

The Gospel of Mark – More Traps for Jesus

Mark 12:1-27

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



How many of us have set out to head to a specific location via a very familiar route, and then when it comes time to turn off the familiar route, do we miss the turn altogether and keep on driving? I can't tell you how many times I've done that. Muscle memory sets in within a matter of minutes of leaving the house, and driving becomes reflexive even though I have set out with purpose and intention. This has caused me to be late and frustrated as sometimes I don't catch it right away, and then the course correction is even more painful. Why does this happen? Well, often, for me, it is just a matter of muscle memory and getting caught up in my thoughts. I'll set out telling myself I'm going one way, and even though the turn is right in front of me, I miss it. See, the religious leaders throughout the Gospel of Mark are just like that. They didn't set out to be opposed to God's plans of redemptive history. In fact, the very opposite is the starting place of their journey; they set out to follow God's plan for redemptive history! But along the way, muscle memory built up, and intentionality and awareness seemed to diminish. They were so close to everything that should have pointed them in the right direction, but they missed it. And because they missed it, they missed the very thing they had long wanted to experience.

It is a mistake that when we do the same thing in our cars, it is mildly frustrating. But, when we do it in our relationship with God, it can have lasting consequences. As we read through chapter 12 of Mark's Gospel, we once again must resist the temptation to think we're not like these religious leaders. But we are. We can have the intention to set out and engage in a relationship with God, but then muscle memory kicks in, and before you know it, we're doing our own thing, and God is only an accessory in a journey that we are in charge of. This is especially tempting for anyone who regularly participates in church. Why? Because the muscle memory looks like the very thing that God desires. That is exactly what we see in the religious leaders. They had immediate proximity to the very thing that should have pointed them to Jesus, but they still missed it. It is in their example that we are warned, and we remember that **it is entirely possible to have proximity to something and miss it altogether.**

1. Rejecting Jesus (vv. 1-12)

- a. **Parables function as a lens that allows us to see the truth and to correct distorted vision.**
 - i. Jesus used parables because he wanted his audiences to be able to see themselves clearly God accurately, and be made aware of the goodness of the life he offers.

- ii. **They allow us to see what we would not otherwise see, and they presume we *should* look at and see a *specific* reality.**
 - 1. They are not Rorschach tests; they are stories with intent, analogies through which one is enabled to see truth. Except for five of Jesus' parables ... they are stories with two levels of meaning, the story level through which one sees and the truth level, the reality being portrayed.¹
- b. Parables are forms of indirect communication.**
 - i. Jesus used them to enter into the hearts of his audience through a backdoor or an open window instead of kicking down the doors.
 - 1. Yes, he does kick down some doors... Typically, to the religious leaders.
 - a. Think about Mark 2:10 – He claims to be God.
 - b. Or, Mark 2:17 – At Levi's house Jesus tells the religious leaders that he came for the sick.
 - ii. Søren Kierkegaard's treatments of indirect communication deserve careful reflection. People set their defenses against direct communication and learn to conform its message to the channels of their understanding of reality. Indirect communication finds a way in a back window and confronts what one thinks is reality. Parables are indirect communication.²
- c. Parables move us away from complacency.**
 - i. Biblical parables reveal the kind of God that God is and how God acts, and they show what humanity is and what humanity should and may become. **Parables are not merely informative. Like prophets before him, Jesus told parables to prompt thinking and stimulate response in relation to God.**
 - 1. Parables usually engage listeners, create reflection, and promote action. They are pointed and clinching arguments for a too often slow-minded or recalcitrant audience.³ They seek to goad people into the action the gospel deserves and the kingdom demands.
 - 2. The parables compel us—for Christ's sake literally—to do something! Parables do not seek the "**mild morality**" about which Kierkegaard lamented but radical cross-bearing, God-imitating response worthy of the name "conversion."³
- d. The parable of the Wicked Tenants → What is going on here?**
 - i. This parable, set in the context of the confrontation of religious leaders and Jesus and at the Temple mean that the stakes are high. And, unlike most parables, this one is of direct and major Christological significance.⁴
 - ii. **Like so many others, the parable is primarily about response.** Will people respond to the claims God has on their lives or reject his messengers in favor of their own agenda? Will they live productively to "produce fruits" for God?⁵

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (2018), 8.

² Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (2018), 8.

³ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (2018), 9.

⁴ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 276.

⁵ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 297.

1. **The kingdom comes with limitless grace, but also with limitless demand.**⁶
- iii. The religious leaders were so hardhearted that they rejected Jesus and the life he came to offer. This is a deeply tragic reality. Their pattern, however, is one that has beset Israel for a long time. → There is a deep connection to the OT and Israel's repeated unfaithfulness and drifting from the Lord.
 1. vv. 2-5: Even the maltreatment of the prophets by their forebears was readily admitted by later Israel (Matt. 23:29–32), for this did not compromise them. Indeed, they prided themselves on their superior spiritual insight, and on showing their piety by building fine tombs for these ancient martyrs. As Jesus drily said, this only showed their identification with their ancestors: one generation killed the prophets, while another generation buried them, as if consenting to the crime (Luke 11:48). **Every generation can always see the spiritual blindness of its forebears, but never its own.**⁷
 2. This parable from Jesus was not merely a rebuke for rebuke sake to them. It was a shoulder-shaking offering of grace to wake them up to the reality of their spiritual blindness.
- iv. **We need to consider this for ourselves. → What have we grown blind to?**
 1. This is the importance of our value of **intergenerational discipleship**. We need others in our lives to help see what we're not seeing.
 2. Are we willing to listen to what other generations have to say about the generation that we're in?
 - a. This is a two-way conversation. It isn't the "know betters" speaking to the need to "know-betters." Which, by the way, it doesn't matter if you are in an older generation or a younger generation, both seem to always think that they "know better," don't they?
- e. **The crux of this parable – v.6**
 - i. Above all, the son is "beloved." The word recalls Abraham's love for Isaac (Gen 22:2), Jacob's love for Joseph (Gen 37:3), God's love for Israel (Isa 5:1), and especially the Father's love for "the beloved Son" at the baptism (1:11). The reference to the "beloved son" (Gk. *huion agapēton*) in the parable recalls only one other relationship in the Gospel, that of Jesus and the Father (1:11; 9:7). In the story of the sending of the son Jesus is speaking of his own unprecedented role in the history of Israel.⁸
 - ii. In sending the servants the owner appealed to the integrity of the tenants; in sending his son he appeals to the right of law, for the son was the only person, save himself, who possessed legal claim over the vineyard. This is why the owner says, " 'They will respect my son.' " The son goes as the father's representative, with the father's authority, to the father's property, to claim the father's due.⁹

⁶ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 297.

⁷ R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 264.

⁸ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 358.

⁹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 357–358.

1. **They had grown to hate the owner, and because of that, they rejected the owner's son. How can we avoid this hardheartedness? → By enjoying God.**
- f. **"Did God make my day?" → A CCC Life Question**
- i. Our Life Questions are purposefully intended to help us take the temperature on our connection with the Lord and assess our following of Jesus in a life-defining way.
 1. The reason we want to ask them is that we know we have the tendency to drift from the Lord and not to him. We are like OT Israel or the tenants in this parable.
 - ii. **This is not a question of legalistic obedience.** It is instead a question that is intended to help us prompt the joy of being connected to God and enjoying his presence in an abiding way.
 1. How are we to maintain joyful connection with the Lord?
 2. Do I believe that God is good, mostly good, or not good at all? This question is reflected in the passage and will determine our relationship with him.
 3. If God is mostly good or not good at all, I am not going to pursue him in a life-defining way. That means my relationship with him will always be on my terms, and that will always leave us guarded at some level.

