

“Q & A”

Mark 12:13-44 *NRSV*

Fifth Week of Lent, March 17 & 18, 2024
New London UMC
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Questions. There are so many questions. And there are so many different reasons for asking questions. And so many different ways to ASK questions. . . . In our reading from the Gospel of Mark there is a whole series of questions being asked – so let’s look at them in order.

You should recall that on this day the questions at the temple actually started when Jesus walked in and the chief priests, scribes, and the elders confronted him and asked, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?” And Jesus responded by saying, “I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.” That evolved into Jesus telling a parable against them, which made them want to arrest him, but because they feared the Passover crowd, they left Jesus and went away.

But then they sent some Pharisees and some Herodians to try to trap Jesus into publicly saying something that could lead to his arrest. This was an interesting development because the Pharisees and Herodians typically did not agree on everything – but here they are united against Jesus. They begin with false flattery, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth.” They are implying that Jesus’ impartiality mirrors that of God. Thus Jesus will reject all standards except those that come from God. They appear to be hoping to force Jesus to demonstrate that he has no regard for the power represented by Caesar (*p. 673, NIB, Vol. VIII*) as they ask the questions, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?”

Jesus responds with his own question, “Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.” They do not answer Jesus’ question, but they do bring Jesus the coin he has asked for. The silver denarius from the imperial mint was the only coinage that could be used to pay the “poll tax” levied on every adult listed in the census by the Roman Empire. It featured the profile of the emperor on one side of the coin. Having coins with a “graven image” like this would have been considered sinful to the Jewish population. Their every day commerce would have been carried out with coins that bore no images. The fact that someone among the Pharisees and Herodians could readily produce a denarius here at the temple highlights their hypocrisy – because a coin with a graven image on it should not have been present at the temple. But here it is.

Jesus then asked them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” And Jesus then turned a volatile political question about paying taxes into a question of property rights: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to

God the things that are God's." This silver coin that bears the image of the emperor thus belongs to the emperor. But human beings bear the image of God and thus belong to God.

It's easy to imagine how the Herodians and Pharisees must have been left standing slack-jawed in amazement before Jesus. And then it was probably like playing "hot potato" trying to move that silver denarius away from Jesus, out of sight, and quite probably out of the temple. But the Sadducees step right in to the breach to ask a question pertaining to resurrection. This was odd topic for them to pursue with Jesus. Because if you had asked any of the Sadducees if there IS a resurrection, they would have said there is NO resurrection. The Sadducees were also basically the Jewish aristocrats who controlled the temple and the Sanhedrin with the backing of Roman benefactors. And people like the high priests Annas and Caiaphas were both Sadducees. . . . So why do they ask this long, convoluted question about the Levitical practice of a man marrying his brother's widow to produce an heir, that results in seven brothers marrying the same woman – with no heirs produced prior to their deaths? Do they really CARE about knowing, "In the resurrection whose wife will she be?" No, they just want to see if Jesus will agree with them that it is a scripturally unjustified innovation to believe that righteous humans would return to life when God's judgment establishes true justice (p. 675, *NIB*, Vol. VIII).

Jesus answered them with a question: "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?" He is strongly implying that anyone who doesn't believe in the resurrection denies the reality of God's power to give life (p. 676, *NIB*, Vol. VIII), and gives them a scriptural reference from Moses, that from the bush God said to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God used their names in the "present" tense. So Jesus said, "He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong." Well, there, that's Jesus telling the Sadducees that because God is God of the living, not the dead, there MUST be a resurrection – and if the Sadducees STILL say there is NO resurrection – they are QUITE WRONG. PERIOD. This is the equivalent of a first century mic drop at the temple.

No wonder it catches the attention of one of the scribes who was just cutting through the temple grounds. A scribe who appreciated and respected how well Jesus answered the Sadducees. The work of a scribe was to preserve scripture. To painstakingly, accurately copy and recopy each word of scripture, so that the Law of Moses could be taught and interpreted to the people. So is it any wonder that the scribe's question would be: "Which commandment is the first of all?" And how gratifying it must have been for him to hear Jesus respond, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." This was an answer that the scribe could truly respect, and he shows his respect to Jesus by repeating what Jesus said and elaborating on it by saying, "this is much more important than all whole burnt

offerings and sacrifices.” Granted, that might have sounded like a very strange thing to say at the temple – the literal center of whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. But what’s the point of making all those offerings and sacrifices without believing there is no other God; and loving the one Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; while also loving your neighbor as oneself? Jesus heard the wisdom of this scribe in his response. And out of respect, and with encouragement, Jesus told him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

And after that – no one else dared to ask Jesus any questions. So Jesus kicked into teaching mode and addressed what he felt still needed to be said. This was probably what Jesus had hoped to be able to do this day when he got to Jerusalem – but now he was *finally* able to get to it after seemingly every different leadership group involved in Jewish religious life had gotten a chance to ask a question. What a relief that the Q & A session was finally over! . . . Or was it? The day was not yet over – and Paul Harvey would be pleased to know that we’ll read more of “the rest of the story” next week.

Amen.