

Tested and Proven

Mark 12:13-27

Hook: Responding to hostility with what a person needs rather than what they deserve.

Context:

Religious leaders continue their scrutiny and thinly-veiled hostility toward Jesus in the days leading up to the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus does not retaliate to these attacks; rather, He speaks the truth in love, even teaching His adversaries and giving them what they truly need. Each of these RLs then are faced with a test: whether they will place their faith in Jesus as their Messiah or reject Him and continue with their murderous plans.

In the passage just before this, the religious leaders (RLs) first confronted Jesus as He taught in the Temple on the Tuesday before the cross. *They questioned His authority to do and teach the way He did, and demanded to know who gave Him this authority. Jesus challenged their response to God's authority in their lives, then told a parable about how their rejection of John and Himself followed a long line of rejection by Israel's leaders. They wanted to lay hold of Him but feared the people, and left.*

We see this often in the gospels: Jesus is delivered from harm by the Father because it was not His time yet. Friday of this week would be His time; until then, Jesus' enemies were frustrated, and not repentant.

A great encouragement to us, either when we face danger or when we suffer. When we face danger: God is our Protector. When we suffer: God knows and cares.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Mt 10:29-31

Exposition

:13-17 The Test about Taxes

:13 Having failed in their effort to entrap Jesus, the older religious leaders send in the young men to have their try. A very odd combination: Pharisees and Herodians. Pharisees were separatists and purists: they were rightly waiting for a king to sit on David's throne (even though they were rejecting Jesus, the promised Son of David). Herodians were compromisers and pragmatists: they felt Herod the Great, who allowed the Temple to be rebuilt, was a great benefactor of the Jewish people. Herodians were fine with cooperating with Rome. This usually led these factions to fight with each other, but they are united now in their opposition to Jesus.

In Matthew's account of this incident, he writes *“They [Pharisees] sent their disciples to Him”* (Mt. 22:16), so these were certainly younger men.

But they have the same ill intent in their heart. It says they intended to *“catch Him in His words”*. The word catch means to stalk as a hunter would his quarry; Matthew write that they wanted to entrap Him, to set a snare for Him to walk into. These guys were hunting Jesus down.

:14-15 Since they are younger, these guys are a bit more blatant in their schmoozing of Jesus. It's almost painful to read!

“Teacher, we know You are true: you don't play favorites; You don't show partiality (regarding the face of someone—treat someone differently because of who they are or what position they hold). You teach the way of God in truth.” All true... but said completely insincerely. Since they were hunters, this was their **verbal camo**, to lure Jesus in to their trap.

“Shall we pay, or not pay?” These men were asking Jesus about one of the most hated taxes levied by the Romans on the Jews.

Here's an overview of all the taxes charged by the Romans [slide]:

-If you were a farmer or vineyard owner, there was the ground tax: 10% of all grain or 20% of all wine / fruit (capital gains tax).

-Frontier (shipping) taxes: inflated the cost of a product up to 100x!

Individuals were burdened with a lot of taxes:

-Income tax 1%.

-User fees: city, roads, houses, water, even food all taxed.

-Poll tax (census tax) one denarius / yr to pay for Roman occupation forces! Most hated, and the subject of this question.

Like their elders in Ch. 11, these young RLs thought they had Jesus trapped. If he told them to pay the tax, that could be taken as legitimizing Roman domination of Israel.

Remember, the Jews were expecting their Messiah to be a political ruler: no Jewish leader would willingly bow the knee to Rome. If He said no, don't pay, they could quickly report Him to the Roman authorities as a rebel and an insurrectionist. (You can see the teamwork between Pharisees and Herodians in inventing this trap.)

:15 Jesus, under the guidance and wisdom of His Father, cannot be cornered! He could see their hypocrisy. The word refers to masks worn in Greek plays [photos], which helped actors adopt a role and expression. What appeared on the mask was the role they were playing, not who they are.

The Father allowed the Son to see through this attempted entrapment. "Why are you putting me to the test?" Jesus asks. In order to answer that simple question, they would expose their evil motives, which they weren't willing to do.

Here is God's wisdom: instantly applicable in an impossible situation! Do we ever need this, often on a daily basis... and God gives it to us when we ask (humbly).

