

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor Emeritus  
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)  
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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Mark 12:13-34 (read vv.13-15a)      “Answers to Life’s Questions”

Intro. As we consider this text of Scripture, it is necessary to keep the context in mind. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey in fulfillment of prophecy. The people proclaimed Him as the King of Israel. The next day Jesus cleansed the temple and rebuked the leaders for allowing such things to take place. The leaders of the Sanhedrin then bluntly questioned Jesus’ authority to take such action. Jesus silenced them by means of a counter-question. Not only that, but by means of the parable of The Wicked Tenants He had predicted their doom. So more than ever, they were determined to kill Him. But, v.12 says, “they were afraid of the crowd.”

Now a new alliance forms with a common desire to destroy Jesus. Notice v.13, “And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk.” The Pharisees and Herodians joined forces to attempt to trap Jesus into saying something they could use against Him. This combination of Pharisees and Herodians was a strange coalition between the sanctimonious and the sacrilegious. The Pharisees claimed to be zealous about keeping God’s law, and the Herodians were worldly, and cared little about the divine commandments. And yet they came together to promote a common aim: to get rid of Jesus. Each group had its own reason for wishing to destroy Him. He had recently denounced the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. The Herodians could not have been happy with Jesus’ royal entry into Jerusalem, nor the Pharisees with the people proclaiming him as “the Son of David,” the Messiah. Also, both envied Jesus because of His influence over the people.

So the last of v.13 says they were sent “to trap him in his talk.” The word translated “trap” (*agreuo*) literally means “to catch or take by hunting or fishing.” They wanted to trap Him like an animal. Often, a fish or animal is caught with bait. It looks so good, but when they go for the bait, they are caught and put to death. Well, they set their trap with the bait of flattery, as we see in v.14. These men tell Jesus that He is truthful and that He truthfully teaches God’s way. Of course, they didn’t believe that, but they hoped to completely disarm Jesus by means of such flattery. You had better watch out when someone changes their tune about you and speaks flattery to your face (cf. Prov. 29:5). Then, in vv.13-15 we have the first of 3 loaded questions that the enemies of Jesus have for Him on this day. They were not seeking for truth. They were looking for some opportunity to have Him killed either by the Romans or by an inflamed Jewish mob.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus answered their questions, and His answers were very wise, informative and useful even for us today. Do you have questions? We are going to see that Jesus has the answers for life’s great questions.

So let’s consider the first of three questions that were addressed to Jesus in this text of Scripture. They begin with:

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<sup>1</sup> You can count on the fact that some unbelievers will try to trip you up by focusing on difficulties that appear in the Bible.

## I. A POLITICAL QUESTION

In some cases, being on the wrong side of people in political power can cost you your freedom or even your life. They were hoping to use a political question against Jesus. Now let's see:

A. The Question Stated – Beginning in the last of v.14 they ask, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?”<sup>2</sup> This was one of the great and frequently asked questions of the day. Yet it was a subtle trap, for no matter how Jesus replied to their question, especially with a yes or no, it seemed that He would be in trouble with either the Jews or the Roman authorities! The Herodians took the side of the government. They thought it was best to fully cooperate with the Romans in order to enjoy peace and material prosperity. They supported paying taxes to the secular authorities. The Pharisees resisted paying taxes to Rome, saying that to do so would be against God.

Why did Jesus ask them in v.15 to bring Him a denarius? That was the amount required for the poll tax, which was collected by the procurator from every adult male in Judea, regardless of income, and was paid directly into the imperial treasury. There were other taxes Jews had to pay as well.<sup>3</sup> The poll tax was one day's wage for the average working man. A denarius from the reign of Emperor Tiberius pictured his head on one side. On the reverse side he was shown seated on a throne, wearing a diadem, symbolic of political authority. Yet the emperors also claimed absolute spiritual authority. For beginning with Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperors assumed the title of Pontifex Maximus, i.e., “Highest Priest”. So the image of the emperor showed him clothed as a High Priest. As you can imagine, this tax to such an emperor was distasteful to many freedom-loving and religiously devout Jews. It could even be considered idolatrous.

