

## Contest - Mark 12

Date: 3 April 2022, 5th Sunday in Lent

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Mark

Texts: Mark 12

What are the hardest 3 words to say in the English language? This is not a question about pronunciation, although I'm sure you could ask Dahoo and Becky what they find tricky. "I'm sorry" slips off the tongue too easily. "I forgive you." Sometimes yes, that can be very hard. But I think it's these: "I was wrong." And this is followed by a close second: "I don't know". None of us likes to be wrong, much less admitting that we were wrong, and we certainly don't like someone showing us we're wrong. Our pride naturally says, "I'm right. I know what's going on. I don't need to listen to you." That's the case not only towards others, but also towards God. But there is something beautiful and disarming about a posture of humility. Being open and willing to listen and to learn. It opens doors and crosses boundaries. Far from weak, it's a sign of inner strength because it says I'm secure enough to learn from my mistakes.

We often talk about how being a Christian means being a disciple of Jesus. That word disciple literally means learner. It's what we're meant to be as Christians. People who keep learning from Jesus. I'm a Star Wars fan, so I always think of being a disciple like Jesus is the Jedi Master, and I'm his apprentice. In Mark 9 we read that at the transfiguration God says to the 3 disciples, "This is my Son. Listen to him." So to be a disciple is to listen to Jesus. But how? Well Jesus speaks through Holy Scripture. The Bible. All the Scriptures point to him and he is the key to interpreting them. This is my Son. Listen to him. That means listening to Jesus in all areas of life, not just the spiritual, but also the moral and the political. It's what Beck and Sally and Tina have committed themselves to do, reaffirming their own baptismal vows and promising on Rosie's behalf, to turn to Christ, to listen to him, to submit to his authority, to live as a disciple, to teach Rosie what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus.

What does all this have to do with Mark 12, our text for today? Today's text is all about a contest for authority between Jesus and Israel's leaders. Will they recognise his authority as God's Son and listen to him? Last week we saw Jesus arrive in Jerusalem as God's long awaited king, the Messiah, fulfilling prophecy and riding on a donkey. That was Sunday. On the Monday, he cleansed the temple, driving out the money changes. Now on the Tuesday, the contest begins in 11:27. Jesus comes to the temple courts, and the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders come and ask him by what authority has he done this? Mark makes clear that they think he comes in his own authority, but in fact it is from God.

And for the rest of the chapter we are ringside, as it were, to a verbal boxing match, a contest of authority, where the different leaders of Israel step into the ring with Jesus. He dodges each of their blows, and his counterpunch floors them.

Through Mark we've been asking 3 questions. Who is Jesus? What is the Kingdom of God? How do we follow him? When Jesus comes he challenges and replaces all other authorities. As each fighter steps into the ring, the contest takes us deeper into each of those questions. This is such a fun chapter. Switching metaphors, I would love to take you close up through this chapter like the horse and carriage tour of Battery Point, but instead we're going to hop in the sea plane down at Constitution dock and go for a fly over. So fasten your seatbelts. Open your Bibles. Stow your tray tables and let's take off.

### **Round 1, The parable of the tenants in the vineyard.**

In verses 1-12 Jesus tells a parable about a vineyard. The vineyard of course is Israel. The tenants are Israel's spiritual and political leaders. God sends different servants to collect some of the fruit of the vineyard, but they're all treated shamefully. At last the vineyard owner has only his son who he loves left to send. "Surely they will respect him?" But no, they kill him and throw him out of the vineyard. Jesus has predicted his death three times, and here he does so again. But now he adds the ominous warning. God will come and throw out the tenants who kill his Son and give the vineyard to others. It's a well aimed right hook. The chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders all know that Jesus had spoken this parable against them. The irony is that they go and try and do exactly what Jesus says they will do - try and lay hands on him to kill him. Jesus is the Son whom the Father loves. If the vineyard is the kingdom of God, then it is given only to those who recognise Jesus as the Son whom the Father loves, who welcome him, who listen to him, who honour him. No longer will the kingdom be an ethnic geopolitical entity, but made up of people from every nation and language who bow the knee to Jesus.

### **Round 2, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Verse 13-17.**

The chief priests, teachers of the law and elders tap out and into the ring step 2 unlikely bedfellows, the Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees were deeply concerned with the right interpretation of the Scriptures and obedience to the Law. The Herodians are backers of Herod, the half Jewish puppet king. Normally they couldn't stand to be in the same room, but here they are united in their hatred of Jesus. They lay their trap. "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" The Herodians would naturally say yes, the Pharisees no. To say yes would be spiritual betrayal, to say no, treason against Rome. Jesus dodges the left and right combo and lands his own jab to the ribs.

“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.”

With this response Jesus cuts across a whole history of false dichotomies that we still live with today. The kingdom of God is not what you expect. It’s not Faith versus Reason. Religion versus Science. Private versus Public. The Sacred versus the Secular. Jesus’ words are a window into the whole of the Bible’s teaching about the relationship between the Church and the State. *Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.* Pay the imperial tax. “*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established,*” writes the apostle Paul. “*This is why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing.*”<sup>1</sup> Or again, St Peter writes, “*Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.*”<sup>2</sup> The God given role of government is to establish and maintain justice. As disciples, we’re called to be good neighbours, to use our Christian freedom to serve our neighbours, to submit to governments, to render them the honour that is their due.

