

“Honest Questions for a Change”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 8/18/19
Mark 12:28-40, at FBC of Newport, NH

//28 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?”//

—Mark 12:28 (NIV)

We’re still early in the week of Jesus’ Passion.

On Sunday he entered Jerusalem in a messianic parade, coming in peace. But he has also faced the corruption and insult found in the heart of the city in the temple.

On Monday he cleanses the temple. And when his critics challenge his authority to do so, they fail to get anywhere because they themselves did not dare to lay all the cards on the table for fear they had more to hide than Jesus. After this, Jesus tells one of his most confrontational and pointed parables for all to hear. In it he alludes to the corruption of the Jewish authorities, the coming death of Jesus, and even the identification of himself as the Son of the Owner of the vineyard—Israel!

Now on Tuesday Jesus encounters a series of questions. We’ve just covered two of them. Trick questions, designed to embarrass Jesus and undermine his authority and popularity with the crowd. But there are two more questions coming, one by a teacher of the law who seems genuinely impressed with Jesus, so he asks an honest question. And the last question, from Jesus himself, getting people to question themselves in their understanding of the Messiah.

About these four questions, the New Testament scholar, Craig L. Blomberg says this:

“The four episodes in Mark 12:13-37 interestingly correspond to the four questions of the ancient Passover liturgy: (a) a question regarding a point of law (on paying taxes...); (b) a question with a note of scoffing (on the resurrection...); (c) a question by a person of “plain piety” (the scribe asking about the greatest commandment...); and (d) a question by the father of the family at his own initiative (Jesus asking about David’s son...).”

—Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 367

Then he asks, “Do the evangelists by this device intend to point out Jesus as the true fulfillment of the Passover?” I find that more than interesting. Surely Jesus taught his disciples as much when he pointed to the broken bread as his broken body and his shed blood as the cup of the New

Covenant. This would seem to be showing the Passion of Jesus weaving together with Passover, the last week of Jesus' mortal life.

So keep this in mind as we look at these last two questions. For even though they are in contrast with the motivations of the first two, they are all working together toward revealing Jesus as God's perfect provision for us sinners to be set free to worship God and serve him with eternal thanksgiving and praise.

The **first honest question** comes from one of the listeners of the debate going on with Jesus. He's a scribe and teacher of the law. He asks a question which is asked of most every serious Jewish teacher in order to get a sense of where they're coming from. "Which is the most important commandment?"

Jesus answers not only with the law, but with the Shema before it, the cornerstone of the Jewish faith. "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." (from Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Then he adds to it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:17-18)

The scribe simply agrees with Jesus. He reinforces the importance of one's love for God and neighbor by saying it is "more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Jesus is impressed by this man's agreement and shows it by telling him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." The scribe is not there yet, but he's at least near.

After this Mark says no one dared ask Jesus any more questions.

Suddenly we go from a contentious, radioactive face-off between deadly enemies to a mutual, fundamental agreement between fellow Jews on the most important law before their God. This had to have been refreshing for the both of them. Jesus can be seen here as standing firmly on recognized Jewish orthodoxy. And the scribe can be seen as standing near to the kingdom of God. It is a reminder of just how much of the division between the Jewish leadership and Jesus was unnecessary, if only it were approached with more honesty, humility and recognition of the common ground built into the Jewish faith.

Now if this were an ordinary political conflict of our day, we would surely be blaming both these Jewish leaders *and Jesus* for not getting along. If only they would both be reasonable, civilized and respectful of one another then everyone would better understand each other, hug, and find ways to work together. I can just hear it now, in a most patronizing voice:

“Now Jesus, you shouldn’t have overturned those tables and disrupted the business of those money changers in the temple, or told that terribly insulting parable in front of everybody. And you Herodians and Pharisees should not be trying to trick Jesus into getting himself crucified. See how nicely everything goes when Mr. Scribe here finally asks an honest question for a change? Let’s just see if we can all get along better from here.”

But the situation with Jesus confronting the leadership in Jerusalem is not going to be reduced to this kind of simplistic foolishness. The conflict brewing in the streets is profound. It is a battle line between the kingdom of God and the godless ways of Man, even now in the city of David. There will be no “agreeing to disagree” here. There is going to be a conflict. There is going to be an all or nothing challenge as to just who is right and who is wrong—in the eyes of God.

However, in the midst of this face-off, this scribe does ask an honest question—and gets an honest answer. Jesus is perfectly capable of changing gears toward anyone who will approach him in this way. And now this scribe is near to the kingdom of God.

If we want to pierce through the politics of our day, or the personal conflicts in our life, then we need to get honest with God. We need to love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. Or we at least need to remember that as our goal, even if we do not achieve it.

And if we want to love God in this way, then we need to love our neighbor. For it’s easy to invisibly love the invisible God. Who can say otherwise? So then, we’re right back in the fog again. But loving our neighbor is visible. And it is a measure for our love of God.

So if we want to love our neighbor as a practical way to love our God, then we need focus on being ourselves the kind of neighbor we would want to have next to us. It’s not “rocket surgery,” as a friend of mine likes to say. It’s something most everyone can understand.

So then, when God shows up as a neighbor in our conflicted, confusing world and you sense that people aren’t treating him as he should be treated, we may find ourselves speaking to him, without even realizing it. And we may end up asking him an honest question for a change. And that change could make all the difference between getting swept along by the world’s lack of love for God or getting some clarity as to where the kingdom of God truly is in all this confusion. And how near or far we need to move to be in it.

But there are two honest questions at work here. The second one is from Jesus himself. When no one dared ask any more questions, he took the occasion to ask about their understanding of the Messiah as

the “son of David.” He points to Psalm 110:1 where David calls the Messiah *his* Lord. It’s the kind of thing a person might read and just skip over because they don’t know what to make of it. But Jesus knew what to make of it. And now he’s pressing the people there to ask themselves this honest question. If David himself calls the Messiah “Lord,” how then can he be his son? It’s so backwards it forces you to ponder why. It’s kind of like our seeing a truck with its business lettering on the door reading: “Smith & Father’s Plumbing Service,” instead of “Smith & Son’s Plumbing.” Why would anyone put their father second? But in David’s case it was him as the father putting his great, great, great ..., great grandson above him in the order of things. And things relating to God. That verse reads:

“The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”

The term “Lord” has a wide range of use, from a simple show of respect for another person, to a profound reference to almighty God. The determining factor for which is context. David calls the Messiah “my Lord” and *the* Lord God has this Lord sit at God’s right hand. Doesn’t sound like a simple show of respect in either case.

By raising this question here, Jesus is planting a scriptural seed to get his Jewish audience to ponder their Messiah beyond the confines of just a descendant of David who will come and wage war against their Roman enemy oppressors.

David, this king of Israel, is the highest human figure in Judaism. But this “Lord” in Psalm 110 is higher than David, and even sitting at the right hand of *the* Lord God almighty. Jesus is not overtly stating these things about himself and the Messiah, but he is setting the stage for that teaching later. Right now he is getting anyone who has ears to hear to ponder this honest question honestly. Come Pentecost, just under two months away, the church will be readily referring to Jesus as the Christ/Messiah, with the full understanding of him as “Lord” in the same way that God is the “Lord.”

Where might you and I have need of Jesus asking us this kind of honest question? Some area where we think we know something about God and his ways, but in reality we have an impoverished understanding?

Instead of his hitting us all at once with the truth, he may come to us first with a question like this, to warm us up, to make us ponder. We may not even have a good reply, just an uneasiness that won’t go away, but also a readiness to hear him when he comes back to us with the whole story. That is, if we still have those ears that hear, and an honest heart that will respond well to his honest question.