

MARK 12

Mark 12:1–12. The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 626–642.

Although we are in a new chapter, Jesus is still in the temple speaking to the authorities. This context is important to the parable He is about to share. In Old Testament imagery, Israel is often symbolized by a vineyard (see especially Isaiah 5:1–7), and the other amenities mentioned are necessary for the vineyard’s operation and protection. In some Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 5, the hedge, or fence, is the law and the tower represents the temple. “Husbandmen” (Greek *geōrgos*) is no longer a part of our English vocabulary; it refers to tenant farmers tasked to supervise the work on the land in return for a share of its yield. It is almost unanimously agreed upon that this refers to the religious leaders of Jesus’s day. The implication is that they have failed to live up to their agreement with the vineyard’s owner (God), upon which agreement their once-legitimate authority rested.

The servants, then, are the prophets whom God sent to establish His authority and direct the work in His vineyard. The Old Testament is replete with examples of prophets who were rejected, mistreated, and killed—often by the religious authorities who should have supported them. While continually sending servants despite their repeated rejection may not seem wise, the emphasis is on God’s patience and mercy. The word “wellbeloved” (Greek, *agapētos*) is used only three times in Mark: twice by a voice from heaven describing Jesus (1:11 and 9:7) and once here, making it clear that the son is Jesus. Recognizing that the son is the greatest challenge to their authority, the tenants decide to eliminate him. The only recourse left to the owner is to violently wrest possession of the vineyard away from the rebellious tenants. The process will begin anew, with new tenants and with a foundation in Jesus Christ. We can, perhaps, read

this revolution as the close of one gospel dispensation and the opening of another. Unlike with many of Jesus's previous parables, the implication of this one is clear to its audience. Though angry, they still do not dare arrest Jesus in the open for fear of the public outcry.

Mark 12:13–17. Trick Question about Taxes

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 642–649.

Unable to take Jesus by force, the Jerusalem authorities resort to a series of trick questions designed to either entangle Jesus in legal trouble or damage His popularity with the masses by embarrassing Him. None will succeed. In verse 14, Jesus's interlocutors preface their question with some flattery, perhaps to goad Jesus into an overconfident and brazen answer. Their remark that He "care[s] for no man" does not mean that Jesus is callous or careless—this is manifestly untrue—but that He is unfazed by others' opinion of Him.

The issue at hand is not the legality of taxes under Roman law (obviously, Roman law permitted Roman taxes) but the legality of paying taxes to a pagan authority under the law of Moses. To answer yes would make Jesus look like a Roman collaborator; to say no would make Him appear to be a revolutionary. It does not matter that the questioners do not have a satisfactory answer to this same question; what is important is that they have forced Jesus to weigh in publicly.

The use of coins (or any other objects, for that matter) with images was a violation of the second commandment, but Roman taxes had to be paid with Roman coins. Despite this, it is not Jesus but rather His opponents who have one of these coins on hand—in the temple, no less. Jesus's answer strikes a profoundly reasonable tone: it is perfectly appropriate to "render" (Greek *apodidōmi*, literally "to give back") to Caesar the things that belong to him, but Caesar has no right to demand the things that belong to God. There is no conflict because God does not demand the same things of humanity that Caesar does. Jesus does not specify what these things may be, leading His audience to consider what they owe to each authority. Each side of the argument (represented by the Pharisees and the Herodians, who would answer no and yes to the question, respectively) is satisfied or at least has no grounds for complaint. Jesus has escaped the political trap.

Mark 12:18–27. Trick Question about Marriage and the Resurrection

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 650–655.

After the failure of the Jerusalem authorities, a group of Sadducees next tries to trap or humiliate Jesus. Unlike most of the Jewish sects at the time, the Sadducees rejected the concept of an afterlife, so we can

be sure that their question is not sincere. It is rhetorical—not seeking an answer as much as demonstrating that the concept of a resurrection is untenable. Their question centers around the practice of levirate marriage, in which a man was required to marry his brother’s widow if she were childless (both for financial support and for perpetuating the family line). The scenario concocted by the Sadducees is patently absurd, but the overstatement brings out their point: how can issues that are messy and complicated be resolved in the Resurrection? The answer implied by the Sadducees, of course, is that they cannot.