Jesus answers their question as if it were asked with sincerity, with the wisdom of God, at the same time bypassing their trap.

"Bring Me a denarius that I may see it."

:16 Denarii have the image of the Caesar at the time. [photos] Tiberius Caesar was emperor 14-37 AD. A modern coin would have his image on it. They were the common amount paid for a day's wage on the farm, the "minimum wage" of the day.

One side shows Caesar image, the other him reigning as a god. Roman emperors not only had dictatorial power, but they were worshiped as gods. Jews regarded even handling these coins as idolatrous.. but they did it. This particular coin had significance: it was the only accepted way the poll tax could be paid, and it was the exact amount of the bill.

Jesus uses the coin to make a point about government's authority, and God's. Caesar had authority: His image was stamped into this silver. His authority was limited to this kingdom at this particular time, but the authority was real.

:17 "Render to Caesar the things which are Caesar's". Jesus acknowledges that governments have the right to lay claim to our resources. It is lawful for governments to charge-- and us to pay-- taxes. Exactly how much may be a hot topic!

Jesus makes a clear distinction between Caesar and God...paying one's taxes does not mean adopting the evil ideas and practices of a particular government. In the case of these men, paying that hated poll tax didn't mean engaging in emperor worship. It does mean fulfilling one's duty as a citizen.

We benefit from government services as a citizen, so it's only right that we pay taxes for them. That's the point the apostle Paul makes in his letter to the church at Rome, as he talks of government authority: "So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience. Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority. Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law." Rom 13:5-8 NLT

The debt we owe the government may be more tangible: but God has the greater claim on our life. He has His stamp on us: we have been made in His image. What do we

have that we haven't received from Him, including our very life itself? Not only in our giving do we proclaim to God our worship and His ownership of what we have, but our lives, our souls belong to Him.

In this illustration, Jesus extends an invitation to these young men, being schooled in the schemes of their respective religious group, to give their lives by faith to God. Such faith would alter the path they were on, even that day, if they trusted in Him.

These young men were dumbfounded. As with the RL group that had withdrawn after the parable of the wicked tenant farmers and told these guys to hunt down Jesus, they had come with a trap to catch Him, but their plans failed utterly. Instead they were left speechless by His wisdom, kindness, and the personal invitation to trust Him.

:18-27 The Test about the Resurrection

:18 As this group of young leaders walk away wondering what just happened to their plan, another group steps up and tries to shame Jesus. The **Sadducees** were the intellectual skeptics of first C Israel: they would fit right in on a college campus today. Sadducees didn't think God was involved in everyday life: the spiritual world wasn't real; when we died we just ceased to exist; and there certainly wasn't any resurrection. They were materialistic and realistic: this current life and what we can see is all there is.

:19 Their way to discredit Jesus was to prove Him a fraud, beneath them intellectually. Since they only believed the first 5 books of the Bible, they begin their convoluted question with a reference to a passage in Deuteronomy. Continuation of a family name was a much bigger deal then than now. Moses established a way for a family to continue if a married man dies childless:

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel." (Deut. 25:5-6 ESV) This practice of marrying your deceased brother's wife is practiced in some African countries today.

:19-23 Now comes the hypothetical situation: they invent a sorry imitation of a parable in order to raise a hypothetical question about a false teaching! Here's the story: the same wife married by seven brothers, and they all die before conceiving children with this woman. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? (Black widow?)

Hypothetical stories are cute from children, but not from adults. (Thomas girl story)

:24-27 Jesus sidesteps the silliness of this story and gets to the heart of the matter, once again speaking the truth in love.

"Isn't this why you are wandering into error: you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." There's a serious issue here: these men were teachers in Israel. They held positions of influence, and they were leading themselves and others into error. The word used to describe their wandering off is the word from which we get "planets". The other bodies in our solar system would wander in the night sky; they would change their position, unlike the rest of the stars. In the same way, these leaders were wandering off from the truth and taking many others with them because they did not know the Scriptures nor the power of God.

God reveals Himself and speaks to us through His Word. He is real and He is powerful, involved in our world and our lives. If we ignore God's word, we don't hear His voice. The Sads didn't study the Scriptures; instead, they brought their own template of what they believed to the Bible and twisted the verses to fit what they believed... always a bad practice.

