

Who's in Charge?

“By what authority” indeed! You could get the idea that the priests, teachers and elders thought that they owned the Temple and all that happened there. They were calling Jesus on the carpet. They were demanding some answers. They were so upset because Jesus had once again cast the money changer and animal sellers out of the Temple courtyard. More than that, he would not allow anyone with merchandise to come in.

Jesus did not owe them an answer. It was God's Temple not theirs. It was his will that mattered, not theirs. These leaders fell into a trap that too many leaders fall into. Because they were leaders, they thought that they owned what they were trying to lead. Anything that happened there had to go through them. Jesus refused to answer, asking them a question instead. “John's baptism – was it from heaven, or from men?” Brilliant! He exposed these leaders for what they truly were. Instead of just being truthful and saying what they thought about John, they discussed the political ramifications of their possible answers. If we say yes, then he will say ..., if we say no they will ...! Uggh! Why not just tell the truth? They finally answered with a non-committal, “We don't know.”

There are valuable truths about godly leaders that can be derived from today's reading. One is the need for leaders to see themselves as servants, not owners. Jesus bought the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28). Jesus is Lord, not any leader. The greatest leaders are the greatest servants. They don't direct the disciples to do something, they lead.

Second, it is important for leaders to always tell the truth. Politics should be a dirty word in the church. Truthful leaders can be trusted and imitated. When they tell truth they should tell it in a way that is redemptive and not harmful. Paul encouraged Christians to “speak the truth in love.” We don't have to be hateful or harsh, but we do have to tell the truth. Only then can we encourage one another to allow the Holy Spirit to remake our lives. We need bold leaders who are servants, not Lords; who are truth-tellers, not politicians; and who recognize who is standing right in front of them – Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

Questions:

1. Why were these leaders upset about the way Jesus cleansed the Temple?
2. What other event caused these leaders concern? What did they plan to do to stop Jesus' activity in Jerusalem?
3. In their view, who was the “authority” in the Temple?

An Important History Lesson

Do you like history? Lots of folks don't. History is so important for many reasons but it is especially important for the purpose of helping us not make the same mistakes over and over again. No one likes to hear that they are headed down the wrong path, but it is important to hear these words sometimes.

Jesus takes off the gloves in chapter 12. The parables Jesus taught the last week of his life were to the point. There was no misunderstanding what he was saying and to whom he was referring. God was the man who built the vineyard. The Jews were the farmers who sharecropped the land. The servants sent were all manner of prophets and teachers. The son was the Son. How the leaders must have squirmed when Jesus told how the Son would be killed. Were they so transparent in what they planned to do? It is almost as if Jesus heard their thoughts and the intentions of their hearts.

And then, in what must have been the most dramatic moment, he turned to them and said very clearly, "(The owner) will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." The rejected stone is the capstone. And it's a done deal! It has been accomplished!

What courage it must have taken for Jesus to confront these leaders, realizing that they were trying to find a way to crucify him. The leaders thought they were owners, not tenants. How dare Jesus reject their authority. How dare he expose them. Instead of rethinking what they had planned or taking to heart the direct rebuke from Jesus, they intensified their efforts to hush him up. Jesus' words did not penetrate their hard, hard hearts. They would have had him arrested on the spot but the crowds loved what they heard. They could see what Jesus saw and the leaders were afraid of some kind of revolt against them. They would have to bide their time and wait for the opportune moment to strike. This man must be silenced. He must be stopped. He must be silenced or they had to change. There is no middle ground.

We are tough on these leaders but we have ways of making Jesus be quiet today. We might ignore the Word, refusing to feed on it daily. We might stay away from those who try to live out the will of God. We might even try to act as though no real change is needed in our lives. The spirit of the leaders has not died.

Questions:

1. Why did Jesus continue to teach in parables, especially when the meaning of these parables is so obvious?
2. Do you think the crowd knew that Jesus was talking about the leaders in the parables he taught?
3. In what way is the Scripture true, "The Lord has done this?" Why not say, "The Lord will do this?"

