



RIGHTING THE REVOLUTION

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Mark 12:13-27

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In our studies in the gospel of Mark we now come to five stories of heated controversy between the leaders of Israel and Jesus, following his arrival at the Temple as its rightful king. These five encounters, which balance the five stories of controversy of chapters 2 and 3, indicate that in the intervening time of Jesus' ministry of healings, miracles and teachings there has been no change of heart among Israel's leadership.

In the early chapters of Mark these leaders confronted Jesus in Galilee; now he confronts them in Jerusalem. He has cleansed the temple, announced its demise, and declared that he will build a new temple in its place with himself at its center. Jesus' claims and actions could hardly have been more confrontational. It is not surprising that they provoke the anger of the Sanhedrin. They want him dead, but they are unable to act for fear of the crowd. So they depart the scene, having been shamefully defeated by him.

How will they respond? What can they do to diminish the popularity of a rival king as well received as Jesus? They apply a time-honored strategy, one that is used in all political campaigns: they create enemies by getting their opponent to take a stand on a controversial issue that divides the populace. Then, once the opponent has committed himself to a certain position, he will be tied to the total party line and the rest of the population will become his enemies. This process is repeated over and over again until he has no friends left. Responding to this attempt of his enemies to pin him with their personal political agendas, Jesus forcefully "rights" the revolution. The result is that issues relating to the kingdom could not be clearer or their cutting edge more sharply defined. As the drama is played out we will be forced to ask ourselves to what degree has the Pharisee, the Herodian and the Sadducee in each of us dulled the cutting edge of the gospel.

I. Kingdom Loyalties: Caesar or God?¹ (12:13-17)

A. Feigned Flattery (12:13-15a)

And they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him, in order to trap Him in a statement [i.e., an unguarded word]. And they came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful, and defer to no one; You are not partial to any [lit., "You do not look into the face of men"], but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" (NASB)

Having departed in defeat the previous day, the San-

hedrin now send a delegation of opposition parties to stir up a slur campaign among Jesus' supporters. Two rival groups with a vehement hatred of each other, the Pharisees, who plotted revolution against Rome, and the Herodians, who had compromised with Rome to acquire political and economic power, now take center stage.

In contrast to their demeanor of the previous day when they vented their ire upon Jesus, they now come with an air of feigned deference and effusive flattery. Their words have a calculated dignity and perfect symmetry. The compliment, "teacher of truth," stands as bookends to their flattery of Jesus, with a reference to his impeccable "impartiality" doubly layered in between. Their perfect word selection is so sweet it is sickening. The irony of it all is that what they say is the absolute truth, yet its formality is so overdrawn it places their words at odds with the condition of their hearts. It takes little discernment to see through their diplomatic airs and sudden change of heart to the demonic ploy lying beneath the surface.

The events of the previous days have created an opportune time to force Jesus' hand. Since he has just cleansed the temple, thereby laying claim to be Israel's true king, these men are eager to discover what the Galilean revolutionary will say about paying the census-based poll and land tax. The Jews hated this tax. It had to be paid in Roman coinage stamped with the idolatrous image of Tiberius, proclaiming his supposedly divine ancestry as "the son of a god." It was a constant reminder to the Jews of the conquerors' pervasive pagan idolatry and their own subjection. So the Pharisees and the Herodians seek a ruling from Jesus, prefacing their remarks with the accolade that he defers to no one, and "does not *look* into the face of men." This is a most unusual phrase. The normal Hebrew expression, "to receive the face" (or "lift the face" of someone), when used in a good sense meant, "to be gracious towards," or, used in a bad sense, "to show partiality." The slight change is well crafted to flatter Jesus as an "extraordinarily scrupulous Jew"² who would not dare look upon the idolatrous face of Caesar.

Will this Galilean advocate the paying of taxes or not? The last revolutionary, Judas the Galilean, taught that "loyal Jews should not pay taxes to Caesar, since they have no master, no *despotes*, but YHWH, himself."³ What will Jesus say? If he instructs them to pay the poll tax, the Pharisees will say he supports idolatrous Rome and use his answer to undermine his popularity with

the crowd. If, on the other hand, he tells them not to pay the tax, the Herodians will accuse him of insurrection against Rome. Let the master speak.

