

Politics, Belief, and Practice ... But Who Do You Belong to?

Mark 12:13-34

Introduction

A principal of a girls' school is getting frustrated that a particular group of girls has been putting on lipstick and then kissing the mirror in their bathroom and creating a sizeable mess and creating more work for the cleaners. The principal did some investigating and thinks that she's been able to narrow down most of the girls who have been doing this. What is the principal to do? How can she effectively get the message across that this behaviour has to stop? The principal calls that group of girls into the bathroom and points out the lipstick marks all over the mirror. "Young ladies," she begins, "look at this mirror. You have made a terrible mess and it creates a lot more work for our cleaners. Just look at what our cleaners have to do to clean these mirrors." At this the cleaner got the window squeegee, walked into the nearest cubicle, dipped the squeegee into the toilet and then went back and cleaned the mirror. Lo and behold there were very few problems of lipstick on mirrors after that!

One of the characteristics of great educators is that they are able to teach in ways that make a lasting and deep impression. There is a world of difference between simply presenting information and providing a deeper impact and understanding like the principal and the cleaner did.

Similarly, it's possible for teachers to provide answers and information which address one question while also giving a deeper understanding of another topic or life lesson. Indeed, sometimes it's the secondary lesson which makes the bigger impact on our lives.

Many people, including non-Christians, would say that Jesus is a great teacher. This morning we're going to see more as to how Jesus earned such a reputation through being able to answer difficult questions. However, not only was Jesus able to answer difficult questions but he was able to use his answers to provide an even deeper level of teaching and understanding.

Politics - How Do We Know Whose We Are? (vv. 13-17)

Previously, when Jesus was asked about his authority to clear the temple he replied with a question asking his opponents about John's baptism which basically put them into a catch 22 scenario of not being able to answer. Here his opponents seek to do the same thing.

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

The Pharisees and Herodians are dispatched to try and catch Jesus out. The difficulty in this question is that the Jews were under Roman occupation which was regarded as very unpopular by much of the populous. As such, if Jesus were to say that people should pay taxes to Caesar then that would likely cause him to lose popularity with the masses and so make him vulnerable to the plans of the religious leaders who wanted to do away with Jesus. However, if Jesus were to say that people weren't to pay taxes then Jesus could probably have been reported to the Roman rulers as an insurrectionist and the Jewish religious leaders could have used Rome's military power to get rid of this troublesome preacher from Galilee.

Jesus displays both considerable courage as well as deep insight in his answer: But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

Jesus answered with courage because he actually did affirm paying taxes to Caesar but he did it with such insight, effectively showing that the people were simply

returning to Caesar what was already his (as indicated by Caesar's image being on the coin), that the crowd continued to be amazed and didn't, at this time, abandon him.

At one level we have here what has been regarded as one of the greatest contributions to political and philosophical thought that has shaped Western thinking and that is of the legitimacy of civil government and taxation, even of religious people. No small legacy. This highlights that Jesus is a great teacher but I wonder if there's an even deeper teaching and connection which Jesus is making ... we'll come back to this.

Belief - For How Long Are We God's (vv. 18-27)

Moving on though we see that having dealt with a political question, Jesus is next asked about a matter of belief. Specifically, the Sadducees want to see if Jesus believes in the resurrection, something which they don't. The Sadducees only held to the Law of Moses, the Torah, which are the first five books of the Bible, and the Sadducees didn't see evidence there for a resurrection.

To illustrate how foolish this view was in their thinking the Sadducees asked a question which used an example of when a brother in-law was to marry his brother's wife should his brother die without having children. If two people had been married to the same woman, whose wife would she be at the resurrection? Specifically in this example and question, the Sadducees used the symbolic number seven to indicate totality and completeness.

Jesus' answer is two-fold. Jesus starts his answer by saying, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."

Jesus' first correction of the Sadducees' thinking was that they didn't recognise that the resurrection was not just a resuscitation, a continuation of this life, but rather the resurrection was transformative. I don't have time to go into more detail regarding this teaching about what we'll be doing following our death and resurrection (how

much we'll recognise people, what about animals, etc., etc.) but the point of the matter here is that the resurrection will be so transformative that the laws which apply to our lives now will no longer apply and so it's foolish to try and make such connections.

Secondly, Jesus interestingly and very effectively uses a reference from the Torah which the Sadducees accepted to make his point about how the resurrection is valid because it is connected with the power of God. "Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

Yahweh did not say to Moses, "**I was** the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob..." but rather he said, "**I am** the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God's dealings with the patriarchs of Israel who pre-dated Moses was not in the past but still present. The failure of the Sadducees to recognise the continuing work of God meant that they were badly mistaken.

