

THE KING'S WISDOM

Mark 12:13-44

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The “Troll at the Bridge” is a classic plot device. The hero has to cross a bridge, but a troll or gatekeeper blocks the way, saying, “Answer me these questions three, ere the other side you see.” The troll isn’t hungry for knowledge. Rather, he’s hungry for breakfast. But fortunately for the hero, the troll always has this terrible habit of playing with his food. So the hero—be it the Billy Goats Gruff, or Bilbo Baggins, or King Arthur—plays for his life.

Mark 12:13-44 is a twist on this familiar motif. Jesus is the hero. Instead of meeting one troll with three riddles, he meets three successive parties, each riddling him on that which they hold most dear. Not only does Jesus outwit them, but he also turns the tables on them, showing them that his Kingdom is far better than their petty idols.

What makes Mark 12:13-44 so amazing is not that our hero outwits the trolls. (That’s what we expected him to do.) Rather, it’s the graciousness of our hero. Jesus knows and has been telling us all along that these people are going to kill him, whether he outwits them or not. Yet knowing what they’re about to do to him, Jesus still plays the hero by offering them—and us—a place in his kingdom.

Mark 12 is set within the Jerusalem Temple—a place Jesus previously condemned as a fruitless “den of robbers” rather than a “house of prayer for all nations.”¹ He shut the place down, foretold its total destruction, and then declared himself the cornerstone of a new, living way to God for all people, everywhere, forevermore.² So the Sanhedrin—the religious leadership council comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes—were furious. They sent three delegations, one from each of these groups, each with a different question, in order to eat Jesus for breakfast. Let’s take a closer look.

THE PHARISEES & HERODIANS: WHAT COULD BE MORE IMPORTANT THAN SUPPORTING OUR CAUSE?

The first group to approach Jesus (in v13) were the unlikely allies of the Pharisees and the Herodians. Neither group was in power in Jerusalem, and both were hungry to unite the nation under their respective causes. The Pharisees were advocates of a strict Jewish nationalism unified

¹ Mark 11:17.

² Mark 12:10.

around their oral tradition, and the exclusion of Gentiles from the land.³ The Herodians were loyalists to the Dynasty of Herod the Great. They campaigned for Jewish national unity under Herod's descendants. These two parties probably held divergent views on many things, but they agreed that asking Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar was a good way to force his hand.

They tried flattery as they approached Jesus, but Jesus saw right through their hypocrisy (12:15). He knew that it was a trap, because if he came out in opposition to taxes, he could be arrested for treason against the empire, but if he came out in favor of taxes, then it would show that he didn't support their causes for Jewish nationalism. It was a brilliant question putting him in an impossible bind, a lose-lose situation.

Jesus never flinched. He asked, *"Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."* (12:15).

So they brought him one, and then he held it up and asked: *"Whose icon and epigraph is this?"*

"Caesar's," they said.

Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (12:17)

Jesus' response is the first of three times that he turned the tables on the trolls. Each time he did it with a one-two punch, answering their question and then adding a postscript that sets a trap for them. In this case, the question was whether or not to pay taxes to Caesar, and Jesus answered it by saying "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." Then he added: "P.S. Render unto God the things that are God's."

What's the point of Jesus' postscript? Well, if the coin bears Caesar's image, who bears God's image? Not just Jews, but all people. So Jesus set a trap for the Pharisees and Herodians, upping the ante from a few coins each year, to the entire human race.

These men, all advocates of Jewish nationalism, were standing in God's House, the house of prayer for all nations that had degenerated into a den of robbers. It had become the primary place where the Sanhedrin oppressed people made in the image of God. The Pharisees and the Herodians should have been clearing the way for all God's image bearers to come to him at the Temple, to be rendered unto God, just as the denarius was to be rendered unto Caesar.

As Shawn Honey likes to say, all people were made in God's image, but because of sin we're also like wax figures who have gotten too close to the sun, rendering us melted and gnarly. Jesus, however, was free of sin, and was a perfect image of God.

These gnarly, melted images, stood before God's perfect image, and asked, "What could be more important than supporting our cause?" If they could have seen the perfection of the one standing before them, then the answer would have been obvious to them. They would have offered

³ We wrongly think of Pharisees as biblical fundamentalists, when they were actually much more progressive, with an evolving set of oral cultural regulations based on but superseding the Old Testament.

themselves to their maker through Jesus, trusting God to repair all that had melted in them. And then they would have joined Jesus in opening the doors of God's House to all people, so that the whole world might be restored to him.

Here on Capitol Hill, it's hard for us to imagine a backwards world like this in which people made idols out of political parties. How sad to live in a society divided by political factions for whom nothing could be more important than supporting their causes.

It can happen to any of us. Imagine a person you loathe. Maybe it's a political figure, some cartoon caricature created by Fox News or MSNBC. Or maybe it's just an adversary at work, or a bully, or someone who has abused you or another loved one. What could be more important than seeing that person get melted, melted down to nothing under the blazing heat of justice?

How about full restoration? A complete overhaul, according to Jesus, the true standard of perfection.

