

# Mark 12.18-34

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## *Jesus is... the greatest teacher*

Amington Church

Sunday 10 February 2019

### **Place**

In a film or TV show, you can often tell something bad is about to happen because the background music turns ominous – it lets you know before the characters do that a Bad Thing is about to happen.

Mark has done a similar thing in his gospel – as early as chapter 3 verse 6 he said this:

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

*Mark 3.6 (NIV)*

Time and again we see Jesus clash with the religious leaders – the ominous background music growing louder and louder – and it gets louder still here in Mark 12.

Jesus was staying in Bethany, on the Mount of Olives – most likely with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, his friends who lived there.

He was there to celebrate the Passover – and, as we know, to die on a Roman cross. But we're getting ahead of ourselves...

Every day Jesus was walking into Jerusalem, to the Temple, to teach the crowds – and, it turns out, to debate with the religious leaders and teachers. They were getting more and more desperate – and his parables didn't help.

Jesus began telling a well-known parable from Isaiah 5, about God planting a vineyard. But he added a twist: instead of only being about God and his vineyard, there are some tenants, who reject the owner, mistreat and kill his servants – and eventually his own son.

**The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders** knew their Scripture, they knew the original parable in Isaiah – and they realised that *they* were the wicked tenants (12).

So they redoubled their efforts, to try and find a way to arrest him. They sent their best legal minds, and asked the thorniest questions of the day, to try and trap him in front of the crowd who loved him so much, to try and trip him up in a blasphemy – or say something that would force the Romans to do their dirty work for them.

# Resurrection

A daughter once asked her mum, ‘Mummy, why are you getting so big?’ The mum replied, ‘That’s because I’m expecting a baby.’

The daughter asked, confused, ‘Where’s the baby?’ The mum replied, ‘Inside my tummy.’ ‘Oh my goodness you ate a baby?!’ cried the shocked child.

Children often ask challenging questions – especially when they go through the ‘why’ stage – but normally their questions are out of curiosity – whereas here the leaders were trying to trap Jesus.

First they ask about taxes – if you missed it, I suggest you listen to Sophie’s sermon on this from a couple of weeks ago.

The second question – on the resurrection – is one of my favourite episodes in Jesus’ life. He was asked the question by the Sadducees who were a wealthy high-priestly caste. They ignored all of what we call the Old Testament, except the first five books – the books of the Law. And, the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection – which is why they were sad, you see.

In the Old Testament there is a law of ‘levirate marriage’, where the closest relative of a man who dies childless marries the widow, to provide for her and to have a child in his dead relative’s name.

The most famous example is Ruth, who married Boaz under this law, and became the great-grandmother of King David himself.

Anyway, in the Sadducees' question there are seven brothers. The first gets married, but dies before he can have any children. The second brother, being a dutiful, law-abiding chap, marries his widow to provide for her and have a son in his brother's name.

But *he* dies before they can have any children. So it's the third brother's turn – only this time, presumably he has to have *two* children, to preserve the family lines of both his older brothers.

But the same thing happens... he dies before they can have any children. Up steps the fourth brother... I imagine by this time a little nervous. If you were at our BBQ in September when we dramatised the second half of Mark's gospel, you'll remember how Daniel got more and more nervous...! By the time it was the turn of the seventh brother he was as nervous of the number of children he now needed to have, as much as marrying this unlucky widow!

The seventh brother dies, also childless – finally the woman dies, and the question is... **'At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?'** (23). It was supposed to be funny, because they were ridiculing belief in the resurrection.

Jesus' answer is fascinating.

Most artwork depicts Jesus with a sort of serene, impassive face – calm, stoic. We perhaps picture him as terribly English, polite and mild-mannered, with a kindly face, the sort of person who might smile gently and say something like, 'Let's agree to disagree.' But...

Jesus replied, 'Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ... He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!'

*Mark 12.24 & 27 (NIV)*

Jesus didn't mince his words. The Sadducees cut out great swathes of the Bible – the prophets, history, wisdom literature – which provide mountains of evidence for life after death. But they didn't like those bits so they ignored them – they knew some of the Bible very well, but by ignoring the rest ended up **badly mistaken**.

But nor did they know God's power. It's ironic that a group of people so focused on the first five books of the Bible – which contain God's power in creation, releasing his people from slavery in Egypt by parting the Red Sea, providing manna and quail in the desert, gushing water out of a rock – it's ironic that they would deny God's power to bring life even out of death.

And yet we are all in danger of making the exact same error today.

*Pause*

## Love

A couple are sitting in their living room, each sipping a glass of wine. Out of the blue, the wife says, ‘I love you.’

‘Is that you or the wine talking?’ asks the husband.

‘It’s me,’ says the wife, ‘Talking *to* the wine.’