B. Direct Exposure (12:15b-17)

But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." And they brought one. And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they said to Him, "Caesar's." And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were amazed at Him.

Before Jesus dignifies their question with an answer he exposes their evil motives and hypocrisy. Then he seizes the initiative by asking them to produce the coin in question that he might see it. His request accomplishes two things. It renders false their insinuation that he is "so pious that he never gazes at facial images stamped on Roman coins,"⁴ and it forces them to play their hand first. The very act of possessing the coin demonstrates their own hypocrisy!

Once the idolatrous coin is in hand, Jesus asks them to identify the likeness and inscription it bears. When they say that it is Caesar's, Jesus responds with the famous aphorism:

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

"On the surface it seems Jesus has made a neat division of loyalties: state and church."⁵ But in their historical context the implications of his response are much more subtle and powerful. When the Jews heard the phrase, "Give back to Caesar what is his due," they thought of revolution, of taking up arms and repaying the gentiles for their oppression. That was the Pharisaic way, invoked every Hanukkah in celebration of the Maccabean heroes who successfully fought against pagan enemies, cleansed the temple and refortified Jerusalem. So the battle cry became, "Pay back the Gentiles in full!"⁶ But here Jesus subverts that idea. He says that paying taxes to an idolatrous government is inconsequential to the kingdom of God; so send those idolatrous coins back from whence they came. What is of consequence is giving God the things that rightly belong to him. As Wright explains, he is evoking "the call to worship the one true God echoed in psalm and prophecy":⁶

**Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
Give to the LORD glory and strength.
Give to the LORD the glory of His name;
Bring an offering and come into His courts.
Worship the LORD in holy attire;
Tremble before Him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."
(Psa 96:7-10; cf. 29:1-2)**

Give to God and God alone the honor that he deserves, not that which Caesar blasphemously claims. At this moment in history, Jesus' words would clearly im-

ply giving honor to God's Son and to the "way" he will reign over the nations. Ironically, both groups, Pharisees and Herodians, were blind to their own affirmation, "You teach *the way of God in truth*." While renouncing pagan idolatry, the Pharisees had actually adopted the pagan way of coercion and violence to introduce the kingdom. In Jesus' eyes they were as guilty of idolatry as the Herodians, who compromised with Rome in order to become rich and powerful.

Should they pay taxes or revolt? The real revolution would not come about by the non-payment of taxes and bloody revolt. It would come through Jesus' dying for the whole world. How ironic that the first person in the gospel of Mark to comprehend this was not a religious Jew but a pagan Roman centurion (Mk 15:39). Jesus did not defeat Rome by warring against her but by dying for her. Suffering to embrace others remains the most revolutionary force on earth.

C. A Political Balance

What a wonderful balance this is. It gives Christians the freedom to be in but not of the world; to use all things that belong in the world but not be used by them. The danger comes not in using the things of the world (like computers, credit cards, and e-mail), but in worshiping those things to gain status, wealth, control or comfort rather than using them for the salvation of others. We can know the difference by how we respond when Caesar calls his idols home. If we are giving God our affections then we can let go of what is Caesar's, knowing that it is inconsequential to the kingdom. Where idolatry is rampant, as it is in the valley in which we live, that might involve letting go of a promotion or the promise of wealth, or even suffering betrayal. Give back to Caesar that which belongs to him, but don't give him the devotion that God alone deserves. Let go of all idols and give your devotion to God.

When we are dealing with evil, however, it is tempting to take the approach of the Pharisees—isolating ourselves from the world in a posture of non-involvement and attacking evil, seeking to overpower it with the methods of the world. This was the way of the so-called "religious right" of recent years. They were correct in the values they affirmed but wrong in the methods they employed. Instead of winning the world to Christ they dulled their swords of love, which are capable of cutting through the hardest of hearts. Let us never forget that the way of the truth is the way of the cross. Jesus is adamant that this sword remain sharp.

II. Rationalists and the Resurrection (12:18-27)

A. Placing Moses against Jesus (12:18-23)

And some Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection) came to Him, and began questioning Him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, and leaves behind a wife, and leaves no child, his brother should take the wife, and raise up offspring to his brother. There were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died,

leaving no offspring. And the second one took her, and died, leaving behind no offspring; and the third likewise; and so all seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also. In the resurrection, when they rise again, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife."