What could be more important than supporting the political cause? Giving ourselves fully to God, and taking up his cause in the redemption of all people, all over the world. Even our worst enemies are image bearers, to be rendered unto God. He may yet redeem them, as he promises to do with us, through Jesus his Son.

THE SADDUCEES: WHAT COULD BE MORE FOOLISH THAN NONCONFORMITY?

The second trolls to approach Jesus (12:18) were the Sadducees, who maintained control over the Sanhedrin. The Sadducees were an aristocracy associated with the priesthood, and they were thorough-going materialists. They were determined to remain in power by preserving inheritance traditions that they derived from the first five books of the Old Testament, the only part they considered authoritative. They didn't believe in angels, demons, the sovereignty of God, or the resurrection. Only maintaining their positions of power and influence.

Imagine the Sadducees snickering as they put their crazy question about the woman with seven husbands to Jesus. The question assumed the ancient practice of Levirate marriage, which sounds grotesque to us today, but was originally intended as a way for families to provide for widows who were unable to provide for themselves. When a man died, leaving his widow without an heir, his surviving next of kin was supposed to marry the widow and provide for her as her husband should have. The Sadducees weren't fans of the practice, because it threatened how they retained political power by passing it down from father to son.

Just as Communist China has always seen allegiance to King Jesus as a political threat, the Sadducees hated Jesus for the same reasons. They came to make him look foolish, and also to humiliate his sympathizers.

Thus, Jesus' encounter with the Sadducees was simply the same song, second verse of the Troll at the Bridge. The Sadducees weren't really humble seekers after truth, coming to learn from Jesus about marriage in the afterlife. No, they intended to eat Jesus for breakfast. So they came to

humiliate him by asking, in effect, "What could be more foolish than nonconformity?" Imagine their surprise when Jesus responded with a one-two punch, turning the tables and upping the ante once again.

First, Jesus embarrassed them by poking fun at their materialism. The Sadducees had made a straw man out of the resurrection, by supposing that people would rise from the dead and then get right on with their lives, without missing a beat. How absurd, they thought. But Jesus set them straight by describing the afterlife as an altogether different future, v 25, sort of like what angels experience in heaven. For Jesus, heaven isn't the apartment upstairs where God lives with his angels. Rather, it's an overlapping and interlocking dimension in which God's reign is clearly visible. In the resurrection, heaven and earth will come together, God's reign will be evident for all to see, and there will no longer be any need for marriage. It won't be needed as a sign pointing to Christ's love for the church, since the thing signified will be fully visible. And it won't be needed for the sake of multiplication and dominion, because then all the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas. According to Jesus, the resurrection wouldn't be the same old, same old, but rather a full-on reversal of humanity's fall into sin, and the fulfillment of all God's promises to the Patriarchs in the kingdom come.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He wasn't going to leave this at the theoretical level, as just a theological debate. He upped the ante by taking them to a passage from Exodus, from the part of the Bible that the Sadducees regarded as Scripture, and undoubtedly would have known by heart. Imagine their surprise as a Galilean peasant began to teach them, the priestly aristocracy, about the beginning of their story in Exodus 3. It would have been like a small town, fifth grade civics teacher coming to the Supreme Court and lecturing them on the Constitution. And here's what Jesus said:

"And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the 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 God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong." Mark 12:26-27 ESV

In other words, Jesus showed that what the Sadducees knew best they didn't really know at all. For how could the Sadducees claim to be the true guardians of Genesis and Exodus if they believed that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were all dead? If they were all dead, then of course all of God's promises to them were long ago rendered null and void. Then the very existence of the priesthood and the legitimacy of the Sadducees would have been eroded. But if Jesus was right, then the patriarchs remain alive, and God's promises to them are still in effect.

The Sadducees had become proficient at controlling people by ridiculing alternative thinking. Their main message was one of materialism—that this life is all we've got, and we ought to live it up while we can. But Jesus upended them with their own Scriptures, showing them that they were hurtling towards the future they loved to ridicule, a future for which they were completely unprepared. They were living it up, expecting that the owner of the vineyard would never return, when in fact he was standing before them. The Sadducees may have been people of the book, but they didn't believe in a living God, especially one to whom they would one day have to give an account.

Again, it's hard for us to imagine a world like this in which people are shamed into conformity, particularly because of materialism. But there may still be pockets of it today, even here in our church. So it's worth considering how your own beliefs may be cramped and constrained by materialist thought police. Think of where you feel like you're at a dead end, where there's no answer and no hope. How has this happened? Have you been shamed into hopelessness for healing, or reconciliation, or love, or children, or meaningful work? We weren't born with a materialist view of the world, in which the whole thing runs like a great big machine, and there is no possibility of supernatural intervention. So how then did that view take hold of our hearts and minds?

The Sadducees asked, "What could be more foolish than nonconformity?" Jesus answered with a picture of the hopeless, bleak future that comes of conformity around hardened unbelief. Then he dismissed them with a sober warning in v27: "You are quite wrong." Easter is proof of it. Just wait and see.