Taxes and Truth

James warns us about the tongue in his short letter. He tells us that it is impossible to control and that it is a world of evil in our bodies. He tells us what we already know; the tongue too often gets us in trouble. The Pharisees knew this too so they sent some men to trap Jesus in his “words.” How many people do you know who always say the right thing at the right time? How many people do you know who are totally honest all the time? How many never shade the truth? How many who try not to be politically correct? How many are not swayed by other men? How many are not hypocritical?

Only Jesus. The reason that they expected Jesus to be a hypocrite is because they were hypocrites themselves. They were not above shading the truth or playing to the crowd if it suited their purposes. Can you imagine what it must have been like when they were trying to find the perfect question to trap him? I imagine that they thought of every angle and that they made sure the question was worded perfectly. This time they would get him. This time he would either lose the favor of the people or he would be arrested for crimes against the government. “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”

What a trap! If he said “no,” the guards would have rushed him and would have thrown him in jail. If he said “yes” then the crowd would have been in an uproar. Paying taxes was no more popular in Jesus’ day than it is now. In fact, the whole taxation system was so corrupt that no one ever expected it to be fair.

Jesus saw right through them. They feigned sincerity and they ladled on the fake compliments. They were hypocrites. They were not “real.” They only wanted to get rid of Jesus. He asked them point blank, “Why are you trying to trap me?” Good question. Could it be that their arguments are not strong enough to defeat Jesus or that their motives were ungodly? They must have been amazed when he turned the table on them and exposed them for what they were, insincere and ruthlessly jealous. They did not want to lose their place among the people. They had to get rid of Jesus, whatever the cost. In their minds the end justified the means.

Jesus asked for a coin. He held it up for all to see. Whose portrait is this? Caesar’s? Good, give it to Caesar then. If it belongs to him, give it to him. What is the problem? But give to God what belongs to him. The trappers were now trapped. They had no words to say in response. All they could do was to stand there amazed.

Questions:

1. Why was it so important for the Pharisees to catch Jesus “in his words?” Why didn’t they just turn him over to the Roman authorities for punishment and death?
2. How did Jesus’ remark, “Give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s” satisfy the crowd?
3. Name a few things that belong to God.

The God of the Living

How could anyone not believe in a hereafter -- maybe someone whose life is full of riches and blessings? There was a group of people in Jesus' day who actually believed that there is no resurrection from the dead. What is even more amazing is that most of these enlightened, wealthy people were from the Priestly families. Incredible. These folks were called Sadducees.

I'm sure that the Sadducees had often stumped their religious friends with the story they told Jesus about a woman who was married to a man with six brothers. Her husband died and left no children and so because of the levirate laws one of the brothers married her. He in turn died leaving no children and so the next brother married her and so the story goes until all six brothers died while married to this woman and none of them left a child. Far-fetched, isn't it? Don't you think the Sadducees must have been smug after they finished the story? Okay, "Rabbi," give it your best shot.

Jesus in effect responds, "Don't you guys know anything?" You are mistaken. You don't know the Scripture or the power of God or you would not ask those kinds of questions. The next thing Jesus said is difficult for us to understand. "When the dead rise, they will neither marry or be given in marriage." Is this primarily a statement about marriage in the hereafter? I don't think so. Remember the subject is levirate marriage. None of the brothers left an heir. Property could not be passed down to future generations. This is a serious matter in this world, but not in the next one.

I think what Jesus was saying is that the new heaven and new earth will be dominated by different things. What is so important in the fallen world will not be so important in a glorified world. What will it be like? No one living knows, but we do know that it will be different. We will be changed. We will have bodies, but they will be different (I Corinthians 15). We will know each other but relationships will be different in a different world that is free from sin. We cannot know what will be, but we know that God will make it wonderful.