2. A clear identity. (vv. 13-17)

- a. In this chapter there are three encounters with Jesus.
 - i. **vv.1-12:** The parable picks up off of the question of his authority in his interaction with the Chief Priests, scribes, and elders.
 - ii. **vv.13-17:** The Pharisees and Herodians bring a question about taxes.
 - iii. **vv.18-27:** The Sadducees come with a question about marriage and resurrection.
 1. **Each of these groups had their identity invested in something other than a wholehearted pursuit of God.**
 2. That will be most clear with the Pharisees and Herodians, but we see a clear and important truth here about the importance of where and what we find our identity in.
- b. Let's understand the question on taxes first. → "Give to Cesar..."
 - i. **The tax referred to is an imperial poll tax, first instituted in A.D. 6. The amount required to satisfy the poll tax was a denarius** (v. 15, another Latin loanword), which was the average daily wage in Palestine (Matt 20:2, 9). A denarius was a Roman silver coin bearing the semi-divine bust of Tiberius Caesar (A.D. 14–37) with an abbreviated Latin inscription, *Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus* ("**Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus**"). The reverse side bore an image of Tiberius's mother Livia and the inscription, *Pontifex Maximus* ("High Priest"). The question of the Pharisees and Herodians is, of course, intended to imperil Jesus in a compromise: support for taxation will discredit him in the eyes of the people, whereas his refusal to pay the tax will bring the Roman Imperium down on him.¹⁰
 - ii. **The question being posed to Jesus is not a neutral or benign one. It is rife with controversy and implications. This is a deeply political statement of Emperor worship or a denial of Roman authority. → Either way that Jesus answers this question he loses.**

¹⁰ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 363.

- iii. **15–17** Jesus, however, refuses to be maneuvered into either position. He knows their “hypocrisy” and nefarious intent. The Greek word translated “trap” (*peirazein*) means “to test or tempt” (8:11). Retaining his own authority, Jesus requests a denarius and asks, “ ‘Whose portrait is this?’ ” There is some irony in the fact that the inquirers possess the requisite coin for the tax, whereas Jesus does not.¹¹
 - 1. By this reply Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of human government. It distances Jesus from all forms of political anarchy, best exemplified in his day by the Zealots, who believed that the overthrow of the Roman Imperium was the will of God. On the other hand, Jesus’ answer cannot be construed to mean that God and government are two separate and exclusive entities independent of one another. God is sovereign over all human affairs, including political affairs.¹²
 - 2. **If coins bear Caesar’s image, then they belong to Caesar. But humanity, which bears God’s image, belongs to God!**¹³
- iv. But, Jesus doesn’t simply stop at the tax question he moves to the identity question. See, a true believer / follower could have answered this same question understanding that there are things of this age and then there are things that solely and exclusively belong to God. The identity of Jesus is never threatened because his identity is in perfect unity with the Father. (Cf. Jn. 1:1-2).
 - 1. In Jesus we see a key truth about our identity.
- c. **A key truth: We will never truly enjoy God if he is not the center of our identity.**
 - i. How do we see this in the passage?
 - 1. **Pharisees:** Centered on religious and moral performance.
 - 2. **Herodians:** Centered on Herod’s authority and social status quo.
 - ii. Both of these groups ultimately had an identity that was achieved either through religious and moral performance or through political and social dealings. They saw themselves primarily through the lens of what they achieved. That means that they and ultimately their effort was the center of their identity.
- d. **Identity – Achieved or Received?**¹⁴
 - i. **An Achieved identity** is always constructed on your ability in the face of someone’s failure.
 - 1. Sports, business, and academics are all in this area. My success or performance is not simply evaluated on its own basis. But its significance is directly compared to those who have done worse or better than myself.
 - 2. This so often turns into pride and arrogance. → You are only happy because you are better than others.
 - 3. The Pharisees had an achieved identity because they were better than others based on their holding to the law.

¹¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 363.

¹² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 363.

¹³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 364.

¹⁴ I first heard this idea via Tim Keller. But you can find much on this from different psychologists (Erik Erikson, James Marcia, Jean Piaget, etc.).