For example, not many years prior to this, Judas of Galilee had vehemently proclaimed, “Taxation is no better than downright slavery.” He had blasted it as being no less than high treason against God.

The question put to Jesus was therefore a very clever scheme. If He answered affirmatively, he would be alienating many devout, patriotic Jews; but a negative reply would be exposing Him to the charge of rebellion against the Roman government. They thought they had Him in a trap, but they didn't have Him at all. They were dealing with the Son of God! He could see right through their hypocrisy. So let's see:

B. The Question Answered - Beginning in vv.16-17 Jesus said, “... ‘Whose likeness and inscription is this?’ They said to him, ‘Caesar’s.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’” So in answering their question, the first principle in dealing with the government is this:

1. Render to the Government What Is due - Honoring God does not mean dishonoring the emperor by refusing to pay for the privileges one enjoys from the government. In fact, the word translated “render” (*apodidomi*) in v.17 means “to pay a debt, to pay back” (Mt. 18:28, etc.). In spite of their distaste for the Roman government, they did provide the Jews many benefits. At this particular time the Roman Empire had brought peace and tranquility to the people under its sway and this to a degree seldom if ever experienced either before or afterward. They also

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<sup>2</sup> One reason this paragraph was included in 3 of the Gospel accounts was because Jesus was falsely charged with being against paying taxes to Caesar (Luke 23:2).

<sup>3</sup> Barclay says they were also required to pay a ground tax (tax on produce) and a 1% income tax (p.297).

provided good roads all over the Roman Empire, like no other society had known. They established a system of law and order with a judicial system of courts, and an appeal process. They provided for commerce and safe trade within the empire, with a stable currency that even the Jews were using, as is clear from v.16. For much of the Empire they provided a relatively safe and abundant water supply with a system of aqueducts. So paying taxes to the Roman government was in essence the discharge of a debt for benefits received. And since they had no qualms about doing business with Caesar's money, they had better pay Caesar's taxes.<sup>4</sup> After all, it had his name and image on the coin.

But He was qualifying his "yes" answer by stating that the emperor should be paid (given back) *only* what was his due. Hence, the divine honor which the emperor claimed but which is due to God alone must be refused. By drawing a distinction between "what is due to Caesar" and "what is due to God," Jesus was rejecting the very claim of Caesar, a claim made on the coin and otherwise, to the effect that his was not only a physical kingdom but also a spiritual. The emperor, to be sure, should be respected and obeyed whenever his will does not clash with the divine will.

Thus, Romans 13 teaches that Christians should be good citizens, and give to the government what is due. I strongly oppose the direction that our Federal government is taking us as a nation. Nevertheless, we are to pay our taxes, for we benefit much from an orderly society, protection from our enemies, a great transportation system, and many other temporal blessings. Government was indeed established by God (Rom. 13:1), and a flawed government is far better than anarchy. We are to obey all laws that do not clearly conflict with God's law. Furthermore, we are to speak respectfully to and about our government leaders (I Peter 2:17), and we are to pray for them (I Tim. 2:2). Have you rendered to our secular government and leaders what is their due?

Now notice the second principle:

2. Render to God the Things that Are God's - By adding "and to God [render] the things that are God's" Jesus was stressing the fact that all the worship, glory, gratitude, service, and offerings (cf. Lev. 27:30) due to God should be constantly and gladly accorded to Him. Nothing must be withheld. As the coin bore the image of Caesar and what is due be given to him, how much more should we give of ourselves who bear the image of our Creator?<sup>5</sup>

Think of what you owe God. He created you. He gives you your life's breath. He provides food for you. Jesus died to save you. You rightly belong to God (1 Cor. 6:19). You have no right to run your life any way you see fit. Have you given your heart and life to Jesus? We also have a responsibility to His church.

So the solution is not an either/or but a both/and. Yet God must always be regarded as the sovereign Lord of all, including the governments He has established. The First Amendment of our Constitution recognizes that we should be free to obey God first and foremost, especially regarding our faith and practice. We even must adhere to the apostolic creed of Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men."

So by means of this answer Jesus had discomfited His enemies. We are not surprised to read: "And they marveled at him." Who could find fault with this answer? Oh, the wisdom of Jesus Christ!