Recognizing that their question is not really about marriage, Jesus mostly sidesteps that topic. What He does say about marriage indicates that the necessity for levirate marriage is a result of the Fall and will thus be done away with in the afterlife. In addition, marriages must be contracted in this world, not the one to come. Instead, He points to Exodus, observing that God refers to Himself as the God of the patriarchs, indicating that the patriarchs still exist, though they died long ago. The Sadducees “greatly err” by denying the possibility of the Resurrection, inhibiting their ability to even consider the potential of God’s power.

Mark 12:28–34. Question about the Greatest Commandment

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 656–660.

Unlike the previous two questions, this next question does not seem to be insincere, contrived, or exaggerated. Though picking one commandment as being the most important out of the 613 identified in the Torah must have seemed daunting, Jesus does not hesitate. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4–5, a very familiar scripture (though He adds “all thy mind,” which is not original to the Deuteronomy text), and Leviticus 19:18. Though the scribe only asked for one commandment, Jesus offers two, suggesting that love of God and love of neighbor cannot be realized except in conjunction with one another. The idea that these two are intimately connected is strengthened by the fact that Jesus refers to the two singly as a “commandment” in verse 31.

The scribe is impressed by Jesus’s answer and concurs. He expounds a bit on Jesus’s own statement, paraphrasing Hosea 6:6 in doing so. This exposition demonstrates that he has not just listened to what Jesus has said but has internalized it and given it some thought. Probably for this reason, Jesus affirms that he has approached the kingdom of God. Unlike the previous confrontations, in which the Pharisees and Herodians “marvelled” but left in silence and the Sadducees simply disappeared from the picture, this scribe’s sincerity results in a genuine, positive interaction with Jesus.

Mark 12:35–37. Jesus’s Question about the Son of David

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 660–663.

Since Jesus’s profound answers have silenced any other potential interlocutors, He now takes the opportunity to pose His own question. We should not necessarily assume based on His question that the scribes’ position is wrong—remember, Jesus has just had a decidedly positive interaction with a scribe. He quotes Psalm 110 to demonstrate that even though some refer to the Messiah as the “Son of David,” David is subordinate to Him and calls Him “my Lord.” Given that Jesus never refers to Himself as “the Son of David” in the Gospel of Mark, some interpreters have taken this comment to mean that Jesus is rejecting that title. However, it is more likely that Jesus is demonstrating that the relationship between David and the Messiah is more complex than some have imagined and, by extension, that many of the expectations associated with the Messiah are not accurate. Jesus will be a messiah that does not often live up to His contemporaries’ messianic expectations.

Mark 12:38–44. Warning about Hypocrisy; the Widow’s Mite (12:38–44)

The following is adapted from Julie M. Smith, The Gospel according to Mark (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019), 663–669.

Given the positive interaction with the scribe in Mark 12:28–34, we should take Jesus’s words here as a condemnation not of all scribes but rather of those who engage in the behavior that Jesus describes in this section. The main criticism Jesus expresses is that of using religious standing to buy social or financial status. Because the law of Moses shows particular concern for care of widows, Jesus offers widows as an example of those hurt by such practices. This also serves as a convenient segue for the final episode of the chapter.

The very existence of a poor widow demonstrates that the leaders have not been keeping the law of Moses. The offering she gives is a free-will offering—done out of generosity—but the coins she has offered are the smallest monetary unit that exists. Yet Jesus recognizes that her sacrifice has been tremendous, and His remark that she “hath cast more in than all” should teach us something about the nature of sacrifice: what matters is not the amount, for that differs greatly among individuals, but rather what it requires of the giver.

Credits

Authors: Jackson Abhau, John Thompson

New Testament Insights Series Editor: John W. Welch

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editors: Sam Lofgran, Verlanne Johnson

Content Manager: Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye

Source: *New Testament Insights: Mark*, by Jackson Abhau and John Thompson