With the failure of the Pharisees and the Herodians to label Jesus in their own terms, the Sadducees now arrive on the scene.

The Sadducees were the aristocratic party, made up of the high priestly and leading lay families of Jerusalem. They were wealthy and worldly. Their arrogance and their harshness in the administration of justice were notorious. Conservative in doctrine, they rejected what they regarded as pharisaic innovations; but their main concern was for the maintenance of their privileges, not for doctrinal purity.⁸

Mark records that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (cf. Acts 23:6-8), and probably regarded only the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses) as authoritative. The spark for this second debate arose from the fact that Jesus had just predicted his own death, in the vineyard parable, saying that afterwards he would become the foundation stone for a new temple. The thought of a new temple built around the risen Christ shattered every vestige of the Sadducees' good reason. So, armed with the teaching of Moses, they now seek to make Jesus' teaching look ridiculous. They build their hypothetical case around the word "resurrection" (verses 18, 19, 23), which Moses used to describe levirate marriage, in Deut 25:5. If a man died without seed in Israel, his brother was under obligation to "raise up" seed for him so that his name would continue in the land. The Sadducees reasoned that this was the real meaning of resurrection. But, if Jesus' position were true, and this woman survived the deaths of seven husbands, then, because of Moses' law, in the resurrection she would have seven husbands all at the same time. This "would make shambles of the Mosaic Law...A man might practice polygamy, but a woman? In the resurrection? Out of the question!"⁹ Now that they have pushed the ridiculous to the absurd, the Sadducees rest their case.

B. Blind to Moses and to God (12:24-27)

Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures, or 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. But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning 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 the God of the dead, but of the living; you are greatly mistaken."

Wasting no time with polite niceties, Jesus comes right out and calls a spade a spade. If the Sadducees

built their case around the word "resurrection," Jesus frames his case around the word "deceived": "You are deceived"... "You are greatly deceived" (12:24, 27). Their failure to understand the doctrine of the resurrection was due to their lack of insight regarding their own law. If they truly read the Scriptures they would see the power of God demonstrated everywhere. It was a power that brought life out of Abraham's dead body, raised the needy out of the ash heap, summoned Israel out of Egypt, and was able to change the very conditions of life itself. Even their own prayers known as the *gevurot*, "powers," declare of God, "You quicken the dead with great mercy...and keep your faith to them that sleep in the dust."¹⁰ So, says Jesus, we must not attempt to project our narrow categories of life into the resurrection. It's a brand new world! When the dead are raised, they are spiritual beings, like the angels (of course, the Sadducees didn't believe in angels, either), and there is no marriage. In essence, we shall all be the bride of Christ. So instead of one woman with seven husbands, there is actually one Husband and one bride drawn from all the nations.

And regarding the fact of the resurrection,¹¹ Jesus chides the Sadducees for not treating Moses seriously enough to grasp the implications of what he wrote. In Moses' very first encounter with God, God addressed him with the title, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God Jacob" (Exod 3:6). How could God give himself such a name if he was the God of men no longer living? And how absurd, to say that God was fulfilling his covenantal promises to these men but they would never come to life to see it. This same attitude often prevails among Christians at funerals. Grief-stricken relatives speak as if deceased believers were not alive to see what God had done on their behalf. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are alive and one day they will meet all their spiritual seed, believers from every nation, you and me, face to face.

C. Modern Day Rationalists

Most of us feel free from the temptation to rationalism that plagued the Sadducees. Doesn't everyone believe in the resurrection? you ask. Yes and no. As evangelicals, we see ourselves as individuals raised from the dead at the end of the age but, like the Sadducees, we project the categories of our world into that age. And now that Christ has been raised we also diminish the glory of what God is doing in this age. We read the promises made by the prophets to Israel and with a rationalistic lens reconstruct them with a literalism that denies the death and resurrection of Jesus, not to mention the transcendent new dimensions of his new temple. No matter what your view of eschatology is you must view every prophetic promise through the lens of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? Do we read our Scriptures and believe in the power of God that the conditions of all of life itself are changed? If we do, then our identity in this life will not come from our human

relationships but from being the bride of Christ.