After dealing with a political question, Jesus then dealt with:

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<sup>4</sup> And since they produced the coin right there in the temple, it would be hypocritical to call it idolatrous.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian may have been the first to reflect on the fact that we bear the image of God in explaining this saying of Jesus.

## II. A DOCTRINAL QUESTION

After the Pharisees and Herodians had attempted to trip up Jesus, the Sadducees stepped up to make their attempt.<sup>6</sup> They were the religious liberals of the day. This was the priestly party, from whose ranks the high priest was selected. Thus, they tended to be aristocratic and wealthy. The temple was their special domain, the very temple which Jesus had cleansed! It is not surprising, therefore, that the Sadducees now, in turn, attack Jesus. This time, however, the attack is to ridicule His faith in the afterlife. Their faith and practice was limited to the five books of Moses and they did not believe the resurrection or afterlife was taught therein. Thus, they intended to strike a double blow. In exposing what they regarded as the foolishness of Christ's teaching, they would at the same time also triumph over the Pharisees, who likewise believed in a resurrection from the dead.

So note with me:

A. The Question - The Sadducees thought that they were smart, but Jesus soon revealed their ignorance. Now before we get to their question, notice first:

1. The Legal Background - They start off in v.19 referring to the teaching of the law. They said, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother." They now make Deut. 25:5-6 the springboard of their question. According to this law, if a wife loses her husband before any male child has been born, the brother of that husband, or else the nearest of kin, must marry the widow, so that the first child born of this marriage may be counted as a child of the deceased, and the latter's line and inheritance may not die out. This law of the kinsman-redeemer is illustrated in the Book of Ruth. Next we see:

2. The Hypothetical Story Applying the Law – In vv.20-22 we read, "There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died." Provided that their basic assumption was correct, namely, that married life continues in the hereafter, two husbands would have been sufficient to prove their point. But seven makes the story more interesting and supposedly makes belief in the resurrection more ridiculous. Now this is a most unlikely story. Each husband must not have lived very long after marrying her. I think that the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> husband should have gotten suspicious about her cooking! Did you notice that she outlived them all? Isn't that typical?

3. The Question Stated – Notice what they ask in v.23, "In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." What the opponents were doing, was setting up a straw man. It was not the doctrine of the resurrection but the assumption from which the Sadducees were proceeding that was false. They thought that teachers like Jesus believed that resurrection life would essentially be the same as our current earthly life.

There are increasing numbers of people who do not believe in an afterlife. They do not believe in a resurrection of the body. Yet the question that confronts us is the same question that Job asked long ago, "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14; NKJV). The Sadducees would have said, "No." But are they right? Have they cleverly disproved the resurrection? Well let's consider together:

B. The Answer of Jesus – Notice with me how Jesus answers them. First of all:

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<sup>6</sup> This is the only time in Mark's gospel when the Sadducees appear (Barclay, p. 301)

1. He Rebukes Them – Jesus said in v.24, “Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?” This is the difficulty today with those who are so critical of the Scriptures—they do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. Don’t let your theology be limited to what *you* think is possible! When a person departs from the Scriptures he is bound to blunder, to be badly mistaken, to wander. Had they known the Scriptures, they would have known that there is nothing in Deut. 25:5-6 that makes it applicable to the life hereafter, and they would also have known that the Old Testament in various passages teaches the resurrection of the body. Certainly those who try to base their argument on Scripture (Deut. 25:5, 6) should know Scripture! They should be acquainted with all the Scriptures, not just with one passage, which they then misapply. Even the Old Testament is not lacking in references to the bodily resurrection. Clearest, perhaps, are Psa. 16:9-11 and Dan. 12:2. Worthy of consideration are also Job 19:25-27; Psa. 17:15; 73:23-26; Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:1-14; Hos. 6:2, 13:14. And had they recognized the power of God (Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:19), they would have understood that God is able to raise the dead in such a manner that marriage will no longer be needed, neither for reproduction nor for blessedness.