The next question for Jesus was about the Law. The debate was this: which is *most* important, the sacrificial system, centred on the Temple, or living a holy life? Rabbis spent hours debating how the law could be summed up or summarised. So, **one of the teachers of the law** asked Jesus, **‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’** (28) Jesus’ answer echoes down the centuries, as probably his best-known teaching:

‘“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: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”’

*Mark 12.30-31 (NIV)*

Except, it isn't actually original to Jesus. He was simply quoting the Old Testament. This wasn't *new* teaching at all – but part of the Law God had given his people centuries before.

Love is the cornerstone of the Christian faith – or rather, to be precise, the love of God in Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, which is offered to all, freely and without discrimination.

So far so good –the problem comes when we turn into modern-day Sadducees, and start ignoring great swathes of the Bible, focusing instead on a tiny bit of it. That's a problem, because as Sophie said two weeks ago, Satan loves to take truth and twist it, leaving just enough for it to sound convincing. The truth is that God is love – but unless we have a whole-Bible understanding of what that means, even that truth can become a dangerous lie.

As I'm sure most – if not all – of you know, Jess and I recently returned from New Zealand. We had a wonderful trip, and were able to visit most of the places we wanted. It took a *lot* of planning – we bought a couple of guidebooks, and did a lot of research online, to work out where we wanted to go. Then we had a big map of both islands, to work out a route that would take us to all those places.

But imagine if, having received the guidebook, we read the chapter on Auckland *and stopped there*. Imagine if, having got our map, we didn't unfold it, but left it on the Auckland section.

We'd have had a lovely trip – Auckland has some cracking beaches, beautiful weather, loads of lovely places to eat, great coffee shops, a Sky Tower with panoramic views of the city – we could quite easily have filled our trip with things to do in Auckland.

Imagine then we came back and said we'd been to New Zealand. We'd have come back and said how lovely it is... cracking beaches, beautiful weather, great food, amazing views. But there are two problems. First, we'd have missed out on so much, and second, we'd have a skewed picture of the country. We'd think the roads were extremely busy – they really aren't. We'd think the wi-fi was excellent everywhere – it really isn't. We'd think it was heavily populated – yet is larger than the UK, with less than 7% of the population. And, we'd think it never rained – yet goodness me it can. We would, to quote Jesus, be **badly mistaken**.

Instead, we needed to *unfold the map*, we needed to *read the whole guidebook* to make the most of our trip – so we didn't miss out, or end up with a skewed picture of what New Zealand is like.

*Pause*

And friends it's like that with the Bible. It's so easy for us to be like the Sadducees, and focus on the bits of the Bible we like, the bits we are familiar with. But then we miss out!

Now, I won't deny there are challenging passages in the Old Testament – but there are some pretty tough ones in the New Testament as well. If we ignore the Old Testament, we miss out on the richness and the depth of the history of God and his people – and we run the risk of being badly mistaken about the New Testament – because don't forget, what we call the Old Testament was simple 'the Bible' for Jesus, and framed his life and ministry.

I think the problem comes when we forget the word Jesus used at the beginning of his answer about the law: **'The most important one is this,'** he said (29). Not the 'only' important commandment, but the **'most'** important commandment. He does not give us licence to ignore great swathes of Scripture, but gives us the best way of understanding what it means. So here goes...

God chooses and calls his people, not because they are better than everyone else, but because he loves them. His love is unconditional – it is like an invitation to a wedding, but instead of being sent only to close friends and family, it is for everyone.

And, like an invitation, we need to respond, or there won't be a place for us at the wedding banquet. We respond in faith, placing our trust in God. We respond by loving him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We respond by loving our neighbours – by sharing the love we have received with all whom we meet.

We respond by seeking to follow him wholeheartedly, doing our best to live a life worthy of God's call, worthy of Jesus' sacrifice. This is costly – but then so was Jesus' sacrifice of himself for us.

And we respond, knowing that when we fail and make mistakes, God is always ready and willing to forgive us when we say sorry.

The invitation is given freely – and we *must* respond. Or – and the whole Bible, from start to finish, makes this perfectly clear – we will face the consequences of our sinful actions and thoughts.

You see, if we don't respond to God's invitation to be forgiven and welcomed into his family, we remain in our sin, and outside his family – and there is no place in heaven for sin, *or* unrepentant sinners. If we ignore his invitation and reject God, one day he will give us what we ask for, and reject *us*.

But the good news is that *anyone* can accept God's invitation, no matter who you are or what you've done – there are no exceptions.

# Respond

In a short while we will be celebrating holy communion together. This act of worship is symbolic of God offering his blessing and love to all – an invitation which we must receive and respond to with thankful hearts.

I sometimes like to describe holy communion with three words: Sorry, Yes please and Thank you.

We come before God not with arrogance but with humility, knowing our hearts are full of sin – like children who know they've made a mistake, but who also know their parents love them still – we come before God saying, 'Sorry'.

We come before God asking that we might receive the forgiveness and new life he offers freely to all who ask for it – we come before God saying, 'Yes please'.

And as we receive the blessing of the bread and wine, symbols of that forgiveness and life, determined to live lives of gratitude for his gift of love and new life – we say to God, 'Thank you'.

That is the invitation God has for you this morning – how will you respond? Because, my friends, respond we must.