upon his answer by showing that obedience is greater than sacrifice. And hearing this response, Jesus declares that the scribe is not far from the kingdom of God. Once he's appreciated the true nature of what it means to keep the law of God, the centrality of loving God and neighbour, and the importance of this over-sacrifice, he has grasped one of the very core principles of the kingdom of God.

A question to consider. In Jesus' teaching concerning divorce, he draws the attention of his hearers back to the period before the fall, to God's original institution of marriage and his creation of man and woman. In his response to the Sadducees, he draws attention to something that lies beyond the patterns of this age, to a new heavens and a new earth where there will no longer be marriage and giving in marriage, but we will be like a heavenly host. How can marriage in the valley of this present age be informed by the reality of these two horizons?