ReMARKable: Answers to Adversaries Memory Verse: Mark 12:29-31

March 30th, 2025 Scripture Reading: Mark 12

**[SLIDE 1]**

 This week brings us to Mark chapter 12. I want to thank Amanda Lucas for tackling chapter 11 last week. It was not very kind of me to ask her to address an entire chapter in what was her inaugural time behind the pulpit, but she did a wonderful job and set me up well for this week.

 And the setup is necessary because Jesus is in Jerusalem now! **[SLIDE 2]** The plot is thickening. Jesus knows what is coming, we know what is coming, but we cannot help but be swept up in the story because Mark has done such a masterful job of getting us as readers to identify with Jesus’ disciples. We are along for the ride. Like the disciples, we want to slow down a bit and have all of our questions clarified, but as I have said so many times throughout this series, Mark is moving on.

 Now, we will see, chapter 12 involves a whole cast of characters who confront Jesus as he then provides answers to his adversaries, hence today’s sermon title.

 So, we have already seen in chapter 11**[SLIDE 3]** Jesus enters the temple courts and casts out all the merchants and moneylenders. Like demons in a person, these businessmen did not belong in the temple. So in verse 27, this first challenge is issued by the chief priests, the legal experts/scribes and the elders. These men represent the leadership of God’s people and, as leaders, they feel they are in a position to challenge Jesus and basically ask the question, **[SLIDE 4]** “Who do you think you are?” And he asked back, **[SLIDE 5]** “Who do you think John was?” And after some discussion, they concluded that they did not know. So, for his part, Jesus flat out refuses to answer the question about his authority. But while the initial challenge has been dealt with, the conversation is not over. Jesus continues to address these leaders with a parable.

 **[SLIDE 6]** He presents the picture of a beautiful vineyard complete with a fence, a winepress, even a tower. It has all the makings of a successful vineyard. But the man is heading out of town for a while, so he rents out his property to tenant farmers. This would have been a pretty typical business transaction. These tenants get to use the land and the equipment, and they pay off the owner with a certain percentage of the crop. So eventually servants come from the master to collect payment, a portion of the fruit that has been harvested, but the tenants take the servant and beat him. The owner tries again with another servant. Same story. The owner continues to send servants, they are continually mistreated, and beaten, and killed. So what does the owner do? What would you do? What would any prudent business owner do with such evil tenants? Evict them, call in law enforcement, press charges, try to recoup losses. You would do whatever you could to see that justice was done. But this owner, who represents God, thinks in verse 6, I will send my dearly loved son…surely they will respect my son. And Jesus suddenly becomes very autobiographical here as he is the son sent to the tenants of his vineyard, also known as the leaders of his people. All the servants who came before the son, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all the other prophets were beaten and killed. The owner simply wants to collect on what is owed to him: some portion of the fruit of the vineyard…but these leaders refuse the message of these prophets. So along comes the son, Jesus himself. Surely, he will be respected. But no, he too is killed and his body thrown out.

 Then, to top it all off, Jesus pulls a line from **[SLIDE 7]** Psalm 118. It’s a song about God’s deliverance of his people. A song about how God has saved his people from their enemies, from outside nations, yet the greatest enemy of God’s people lies within. The greatest enemy of the people at this point are their own leaders! The stone that the builders rejected, or the son the tenants killed and threw out, has become the cornerstone; the very foundation of what God is building.

 But again, as the builder, as the owner, why is God so foolish? Why does he trust these evil tenants? Why does he send his son to those who have such a marred track record? Oh. This is not a shrewd business decision; this is an act of grace **[SLIDE 8]**. God knows full well that his son will not be heeded. He knows the son will die. He knows that this is the plan. God so loved the world, he sent his only son…And we also know that God’s wisdom so often appears to us as foolishness. May we stand upon this cornerstone, on Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.

 This story may have been a parable, but it was transparent enough that these Jewish leaders got the message. However, they did not act on their murderous inclinations because, at this point, they feared the people more. And the people, those lowly, insignificant, ignorant masses, they seem to adore this Jesus.