We do know the Scriptures, don't we? "There is nothing impossible for God." And we are sure of the power of God, aren't we? "Our Father will do more than we can ask or imagine." And that is enough for us. It is foolish to think that everything there will be like it is here. But it is faithful to believe that everything there will be far more wonderful than everything here. And so we patiently wait.

Questions:

1. What did the Bible of the Sadducees consist of? Does that make Jesus' reply in verse 26 make more sense?
2. Why do you think the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection?

Not Far from the Kingdom

Not all the Jews were cynical. There were some who were really searching for the truth. One of the teachers overheard the exchange between Jesus and the Sadducees and so he asked Jesus a very important question. “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus swiftly replied that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your being and the second was to love your neighbor as yourself. There are no commandments more important than these. Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, and the teacher of the Jews was impressed. He totally agreed with Jesus and added that keeping these commandments was more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices a person could ever give God.

Don’t you know that Jesus was thrilled? Finally, someone gets it! This teacher had associates who were hung up over whether you should tithe the spices in your spice rack and whether you washed your hand properly so that you could be ceremonially clean, but this man saw through the clutter directly into the heart of the matter.

Do we see through the clutter? I wonder sometimes. The things that are the most important to us are sometimes not the most important matters in Scripture. We get so involved with minutia that we cannot see the vital. What do you think Jesus would say to us today, if we were bold enough to ask the same question? I think we would walk away with a two point agenda. Anything that has to do with loving God with all our being and loving our neighbors as ourselves must always be at the top of the list. If those aren’t done, it doesn’t really matter what else happens.

Jesus told this man that he was not far from the Kingdom of God. He understood what was important to God. He saw that there are things that are good to do, but there are some things that are absolutely necessary. The Bible is not flat land. There are some commandments that are more important than others. Every thing hands on the two commandments Jesus gave the teacher that day.

Questions:

1. Read the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. See if you can put each commandment in the category of the two that Jesus said are most important.
2. Why are the two commandments that Jesus gives more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices? What did burnt offerings and sacrifices mean to the people?

Watch Out for those Guys

Don't you just love people who always have all the answers – who have a corner on knowledge, who are God's gifts to the world? Ughh! Folks like that are really hard to live with sometimes. I think that there were probably many of those exalted one, those notable ones in the audience when Jesus asked the people how the teachers of the Law could say that the Christ is the Son of David when David himself in Psalm 110 called the Messiah his Lord. How can he then be his son?

The crowd was delighted to see the arrogant teachers squirm. The teachers obviously had no reply to what Jesus had just asked. Jesus warned the people about their teachers. Watch out for them. They like to be treated in a special way. They like to be honored. They like for people to notice them. They like special seats and special greetings. They like to be treated like they are important.

There are several important lessons in our reading today. First, we should learn that the externals have little importance. You can have special clothes, be greeted in a special way, have special seats and receive special honors and not be pleasing to God. What a person does when the light is not shining on him is what matters. That's the true test of a person's religion. We are easily impressed sometimes. We need to heed Jesus' words. We need to be careful. The message of teachers finds validity in the way they live their lives. Did you notice Jesus' assessment? They devour widow's houses, which probably meant that they exploited the most vulnerable people in the community for their gain. Many widows in Jesus' day were destitute and easy targets for religious scam artists.

Jesus also commented on their long prayers. It is just a show, he said. They want people to notice them and consider them holy. It is all about them and not God. They want to be the center of attention. They want to receive the honor and glory. They want the praise of the people. How very sad.

A second lesson we can learn is that Jesus does not want us to be like that. Our trust should be in our Lord and not in the praise of people. We yearn for a "well done" from our Savior and not from the crowds. God is to be the spotlight, not us. If people only notice us then we have been defeated.

Finally, we need to know that attitudes like the teachers had do not set well with God. The teachers had better enjoy the praise of the people now because God is not impressed. In fact, he tells the people that men like this will be "most severely punished." So, watch out!

Questions:

1. What was the purpose of Jesus' teaching in verses 35-37? What was he trying to show the people?
2. Why did the people react with delight?
3. What is the most important thing for people to watch out for?

