

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 18/3/'18) **THE TEACHER IN JERUSALEM** (Mark 12:13-37)

Introduction Have you ever been asked a difficult question? I was asked a few during my years as a College lecturer. In today's passage Jesus is asked three questions, the first two of which are intentionally difficult. Jesus not only answers all three questions well – he also makes every question, including the two which are intended to catch him out, the opportunity for valuable teaching, teaching which focuses his hearers' attention on God. Then at the end of the passage Jesus himself asks a question, a question which silences his opponents and delights the crowd.

Honour Caesar and Honour God (12:13-17) This first question asked by Jesus' opponents is not only difficult but calculated to provoke strong feelings. Clearly they are attempting to trap Jesus. If he endorses the payment of taxes to the Romans, he will anger the great majority of the Jewish people, who deeply resent these taxes. If he opposes payment, he will be guilty of sedition, of advocating rebellion against Rome. Jesus' answer is clever, but much more than clever. By calling for a Roman coin he pointedly reveals that his questioners use the coinage of Rome, and so are not in a position to withhold taxes paid in this currency. And his pronouncement expresses his acceptance of payment of taxes to Rome in a form which is very hard for a pious Jew to criticise. **Read 12:17a.** But Jesus has done much more than avoid their trap. He has made an enduring statement of principle which has been useful to his followers down through the centuries. We owe a debt to human government, but this debt stands under a greater one. Our obligation to honour God comes first.

The God of the Living (12:18-27) The Sadducees were a priestly group who, unlike the Pharisees, gave highest authority only to the five books of Moses (the first five books of our Bible) and did not believe in any personal life after death. They ask a question, based on the teaching of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, which is designed to demonstrate the absurdity of belief in resurrection, and thus discredit Jesus as a teacher, along with the Pharisees. Moses' teaching made provision for situations where a married man died without children. He required that a brother of this man take the widow as his wife, and that the first son of this marriage carry on the name of the dead brother. Moses thus made provision for the preservation of the name and inheritance of the dead man, and at the same time for the welfare of the widow. They pose hypothetically an extreme case of such marriage (seven times over) in order to underline what they see as the inconsistency of belief in resurrection with the teaching of Moses. Again Jesus answers effectively,

and again does more than merely refute his questioners. He appeals to one of the books of Moses (Exodus 3:6) to show that personal life beyond death is not inconsistent with the Scripture which they revere, and thus wins the theological debate. But he does more than this – he teaches two important truths of lasting relevance. **Read 12:24-27.** The first truth is about the nature of life after death. He teaches that it is not just like this life, particularly in not being subject to death and requiring reproduction for continuing human existence. In the resurrection life, Jesus says, we will be “**like** the angels in heaven” (not that we will **be** angels). We will not be subject to death and hence we will not require the sort of marriage which the Sadducees have been talking about. The resurrection life, to borrow Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 15, will be glorious and imperishable. The second truth is about God. God is an eternal God and an eternally faithful God. His faithfulness to those who trust him is not brought to an end by death, but continues unbroken into the resurrection life beyond death. This teaching is of enduring value to all those who put their trust in God. And for us it is confirmed by Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead.

Love the Lord Your God (12:28-34) The third question addressed to Jesus is big and important rather than difficult, and seems to be a genuine question rather than a trap. It seems genuine because the teacher of the law who asks it both commends Jesus for his answer and is in turn commended himself by Jesus. Mark tells us that he notices Jesus’ good answer to the Sadducees, so he is probably motivated by wanting to hear this good teacher’s answer to a fundamental theological question. He asks Jesus what is the greatest of all God’s commandments. Jesus’ answer is not surprising, and “clever” is not the most appropriate adjective to apply to it. But it is certainly a good answer, and an answer of enduring helpfulness. Although asked for one commandment, Jesus nominates two closely related commandments. **Read 12:29-31.** Jesus takes his first commandment from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. We are to love God with our whole being. His second comes from Leviticus 19:18. We are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. By insisting on including the second commandment, Jesus implies what the First Letter of John makes explicit: we can’t truly keep the first commandment without keeping the second. The Christian life must begin with God’s love rather than ours; it must begin with our receiving God’s free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. But when we follow Jesus, we must follow him by seeking to keep these twin commandments.

Jesus is Lord (12:35-37) Now Jesus asks a question, so this is his own choice of subject matter, and we can be confident that he considers this to be highly important. **Read 12:35-37a.** Jesus here takes up an important Messianic title and a Psalm generally recognised as a Messianic

Psalm. He uses the Psalm to query the adequacy of the title "Son of David" for the Messiah, and hence for himself. It is not that Jesus *isn't* the Son of David: he is a descendant of David, and the one who fulfils the Jewish hope of a great king from the line of David. He has just entered Jerusalem in a manner which expresses his claim to be that Messiah King. But the title is inadequate if it is understood to imply that the Messiah is lesser than his ancestor David, or even only the equal of David. Jesus quotes Psalm 110, a psalm of David, to show that David spoke when prompted by the Holy Spirit of the Messiah as "my Lord". So he implicitly recognised the Messiah as greater than himself, as his "Lord". And if Jesus as Messiah is greater than the great King David, he is greater than every mere human being. If he is David's "Lord", he has the right to be hailed as "Lord" by every human being. This neatly completes our reflection on Jesus as Teacher, in two complementary ways. Jesus' choice of this topic conveys that it is of fundamental importance. It is not enough to recognise Jesus as a great teacher - it is necessary to confess him as Lord.