Not knowing the Scriptures not only caused the Sadducees to err, but it has caused error down through the ages. The dark ages of Christendom were times when the Bible was kept back from the people. On the other hand, the great revivals and spiritual awakenings have come as people were taught the Word of God and read it for themselves. The godliest families are Bible-reading families. The holiest men and women are Bible-reading people.

Let us not be ignorant of the Bible, lest we fall into grave error. If we are honest, we would say that we all have been wrong about a number of things. However, to be wrong about spiritual truth can have eternal consequences. So let us read God’s Word diligently and make it our rule of faith and practice. Let us labor to spread the Bible over the world. The more the Book is known, the better the world will be. Do you know the Scriptures? Do you read it daily? Have you ever read the whole Bible? Do you attend Bible study on a regular basis? How can you know the answer to life’s big questions if you don’t know the Scriptures? Don’t be like the Sadducees. Learn the Word of God, and you will also know the attributes of God, including His great power. And by faith in His power, you can see God do great things. Nothing is impossible with God.

So after giving a rebuke, we see next that:

2. He Answers Their Question – Notice what Jesus goes on to say in vv.25-27, “For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses<sup>7</sup>, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.” Their question is based on a false premise. Resurrection is not the restoration and resumption of life as we know it; it is not just a spruced up version of our present physical bodies. It is the entrance into a new life that is very different and far better. He demolishes their false assumption that marriage is resumed at the time of the resurrection. Since there will be no death, the race will not have to reproduce. The saved will be like the angels in this respect; yes, like the angels whose very existence the Sadducees also deny (Acts 23:8). I want to make it clear, Jesus did not say that we would *become* angels or be like the angels in everything, for God’s children are higher than the angels. He said that in our resurrection bodies, we would be nonsexual beings like the angels; and therefore, marriage would no longer exist. This does not necessarily mean that gender will be completely erased. I hope that will still be masculine and feminine traits in our eternal state. But

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<sup>7</sup> Jesus clearly affirmed Mosaic authorship!

our relationships with one another will transcend the kind of relationships that we have here on earth. On earth it seems to take an intimate act of marriage to bring two people very close together in a loving union, but in heaven, we have a close, loving relationship with everyone. We'll be able to hug each other and even give each other a holy kiss without it leading to lust or a sinful, sexual relationship.

By the way, Jesus and Mohammad are in total disagreement here. Islam teaches that if you die in Jihad, you will enjoy a paradise of endless sex with 72 virgins. How can Jesus and Mohammad both be right? They are not. Mohammad erred not knowing the clear teaching of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

While He was correcting their bad theology, Jesus decided to give other reasons why the Sadducees were wrong in their beliefs. So beginning in v.26, Jesus refers to another passage of Scripture where God spoke from the burning bush saying, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."<sup>8</sup> Then He says in v.27, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong." The way God spoke of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it is fair to imply that they were indeed still alive, though they had been dead for some time. And since they died not fully receiving the promises of God, it would take a resurrection for them to fully inherit the promises (cf. Heb. 11:13, 39-40). Surely there is life after death! There is coming a day when the dead shall rise from the dead, and those who believe in Christ will have new bodies, like unto the resurrection body of Jesus Christ. He who created these bodies has the power to reassemble them and make them even greater than before. Our new bodies will not get sick, suffer pain, or die. We will have new capabilities. We will be super men and women in a wonderful new world.

Now as you consider the question of eternity and eternal life, who are you going to believe? Will you believe the likes of atheist Richard Dawkins? Will you believe some atheist professor in some university? Will you believe some religious guru somewhere? Or will you believe Jesus, who died, and rose again from the dead? He knows what is beyond death, because He has been there. No only that, but He is the eternal Son of God. He knows something about eternity! In every sense Jesus Christ is Himself the cause of His people's resurrection. He said in John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die...." Put your faith in Him, and you shall have eternal life.

Over on the straits of Gibraltar, on the Pillars of Hercules, was inscribed the Latin words "Ne plus ultra", i.e. nothing beyond. But when Columbus discovered America and returned, they scratched out the word "Ne" and it then said, "More beyond." When Jesus died and rose again, He declared to the world there is "More beyond." Yes, there is more beyond the door of death for the Christian, a blessed eternal life in heaven.