A Magnificent Offering

Have you noticed as you read the gospels that Jesus often sees things that other people don't see? For example, yesterday in our reading Jesus warned people to beware of the teachers of the Law. They are not what they seem to be.

Now he turns his attention to the crowds putting their money into the temple treasury. I'm sure that most of the people were watching the rich who were throwing in large amounts of money. Can't u just imagine the oohs and ahhs as the rich deposited their contributions? People are impressed by things like that. They notice the wealthy and they love to watch everything that they do. But Jesus noticed someone else. She quietly put her two coins into the treasury. There was no fanfare, no one oohing and ahhing. Just a poor widow quietly honoring her God. Magnificent!

Why can't we see this without having it pointed out to us? Maybe it is because we tend to value things that Jesus doesn't. A person's worth is not directly connected to his or her bank account. We sometimes feel that the materially blessed are the best ones. Riches must be high on our list of things that are important or we would not notice the rich like we do. We aren't told about the motives of the rich givers but we are told that they gave out of their wealth. After their offering, as large as it was, they still went home rich.

But Jesus does tell us about the offering of the poor widow. Two small coins, worth less than a penny. From all appearances her offering was very insignificant, but Jesus gave the disciples a bit of insight. He told his disciples that she had given out of her poverty. She was destitute, desperately poor. On top of that she gave all she had to live on. Some might consider that foolish. She should have considered her own needs. Surely God would understand if she did not give. It might be that she did consider her needs. She wanted God to know that she desperately depended on him and God noticed. He always does. Do you think that poor widow went without food that day? I don't think so. God's promises were that if a person honors him then God will take care of that person. God has never, nor will he ever turn his back on those who put their trust in him.

Questions:

1. Write down a few lessons we can learn about giving from our reading.
2. How would you characterize your giving – like he wealthy or like the widow?

Lessons from a Difficult Chapter

What a difficult chapter! You can read the commentaries for yourself. You could fill up a whole bookshelf with all the different views. Some believe that this chapter is about the end of time, others think it discusses the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Still others believe that both the end of time and the destruction of Jerusalem are discussed. And then there are those who believe that this chapter talks about a time in history some call the rapture. Personally, I tend to think the entire chapter is about the destruction of Jerusalem. To me it seems to be a warning of severe judgment that will come upon the Jews. Regardless of what you think is the subject of this chapter, here are some major points on which we can all agree. In the opening sentences of our reading Jesus shocks his disciples. They are looking with wonder at the magnificent building all around them in Jerusalem. Can you imagine what the Temple must have looked like? Herod's Temple could not have compared to Solomon's but still, it must have been magnificent. Huge stones, massive walls, glistening beauty. The people were amazed by the work of the hands of human beings. Jesus told them that not one of those massive stones would be left on another. Everything would be thrown down. Unthinkable! How could this be? The only way it could be is because God is in control.

We are so like the disciples. We look at the glorious works of our hands and we tend to believe that nothing could ever tear down what we have built for ourselves. It would be like Jesus walking through the streets of Washington, D.C., and saying that the Capital building, the White House, and all the rest of the magnificent building and monuments that are a testament to our power and prominence would all be destroyed.

We must never forget that God is in control, not us. It doesn't matter how glorious our cities are, if God brings judgment everything can, in a moment, be destroyed.

A second lesson we can learn is that we must always be on our guard. Don't be surprised when persecution comes. Tough times do come and God's people must be prepared. People will betray others. False charges will be lodged against believers. Arrests and trials will follow. Jesus does not say this to frighten us but to warn us to be prepared for whatever comes. No one knows the day or the hour. Listen to His final words on this subject, "I say to everyone: Watch!"

Questions:

1. Can you find some other lessons in Mark 13 important to Christians today?
2. Do you think that God still works in the affairs of humankind in the same way he did in the past? Will he destroy a wicked nation and punish the ungodly?

How Can I Thank You?