This has tremendous implications. It means that there is something much deeper than our sexuality. Despite what Hollywood would have us think, sexuality cannot be the driving focus of life. It isn't large enough. Because we are made in God's image, sexuality must be transcended by something much larger, something the Bible calls worship. Just as Moses wrote that there was a higher love than "romantic love" in marriage, a "loyal-love" that transcended romance to provide offspring for a dead brother, so now there is a higher love that transcends all human relationships. That love is found in being the bride of Christ. Sex pales in comparison to this kind of love.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? If we do, we will not regard singleness as a second class estate but as a sacred calling that is higher than marriage. Single people are already living out their total devotion to Christ as his bride. We regard widows in the same light, as women we should feel privileged to learn from. And if we really believe in the resurrection we will regard in a different light couples who cannot have children. We will see their tears of barrenness as painful, yes, but also as the holy gateway to fertility, for, as Isaiah predicted, the "sons of the barren and desolate shall be more numerous than the sons of the married woman" (Is 54:1). And we will rejoice in anticipation that through their pain, many, many spiritual children, too numerous to count, will be born, so that every ounce of the pain is exponentially increasing the capacity for joy.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? There is much I could say, but let me end with this. The resurrection re-frames our life both while we are here on earth and after we die. Those of you who have lost precious loved ones know that their death makes heaven more precious. While you live in the ache of reunion, you can almost hear them singing in the wind, as a holy oboe playing in the air. The resurrection shapes our life. Then, after we die, it's hardly over. God is going to continue to do countless things to love us, things we could not begin to comprehend in our lifetime. And when it's done, he will introduce us to all of these gifts by name, each as precious as a firstborn.

Imagine C.S. Lewis in the resurrection. Lewis never thought he would find joy in life but was surprised by an "inconsolable stab of Joy" In his old age he was given a tremor of bliss in marriage, a happiness that collapsed in sorrow with the loss of his wife. His was an inconsolable grief from which he never recovered. Lewis never sought the spotlight and never had children. However, he wrote children's stories as a distraction during wartime, tales that found their way into millions of child-like hearts. Can you imagine the scene at the wedding of Lamb, when his eyes open to see his Joy, and then the door to the wardrobe will swing open and

his countless children of every race come singing into Narnia?

III. Re-Righting our Revolution

Jesus came to inaugurate a kingdom that was radical and revolutionary, and he is determined that it will not fall into the hands of opportunists to pervert it or use it to fit their own agendas. Every perversion takes away the radical edge of what he came to do, reducing it to finite human categories. To make sure that doesn't happen, as readers we are allowed to feel the weight of this controversial confrontation, with Jesus righting the revolution before his climactic passion. The corrections once written stand to rebuke us in every age when we are gripped by the same temptation.

As for this story, each group missed major things. The Herodians and the Pharisees both were blind to the "way of God," the cross; the Sadducees were blind to the vindication of God's promises in the resurrection. All were held captive by a view of the kingdom that was static, or at best a reconstruction of the old. All were frozen in time and missed the dynamic of what God was doing in history. Worst of all, they missed God himself, and as a result missed out on being human. Do not make the same mistake. Keep the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the one thing, the main thing, the only thing.

1. I have relied heavily on N.T. Wright's excellent discussion of "Tribute to Caesar" in his work, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 502-507.

2. Robert Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 693.

3. Wright, 502.

4. Gundry, 694.

5. Wright, 503.

6. Wright, 504, gives a marvelous quote filling in the background:

"As the old revolutionary Mattathias was preparing to die, he made a speech to his sons, exhorting them to zeal for the law, and invoking the zealous heroes of old. The speech ends as follows:

'Judas Maccabaeus has been a mighty warrior from his youth; he shall command the army for you and fight the battle against the peoples. You shall rally around you all who observe the law, and avenge the wrong done to your people. Pay back the Gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law.'

With that, Mattathias died. The sequel, as we have seen, is that Judas took command, led the revolt, fought the battle, defeated the pagan army, cleansed and restored the Temple, reformed Jerusalem – and established a royal dynasty that lasted for a hundred years."

7. Wright, 505.

8. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark*. Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge UP, 1959) 373.

9. Gundry, 702.

10. Cranfield, 374.

11. Other texts which give a clear reference to the resurrection in the Old Testament are Dan 12:1-2; Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:1-14; Job 19:25-27; Prov 12:28.

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