 But the confrontations are just beginning. This next one comes from some Pharisees and supporters of Herod in verse 13 **[SLIDE 9]**. They begin with flattery, ironically claiming true things about Jesus that they do not believe. Then they spring a trap regarding the payment of taxes. Should we, as Jews, go along with this evil occupying Roman regime and support their existence by paying taxes? If Jesus answers yes, the people will surely turn on him and his respectability would be destroyed. But if he instructs people to not pay their taxes, then these leaders can take their flattery to Roman officials and have Jesus put away for insurrection. Jesus can read the room. He askes for a coin **[SLIDE 10]**, which interestingly enough he does not seem to have on him, while these humble teachers shamefully pull one from their purse. After all, it is an unclean item, something that recognizes the authority of an unclean Caesar as god and not the one true God. It’s an item of blasphemy and idolatry and it is right there in their pockets. Jesus asks a simple question: Whose *eikon* is on it? Icon, picture, likeness image? Well, Caesar’s image is on it. ‘Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.”

 We cannot miss the fact that Jesus is harkening all the way back to creation. The Greek translation of the Old Testament says that God created man in his εἰκόνα, **[SLIDE 11]** in his image. If coins bear the image of Caesar, so be it, but we bear the image of God. This is a pertinent question when we think about our own tax payments. It can turn one’s stomach to think too long about how your money might be spent. We have learned much in this regard in the past months. The waste and abuse of taxpayer funds at the federal level has become a bit more unveiled lately. But all the governmental corruption and deceit should not be so surprising. All the smoke and mirrors that might obfuscate the money trail cannot change the fact that no government in history has always been above board in its operations. Its oversight and accountability come from fallible human beings or maybe even evil tenants. This being the case, we need not have high hopes for a perfect track record, even after an overhaul and an audit, but we can rest easy in this one fact, we belong to God. Our money is minted by the government and the value of it is determined by the government, so…let them have it. We are about the things that have true value…people minted in the image of God.

 These adversaries leave overcome with wonder at Jesus’ answer. Next in line were the Sadducees. **[SLIDE 12]** Mark only talks about this group in this passage and we need to know a few things about them because, even though they oppose Jesus, they are not on friendly terms with the Pharisees and it is easy for us to lump them together. Mark tells us one detail in verse 18: The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection of the dead and the reason they don’t is because they only recognize the Pentateuch, that is the first five books of the Bible, as God’s word. They don’t bother with the prophetic books and the other writings and they certainly do not follow all of the unwritten rules that the Pharisees are always on about. Since there is no mention of resurrection in the first five books of Moses, then, it follows, there is no resurrection and those who ascribe to it are silly and mistaken. The question posed here is meant to point out the absurdity of the very notion of resurrection.

 It involves something called Levirate marriage. **[SLIDE 13]** If a man dies without having had children, the man’s brother is to “marry” the widow and ensure that she does have children to carry on the family name and to maintain the deceased man’s property and land. It is a very strange idea to our modern sensibilities, but, since the book of Deuteronomy, this was the law among Jewish families. So the Sadducees take this law and concoct a ridiculous example for Jesus to ponder. If a man dies but his brother leaves his widow without children seven times over…well, then when the resurrection occurs, whose wife with she be since she has been married to them all? This haughty, know-it-all attitude does not go far with Jesus. He accuses these Sadducees, who were probably priests working in the temple, of being ignorant of both what scripture says and of God’s power. While they are bringing up Deuteronomy, Jesus goes further back to Exodus, another book of Moses’ and shows these mocking priests evidence of the resurrection even within the books they claim to teach and follow. In Exodus 3, God calls out to Moses from a miraculous burning bush. **[SLIDE 14]** As Moses approaches, God tells him to remove his sandals because he is treading on holy ground. And then God introduces himself. “I am the God of your father, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God.” The living God will not introduce himself by citing the names of three corpses…as Jesus says, he is not the God of the dead, but of the living. The Sadducees are flat out wrong. There will come a day of resurrection in which, like the angels, we will not be married as marriage is a temporal mechanism that allows for families and children. But, Jesus points out here that there are two dimensions to scripture that we need to attend to: **[SLIDE 15]** first, the actual written words: What does the text say? And second, the actual power those words communicate. What good is knowing God’s word unless we also embrace and experience the powerful reality which God’s word explains? We dare not try to master one over the other. There is nothing worse than a scholar teaching a dead word, except for maybe a passionate, fiery person that is excited and burns brightly while at the same time being uninformed.