Last of all, Jesus answers:

### III. A SPIRITUAL QUESTION

Now one of the scribes came to ask Jesus a question. The scribes were the experts in the law of the Old Testament. Having observed how well Jesus answered the previous questions, he had a question of his own, much more sincere in its purpose. Now notice with me:

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<sup>8</sup> In Ex. 3:6 LXX God says, "I am" not "I was." In Hebrew "I am" is implied but not stated. Notice that Jesus quoted from one of the books that they accepted as authoritative.

A. The Question Stated – In the last of v.28 a scribe asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Among the scribes, this was one of the most common questions among the scribes. The rabbis, devoted to hairsplitting legalism, carried on lengthy debates about the commandments, arguing whether a particular one was great or small, heavy or light. So they debated the question, “Which of the 613 commandments, is the most important of all?”

Understanding the right priorities has a place in our relationship with God. If that is not done, we can easily degenerate into majoring on minors. For example, in Matt. 23:23 Jesus said: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you ... have neglected the more important requirements of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (NKJV). Elsewhere, He said that they were “blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:24; NKJV). So let’s see:

B. The Answer – Notice the answer of Jesus in vv.29-31, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall 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: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Jesus made love the most important thing in life, because “love is the fulfilling of the Law” (Rom. 13:8-10). Furthermore, the Bible declares that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). Naturally, He would expect His children to practice love as well. The apostle Paul said in Eph. 5:2 that we are to “walk in love, as Christ also has loved us...” (NKJV). Paul said in 1 Cor. 13:13, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Notice the two-fold requirements of love.

1. We Must Love God - This love must be directed first of all toward God with every aspect of our being. The heart, soul, mind, and strength must cooperate in loving God. We should love God with all the “faculties” with which God has endowed us.

Moreover, man must use all these powers to the full. Note the fourfold “all.” The point is that God’s wholehearted love must not be answered in a halfhearted manner. When God loves, He loves the *world*; when He gives, He even gives His own Son. A greater love is impossible.

Do you love God with *all* your heart and mind and soul? If not, then you are breaking His commandment. There are too many people, even in the church, who love the world, or love their career, or love other persons or things more than God. Jesus said you cannot serve God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24). You cannot give God a few hours on Sunday and ignore Him the rest of the week.

Furthermore:

2. We Must Love Others - This love must be directed not only toward God (Deut. 6:5) but also toward man (Lev. 19:18). Notice it says love your neighbor “as yourself.” Man has been created with love for himself. That love for self should be the measure whereby he decides how to love his neighbor. This is a very practical precept. And that “neighbor,” moreover, is anyone who has been providentially placed in your path for sympathy and help. Have you made any effort to get to know your neighbors?

You can’t really obey the second commandment until you obey the first. If you love the Lord, you will have a greater capacity to love others.

In v.32 we see that this scribe accepted the answer given by Jesus with delighted, unqualified approval. It is clear that the words of Jesus had made a very deep impression upon this man, and that he is honest enough to admit it, even though many of his fellow scribes were opposed to Jesus. The man also adds something in v.33, namely, that such love as here described “is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” It would seem that this man was rather

thoroughly at home in the Scriptures. His statement is impressive in light of the fact that Jesus had recently cleansed the temple of many sacrificial animals that were being sold there.

So we see that once again, Jesus had great wisdom in answering the questions of life. If you want answers, look to Jesus. Look to His Word.

Then Jesus said to the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” This man was just a step away from eternal life. If this scribe would now, by God’s grace and power, take one more step, and actually believe in Jesus as his Savior and Lord, he would have advanced from a position of being “not far from” to one of being “inside” the kingdom of God.

There may be some here today that are just a step away from salvation. While most people are far from God’s kingdom, you are in church today. You have listened today. Why don’t you take the next step and *enter* the Kingdom of God. Just repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. He clearly demonstrates in this text that He has the answers to life’s questions. He is the answer to life’s problems! Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life....” So trust in Him today!

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2024; David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Mark* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Jerry Vines (notes from sermons tape of 4/1/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001).

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