- ii. **A received identity** – This is an identity that is established by having the esteem of someone that you esteem.
 - 1. This is the Bible’s message the whole way through. Adam, Abraham, Moses, Noah, David → Received identity.
 - 2. The point of the law was to remind us of our need for a received identity and that the God of the universe not only loves us but can redeem us.
 - 3. This changes everything for us and positions us to be servants.
- iii. **What about us?**
 - 1. Do we operate with a received or achieved identity? Do we center our identity in the grace of God or in our effort?
 - a. This is a routine question that we need to ask over and over again.
 - b. Again, that is why we have our “life questions” as a church. We need to routinely allow the Spirit of God to help us examine the inner parts of us. Because the moment our identity shifts off of the grace we’ve received, we begin to center ourselves and our joy will slip away.

3. God’s greater plan. (vv. 18-27)

- a. **Ok, so here is another group, the Sadducees... Who are they?**
 - i. A second test of the Sanhedrin comes from the sect of the Sadducees. This is the only story in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus has an exclusive encounter with the **Sadducees**. Of the several parties and sects of Judaism in first-century Palestine, two dominated Jewish life in general and the Sanhedrin in particular. They were the Pharisees (see at 2:18) and Sadducees. Both parties seem to have arisen during the Maccabean revolt against Seleucid tyranny (early second century B.C.).¹⁵
 - ii. The Pharisees believed in divine sovereignty, while the Sadducees affirmed human free will alone; the Pharisees believed in angels and demons, whereas the Sadducees did not; the Pharisees accepted a broader understanding of Scripture and revelation, which included both written (Torah, Writings, and Prophets) and oral traditions, whereas the Sadducees accepted only the written Torah; and finally, as this story indicates, the Pharisees affirmed the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees expressly denied (12:18; Acts 23:8).¹⁶
 - iii. The Sadducees further differed from the Pharisees on social and political matters. The Sadducees comprised a clerical and lay aristocracy associated with the priesthood. **The Sadducees, like the priesthood, belonged to the highest social stratum of Jewish society, marked by “wealth” and “men of rank,” to quote Josephus.** The association of the Sadducees with the priesthood meant that their influence was focused above all in the temple and in operations associated with it.¹⁷

¹⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 364.

¹⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 365.

¹⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 365.

- b. **They were literal experts.** And Jesus said this to them! → ²⁴ Jesus said to them, “Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?”
- i. They ask a question that they think will prove both their intellect and their theological position all the while trapping Jesus and proving him to be a heretic. Yet, once again, Jesus boldly and shrewdly speaks truth not merely to their question but to their spiritual condition.
 1. Jesus concludes in 12:27 not only with an affirmation of resurrection but also with a condemnation of the Sadducees’ position, “**‘You are badly mistaken.’**” **The Greek word for “mistaken” is again *planan*, that is, “‘You are way off base.’**” If truth is to be asserted, its opposite must be denied. The belief of the Sadducees is contrary to and incompatible with the truth of God, and the only hope of correcting it (if it can be corrected) is not to ignore it but to expose it. **The ultimate answer to the Sadducees, however, is not the exegesis or even the authority of Jesus (neither of which they accept), but the *life* of Jesus, for the empty tomb will verify his teaching to the Sadducees (16:6). Jesus does not simply announce the resurrection—he *is* the resurrection (John 11:25).¹⁸**
- c. **When God makes our day, we both see and join in his purposes.**
- i. In this whole section we see those who set out to be about God’s purposes, but they missed it. And this is a tragic warning for us today. We can think we’re on the right course, but unless we are routinely and regularly enjoying God’s presence in his Word and through prayer, we can turn relationship into religion and miss the very thing we set out to be about.
 - ii. However, when we abide in Jesus and enjoy him through the posture of a received identity of grace, we grow to know, understand, and participate in the plans and purposes that God has for our lives. It is what Jesus explains in John 15 and Paul in Romans 12.
 1. **Jn 15:10-11:** ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.
 2. **Rom. 12:1-12:** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
 - iii. We also begin to live in a state of non-anxious presence. Why? Because we understand that our whole lives are worship and that enjoying God is not a performative act, but one of relationship in which God desires to commune with you too.
 1. In all three sections of chapter 12 we see the opposite in the lives of the religious leaders, and we hear the words of Jesus saying that it doesn’t have to be that way.

¹⁸ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 369.