Of all the events that took place in Jesus' life, this might have been the best on to attend. Just imagine the people who were there. If we combine the accounts of all four gospels we come up with quite a guest list. First, there was Simon the Leper, or should we say, Simon, the Former Leper. The label stuck, but the condition didn't. It was his home where Jesus and the rest of the disciples ate that day.

Then there was Martha, Bless her heart, she is still serving. She did what she knew best. She was wonderful at hospitality, but this time there were no hurt feelings that no one wanted to help. Mary, her sister, was also there. I can just imagine her sitting and hanging on to every word from the Master's mouth. She adores her Savior and she wants with all her heart to honor him. After all her brother Lazarus was sitting right there in the room with them, alive! Can you imagine the joy in that house, after four days in the tomb? What an incredible conversation they must have had.

If you had been looking at Mary during the meal you might have noticed her eyes were filling with tears. Her heart was about to burst with thanksgiving. How could a person ever thank Jesus for what he had done? She got up from the table, broke open an alabasters flask of pure nard, a very expensive perfume made from the roots of plants grown in India. She then poured the wonderful smelling contents on his head. She anointed him and the fragrance filled the room. What a beautiful way to say, Thank you!

Not everyone felt her tribute was appropriate. Some grumbled under their breath, "What a waste." The nard was worth a year's wages. They rebuked her and told her that the perfume should have been sold and the proceeds used to feed the poor.

Jesus told them to leave her alone. Caring for the poor is an everyday task. There will never be a time when there will not be poor people to care for. But Jesus will soon be leaving. "She has done a beautiful thing for me." He told them that she had prepared his body for burial. What a chilling statement! Then he told them that what she had done for him would never be forgotten. Every time people talk about Jesus they will talk about what Mary did for him. The fragrance of that loving act lingers.

Questions:

1. Read all the accounts of this event in the Gospels. Note especially Judas' role. Does it help you understand verse 10 easier?

A Family Affair

You know how the Lord's Supper goes don't you? Several men line up, some appropriate words are said and a prayer is given and the men pass out the bread and juice to a hushed congregation, many with heads bowed, some reading their Bibles, still others quietly contemplating this solemn moment.

When you read the gospels do you feel that the way we do the Supper was really the way Jesus envisioned it? This "supper" was during a Passover meal. Passover was one of the most important events of the year for the Jews. It was the time when families sat around a table with special foods to recreate the time that God sent his death angel throughout Egypt and passed over the houses that had the blood of the Pascal lamb smeared on the doorframe. It was a time of great joy. It was a time to teach children. It was family time, around a table, sharing a meal, praising God. When we do the supper, it seems to be more a personal moment than a family moment. All is quiet. Children are stifled. The bread and juice are quickly passed out and we are done.

Without trying to be too critical, I wonder what we are missing. When we observe the supper each week does it strengthen our ties to each other as well as with God? Do we feel more like family? Are our children learning valuable lessons about the incredible meaning of this event? I don't think we do the Supper in such a way to accomplish all this. We have been taught to be more contemplative than social. We see the table as an altar not a family gathering place. We are quiet – I honestly do not believe they were at the first Supper. Remember this was a celebration of what God had done. Is not the Supper of the Lord a celebration as well? If Jesus attended our worship would he say, "This is what I had in mind?"

As beautiful an event as that first Supper was, it was tainted by the sinful intentions of part of Jesus' family. Judas had already made arrangements to turn Jesus over to the authorities. What a poignant moment when Jesus said, "one of you will betray me." How could it be?

"Never forget what I have done." That's the message of the Supper. It makes our hearts leap when we survey it all. What does he want in return? He wants a relationship with us and he wants us to have a relationship with a family that rejoices over the wonders of their loving Father. A table or an altar? What do you think?

Questions:

1. What kind of specific instruction do you find in the Bible about how we are to observe the Lord's Supper?
2. Do you think we observe the Supper in the way Jesus envisioned? If not, what changes could be made to help?