*Give to God what is God’s.* And what is that? Well if the coin bears the image of the emperor, what bears the image of God? People. There is a limit to the authority of the State. It cannot own people, body or soul. When it tries to, it oversteps its God given role. For all its coercive power, it cannot change the heart. Only the Spirit of God can do that, and so we should be wary of any attempts to try and bring in the Kingdom of God by political means. God however does have a claim on us. We bear his image. Through Christ he offers us his life for ours. He calls us to worship him with our whole selves, body and soul. As disciples of Jesus, we are not our own. We belong to God. Our bodies are his temple. We have been bought at a price. So, no matter what our culture or experience says, we are to honour God with our bodies.<sup>3</sup>

### **Round 3, God is the God of the living, not the dead. Verses 18-27**

Winded, the Pharisees and Herodians, crawl out of the ring and up step the Sadducees. The Sadducees were mainly drawn from the priests and ruling class in Jewish society. They

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 13:1-7

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2.13-14

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 6.19-20

controlled worship at the temple, and so their hope was all about maintaining the peace, not to mention their own power, through cooperation with Rome. That temporal political focus means they neglected the spiritual side of human existence. Mark draws attention to this when he says that, unlike the Pharisees, they “say there is no resurrection.” It’s from this position of scepticism that they attempt to land a haymaker.

The law says that if a man dies without an heir his brother has to marry his widow to provide him offspring. The Sadducees try to use this law to reduce the idea of the resurrection to an absurdity. It’s not seven brides for seven brothers, but one bride for seven brothers. And whose wife will she be at the resurrection, eh Jesus? Stick that in your theological pipe and smoke it. Jesus blocks the punch and lands his own left and right.

*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. 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!”*

Jesus here speaks about our Hope. In the creed we say that we believe that Christ will come again in glory and his kingdom will have no end, and that we believe in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus’ response to the Sadducees shows that our hope for the kingdom transcends the political realities of this world. The job of governments is justice, and we work for justice, but human justice is always imperfect. The kingdom of God will bring perfect justice. But it comes in full with the resurrection. That means a transformation of human relationships and bodily life. Our culture lives as if romance and sex are our highest good and the pinnacle of human existence. The church can baptise this by making an idol out of marriage. But God is our highest good and ultimate hope. Marriage and sex are only for this life. Indeed they are signs that point to perfect intimacy and pleasure we will enjoy with God when Christ the bridegroom comes. And so it is that singleness too points to and anticipates the ultimate union with God for which we all wait. Will you listen to Jesus with your hopes?

#### **Round 4, the 2 greatest commandments, verses 28-34.**

One of the teachers of the law steps into the ring. After seeing the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians knocked out, he’s giving his opponent more respect. He asks Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus gives him a two for one combo, quoting 2 key laws from Moses.

*The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 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: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”*

This is God’s call on our lives, our obligation to him and to each other. It is the sum of all the Bible’s spiritual and moral teaching. Notice it is the whole of life - heart, soul, mind and strength. Our inner attitudes and our outward actions. They are inseparable, but their order cannot be reversed. The love of neighbour flows out of the love of God. This is in fact what life in the Kingdom of God is meant to look like. This is how to follow Jesus. It’s what we promise in our baptism, to live as a disciple of Christ.

And now, to the delight of the crowds, Jesus goes on the attack. In round 5 he shows he knows the Scriptures better than even the teachers of the Law. What’s more he himself is also not only David’s son, but also his Lord. We recall Mark’s opening words - he is the Messiah, the Son of God. In round 6 he lands the knockout blow. The public piety of the teachers of the law is nothing more than a cover for pride and greed. “They devour widows’ houses”, and, in the final scene, Jesus praises a poor widow as a model disciple.

“They gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on.”<sup>4</sup> This is what it looks like to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. It’s the whole of life devoted to God. Nothing is left over. Nothing is held back. It’s giving everything to him. It’s an act of total trust in God. Her life and future is in his hands. And this devotion springs from a heart of love.

As we look back over this chapter the question for you and me is how can we listen to Jesus and obey him with our whole lives, our hopes, our bodies, our hearts, our politics, our spiritual, our moral life? How can we follow this woman’s example of total devotion to Jesus? How can we trust him for our future and so give him our all? The woman’s devotion sprang from a heart of love. Loving God and our neighbour is what Jesus calls us to. But we will only be able to love him and trust him with our whole lives as we see his love for us. It’s there in what we’ve seen today. He’s the Son, whom the Father loves, who gave up everything for us. He held nothing back, but poured out his life on the cross for you and for me. He did that out of love for God and love for us, his enemies, in order to make us not just his neighbours, but his friends. Why listen to Jesus, even and especially when he shows you to be wrong? Because he loves you. You can trust him. He gave everything for you, holding nothing back. So you and I can live the lives he calls us to, the life of devotion we promise in baptism, where we give him our all. He’s the Son who loves you. Will you listen to him?

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 12.44