THE SCRIBES: WHAT COULD BE BETTER THAN THE LOVE OF THE CROWD?

Only one troll remained at the bridge, and this time, beginning in v. 28, it was a scribe. The scribes were regarded as experts on the 613 laws found in Genesis-Deuteronomy. From time to time they debated which of these laws was most important, as this scribe did when he came to Jesus in v 28, asking: "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

Jesus quickly responded with a one-two punch, or to be more precise, the most important commandment, and the second most important commandment. First, love God with all you've got. Then love your neighbor as yourself. Again, it was the postscript that set the trap for the scribes.

The scribe responded in vv 32-33 by affirming and congratulating Jesus for answering well. After the embarrassing results of the trolls' first two questions, this was a smart move on the part of the scribe. He said that love of God and neighbor were more important than all the altar sacrifices people could make there at the temple. Jesus responded in v 34 saying, "You're not far from the kingdom of God." What? Why not fully in? Because for all his knowledge of the law, the scribe still didn't recognize who it was who was standing before him. This was no mere teacher talking to him. It was Jesus, who was about to become the final temple sacrifice, on behalf of all the lawbreakers the world has ever known. And if the scribe were to enter the Kingdom of God, he would have to trade places with Jesus, from judge to defendant seeking the mercy of the Lord.

By the end of v 34, Mark says that the trolls were defeated: "After that no one dared to ask him any more questions." So in v. 35, Jesus went on the offensive, asking his own question to them: How can scribes say that the Messiah is the Son of David, when in Psalm 110, David called the Messiah "My Lord"?

The answer to this question is one of the central themes of Mark's Gospel. It's why Jesus continually shushed people who identified him as the Messiah—because they didn't understand what it meant. The answer to Jesus' question is that the Messiah is more than just a son, or

a son, or descendant, of King David. Much more. He's also the Son of God.

Why did Jesus choose to make this point with regard to the scribes? Because as with the previous two questions, Jesus knew the scribes' idol too. He knew that they didn't honor the Lord with their knowledge of the Law, but instead used it as a means to an end, namely, their own honor. Listen to what Jesus had to say about them in vv 38-40:

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” Mark 12:38-40 ESV

Unlike the Sadducees, the scribes were not a wealthy class. But they sure wanted to live like them. They wanted seats of honor and fancy robes. So they had to keep the people happy, had to keep the masses in awe of their knowledge, so as to keep the money rolling in. They needed everyone to keep giving, so that they could continue to purchase long robes, and say long prayers, and thus remain faithful to the greatest commandment of loving God. But clearly what they loved more than God was the love of the crowd.

Case in point: the widow devoured by the scribes in 12:41. Many rich people came and gave of their excess. But the widow gave from her need. Others gave what they could spare, but this widow spared nothing. All this in order to keep the lights on for a corrupt institution that Jesus had already condemned. What a shame!

Jesus upped the ante on the scribes by adding the love of neighbor as the second greatest commandment. In so doing, he launched a shot across the bow, warning them that they must not harm others in order to help themselves.

Again, what a crazy time that was, when people tried to retain political power through manipulation and people-pleasing. Can you imagine how destructive that would be to a government? But perhaps we're also guilty from time-to-time, whenever we harm others to help ourselves. Think: do you have any tense relationships right now, in which you're finding the only way to get on top is to put the other person down?

The scribes trampled their neighbors in order to show how much they loved God. What they really wanted was the love of the crowd, revealing in the end how much they actually loved themselves.

CONCLUSION

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes posed three different questions to Jesus, but they were really all the same, because they were all variations on selfishness. Whether you want to seize control or retain control, whether you're motivated by partisanship or people-pleasing, in the end the question you're asking is, “What could be better than love of me?”

Isn't this the question Mark has been putting to readers from the very beginning, when Jesus

called his first disciples in Mark 1 to “Come, follow me?” Isn’t Jesus’ call a challenge to take up a fundamentally different orientation, one in which the Lord comes first?

The disciples were noticeably absent throughout Mark 12, all the way until v. 43, when Jesus called them to himself and said:

“Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Mark 12:43-44 ESV

It was Jesus’ final public lesson before going to the cross. The poor widow here is like the virtuous housewife at the end of Proverbs, set forth as the model of wisdom after 31 chapters of instruction. Likewise, here at the end of Mark’s account of Jesus’ public ministry is the virtuous widow. She, best of all, exemplifies what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. For she gave “everything she had, all she had to live on.”⁴ This is a lesson about money, but also so much more. The call to “Come, follow me” is the call to give Jesus your whole life.

“What could be better than love of me?” Jesus’ answer is clear and consistent: love God. Loving him is better than loving yourself. Why? Because you can’t out-give God. Give him your whole life, and he’ll share with you his entire kingdom.

The Sanhedrin appear wise, but if they’re right, then it’s every man for himself. Get what you can, either by cheating on your taxes, or remaining in the country club, or by devouring widows’ households. But Jesus the King is truly wise. Give him your whole life, and he’ll share with you his entire kingdom.

⁴ Greek: she gave him her whole *bios*—her whole life.