 Jesus has set straight his adversaries, but another scribe approaches with another question. This one I take to be coming from a more genuine place as we will see. He is looking for a summary of the scriptures. Which commandment is the most important of all? Jesus answers with an amalgamation of verses from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. **[SLIDE 16]** ‘The most important one is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Then Jesus adds a bonus answer, presumably because it is really inseparable from the first: **[SLIDE 17]** “The second is this, you will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”

 The scribe affirms Jesus’ answer. He observes that loving God and others is even more important than offering sacrifices. According to Jesus, this man was on the right track. He was not far from God’s kingdom. If he would only **[SLIDE 18]** add faith to the wisdom and knowledge he already possessed…he might yet find life.

 This is still our challenge today, isn’t it? We are constantly immersed in knowledge. We all hold in our pockets and purses a portal to more knowledge than mankind has every dreamed possible. Sometimes this knowledge is useful. I can be informed about news and events, I can learn a new recipe, or how to repair something under the hood of my car. I can also fill this God-given mind with useless dreck. As we are inundated with this rapid-fire information, we have to make decisions as to what is important and what is not. What are we going to prioritize? This scribe is trying to sort out, of all the laws in God’s word, what rises to the top, what is most important? Jesus says: **[SLIDE 19]** Love. Loving God and loving others is ultimately more important than anything else. We can, and probably should, talk about other aspects of the bible and theology. We can talk about theories of atonement and eschatological schemes, but if these discussions are not done under the umbrella of love for God and others, we probably have more in common with the Jesus’ adversaries than we care to admit. The power of God’s word boils down to love.

 In verse 35, Jesus is back on the saddle teaching a large crowd in the temple. **[SLIDE 20]** And he takes the opportunity to denounce the adversaries he has spent this entire chapter dealing with. They do not understand what God is doing. They are wicked tenets…they do away with God’s servants, they refuse to give to God what belongs to him. They posture themselves as examples to emulate, but, Jesus says, do not be like them. They love their regal robes, their seats of honor, their long prayers, yet they could care less about the plight of widows. They do not love God or others and so, they will be judged most harshly. And let’s not pretend that Jesus is not talking about us. Any one of us who takes on the role of teacher, or who would aspire to be an example for others on how to live…Any one of us who dabbles in hypocrisy or places status over people. We ought to be conscious of the righteous judgement of God. We ought to be constantly asking, **[SLIDE 21]** “Do I love others or do I love myself? Do I live for God’s glory or for my own?”

 **[SLIDE 22]** Finally, this chapter closes, not with adversaries, but with friends. Jesus teaches his disciples about something he observed at the temple collection box. Many people brought large sums of money. They were generous and doing what they should. But they gave out of their surplus, from what they have left over. **[SLIDE 23]** But, there was a poor widow, most likely overlooked by the Pharisees and the aristocratic Sadducees. She came to the treasure box and dropped in two *lepta* which literally means, “thin ones”. Here she is, standing before the grandeur and beauty of the towering temple, giving two thin ones. Jesus observes, “In her hopeless poverty she is giving everything she had.” In God’s economy, these two pennies were worth more than all the other cash in the box because she gave all she had. Giving hurts. It is easy enough to give when we have surplus, but giving when we have so little in the first place…that hurts. It is foolish to give all we have. One might say this window was being foolish. She could have at least kept one of the small coins…This brings us back to the beginning of the chapter, remember how God’s wisdom operates. It appears as foolishness in this world. No responsible owner would send their son to face evil and murderous tenants. But Jesus gave all he had. He gave until it hurt, until it killed him. He gave more than any other.

 **[SLIDE 24] W**hat are we willing to give? It’s not about taxes, or even about our tithes and offerings. Yes, just like the first century temple, the church needs funding in order to operate. But the question of what we are willing to give comes back to what Jesus singles out as the greatest commandment: Love the Lord your God. With what? With all your heart, all your being, all your mind and all your strength. We love God by giving our all. We don’t keep back a small portion for ourselves, we don’t love God with all that we have leftover…we are to love God with everything.

 That’s a big ask – so big it is actually easy to dismiss. What does it really look like to give everything? So, let’s adjust the question a bit: **[SLIDE 25]** what else can you give to him? What part of your mind do you reserve for useless information? What part of your heart loves the things of this world? What part of your body is dedicated to desire or enslaved to sin? What else can you give to him? Maybe it is financial in nature, maybe there is some sense in which money gets the better of you. Maybe it is anxiety and fear that you need to give up. Maybe it is a sense of wanting control. Maybe it is a hesitancy to share your faith with someone else. Whatever it might be, as followers of Jesus, we give our all to him just as he gave his all for us. Mind, body, soul and strength: all to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give. Amen.