They also did not know the power of God: they didn't believe God is involved and acting powerfully in our world and our lives. Through their unbelief they were missing God when He was literally standing in front of them; they were exchanging the opportunity for a relationship with God for their own intellectual smugness.

Both practices are still alive and well today, and the source of much error in our world. We must study God's word and open our eyes to see Him alive and at work in our lives.

:25 Our Lord responds with grace to this attempted entrapment. He even answers the question as if it had been sincerely asked.

"For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." Jesus refers to the resurrection as a fact. Here's a detail about resurrected life: marriage and procreation will not be a part of it. Angels were created rather than procreated. When we are raised from the dead we will inherit eternal life, having been born again. Our resurrected bodies are the completion of God's redemption of us. We won't be marrying and having babies in heaven. In that way our resurrected lives will be similar to that of angels.

This runs counter to many false teachings, even today. The Pharisees believed that marriage (and sexual relations) continued in heaven. Muslims who martyr themselves in the cause of jihad, or holy war, expect to receive 70 virgins as a reward and the stamina to service them. Also, Latter-Day Saints believe they will be populating planets yet to be created after they die. A man's "temple wife" will be constantly pregnant with these spirit babies. (Obviously, men thought up these beliefs! Thankfully not the way it will be.)

:26 Jesus now addresses their false belief that there is no resurrection. He goes to Exodus, part of the Bible that the Sadducees regarded as inspired. Refers to it as "the passage about the burning bush", as there were no chapters and verses to mark the Bible at that time.

Jesus paraphrases Exodus 3:6, **"And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."**

Instead of viewing this statement as a declaration of dead ancestors, God is naming those who trusted Him and who were standing before Him at that moment! Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are all very much alive! God says "I am the God of...", not "I was". If the Sads belief in **cessation** was true, what God says here is nonsense. According to them, the patriarchs ceased to exist when they died physically. But that's not what the Lord says, even in part of the Bible they regarded as inspired.

:27 The practice of twisting Scripture to fit preconceived notions, along with a denial of God's power, are factors that led the Sads into deep error. "You are greatly off course here." They still lead people off course, deep into error today. Cults thrive and individuals use the Bible to prove the most outlandish things because they don't know the Scriptures, and they don't recognize God's power (always in line with the Scriptures).

Wrap

Wow: what an example Jesus leaves us. He was approached in hypocrisy and had traps laid for Him left and right, yet He responded by speaking the truth in love. He gave each group what they needed, not what they deserved! May God help us to do the same to those who mistreat us.

What timing that we studied this passage now. As Benjamin Franklin quipped, you can't escape death or taxes, and it looks like that's always been true. As we face tax-paying season, let's remember God's stamp on our life, and renew acting out His ownership of us and everything we have.

Jesus said, "A servant is not greater than his Lord." If He was put to the test having been completely transparent, having lived in line with God's word and demonstrated the power of God, we can expect scrutiny as well.

We ought not to fear such scrutiny, but we should be prepared. We should aim to know the Scriptures and the power of God. We want to know how to read and understand the Bible, then grow in our relationship with Him. The more we know Him, the greater and more powerful we will realize He truly is!

One trait of an elder, a mature Christian, is to be able to discern and refute error, false teaching. That's not becoming an arrogant know-it-all, but reaching out to people who have wandered off into error. Their eternal destiny is at stake! The attitude of speaking the truth in love is shown beautifully by the apostle Paul: "And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will." (2 Timothy 2:24-26)

Applying God's Word to our Lives

- God through His grace provides us with what we need rather than what we deserve! Think of someone who constantly irritates, challenges, or annoys you. What's one thing you might do that would meet a real need this person has? How can you avoid retaliating?
- Besides paying taxes, how else might you serve as a citizen? How might you be involved in serving our community or even in our government, to live out the life of Jesus in that setting? Let's remember to pray for those in positions of authority, too. (1 Timothy 2:1-6)
- Each of us knows someone involved in a cult. Without neglecting our own time in the Word, become more familiar with what that cult believes when compared to what God's word says. (It's best to do this with another believer.) Then pray for opportunities to serve that individual.