Jesus has effectively answered the Sadducees and impressed his listeners but I wonder if there's again an even deeper teaching and connection which Jesus is making ... we'll come back to this too.

Practice - How Do We Show We Are God's? (vv. 28-34)

The final question asked of Jesus in this section appears to be a genuine enquiry and is framed more positively. "One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"'" Having addressed a question of politics and of belief Jesus is now asked about practice.

Jesus doesn't feel the need to limit himself to just one and instead combines two Old Testament readings to give this well known answer:

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all

your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

The teacher who asked the question provides us with some explanation as to why Jesus’ answer is correct with it boiling down to love for God and then love for others being at the heart of the law and thus being more important than any offering or sacrifice which we can make. If it was worded negatively, it would be that people should never think that making an offering or sacrifice would mean anything if we had no love for God or care for people. Such behaviour was clearly condemned by many of the Old Testament prophets.

Interestingly, although this teacher affirms Jesus’ answer and gives a wise response, have a look at Jesus’ response, “When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.”

“You are not far from the kingdom of God.” How interesting that even a right understanding of the law doesn’t guarantee that someone is in the kingdom of God. Jesus’ response here is actually deliberately ambiguous. The teacher is not far from the kingdom of God in that he is obviously very close in his understanding of what God is looking for but he’s also not far from the kingdom of God because he’s standing very close to Jesus. Jesus is the One who brings in God’s kingdom and so is the One who grants entry to it. This story concludes without us being told the response of the teacher but that also prompts us, the readers and listeners, to consider our own response. Will we put our hope in obedience to the commandments of God (even the most important ones) or will we put our hope and trust in the One who brings in God’s kingdom?

Once again we’ve seen that Jesus has impressed his listeners to the point where this time no one is daring to ask another question. And again I wonder if there’s an even deeper teaching and connection which Jesus is making ... it must be time to address these deeper connections.

The Deeper Connection

We've seen that Jesus answered very capably a question about politics, a question about belief, and a question about practice. However, I wonder if we have here Jesus providing answers to unspoken questions or, to put it another way, Jesus' answers are directing us to deeper connections and deeper questions. The deeper questions which I see here are: To whom do you belong? How long do you belong? How do you show that you belong?

When we started with the political question of paying taxes to Caesar what was the heart of Jesus' response? The coin belongs to Caesar because it bears Caesar's image and so give it back to him. However, we're to give to God what belongs to God. But what does belong to God? If Caesar's coin bore his image, what bears God's image? In Genesis 1:27 we read, "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." We, humanity, bears God's image and so we belong to God. When Jesus says to "give to God what is God's" then that is our very lives.

Who do you belong to? You belong to God.

Second, when Jesus was asked the question about belief he countered by saying, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?" When Jesus went on to refer to the Torah he references how God identifies himself to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." In one sense this reference affirms the resurrection because Yahweh is still the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob even though they died. However, this answer also addresses the question, "How long do we belong?" What do I mean? Well, this question could be taken in two ways, first simply in terms of length of time, in which case the answer is for eternity because people's connections to God will never end because God is eternal. As another perspective though, this question of "How long do we belong?" can be taken to refer to where is our hope and trust in belonging? Will we belong only for as long as we are strong and capable? For only as long as we have our voice to sing God's praise? For only as long as we're good little boys and girls? At a deeper

level than just answering a question about belief in the resurrection, Jesus is saying that fears of the conclusion of our relationship with Yahweh, fear that we will one day find that we don't belong, are grounded in not knowing the power of God. Don't trust in yourself, trust in Yahweh because "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

Finally, Jesus' response to the question of practice about what is the greatest commandment answers the question, How do you show that you belong? Building on the previous answers we see that we belong to God by virtue of being made in his image and our belonging to God is not secure because of our performance or strength but rather rests on God's power and now we're directed to demonstrate that we belong to God by responding in love towards God as well as in showing love to others.

I wonder if it was to correct any risk of people reversing the order that Jesus said to the teacher when he affirmed Jesus' explanation as to what was the greatest commandment, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." To truly be obedient to God's character by loving him and loving others is good and proper, but not if we're going to rely upon it. Jesus isn't far from this teacher and if the teacher wants to know what it really means to belong, to experience the power of God and so be able to love God and others then we need to come to Jesus.

So then, pay your taxes, read the Bible to have right belief, and love God and others. But if you do all that without going deeper you risk not seeing the assurance God wants to give you. Know that you belong to God. Have confidence that your belonging rests on his power and display this in love while always trusting in Jesus.