

THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Mark 12:13-27

Key Verse: 12:27

“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”

In chapters 11-13 Jesus taught his Lordship in various ways: by claiming ownership of a donkey (11:3), by entering Jerusalem as a humble king (11:7-10), by cursing a fruitless fig tree (11:14), by clearing the temple as the Judge (11:15-16), and by identifying himself as the Son of God and the cornerstone (12:6, 10). At the end of chapter 12, Jesus quoted David’s psalm to proclaim the Messiah’s Lordship (12:36-37). In chapter 13, Jesus foretells his coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords in great power and glory (13:26). Today’s passage is in the midst of Jesus’ teachings about his Lordship. At first glance this passage may seem unrelated to his Lordship. But when we carefully observe, it is quite related. When Jesus cleansed the temple, the Sanhedrin members began looking for a way to kill him. But they feared him because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching (11:18). When Jesus taught the parable of the tenants, they looked for a way to arrest him. But they failed. Now, in chapter 12, they approach group by group to catch Jesus in his words and alienate him from the crowd. But Jesus answered with such great wisdom that they were totally defeated. As Isaiah foretold, Jesus revealed himself to be Messiah and Lord: **“The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord...”** (Isa 11:2). Jesus did more than win arguments. Jesus taught vital spiritual truth that edified his people. Let’s listen to Jesus’ words of wisdom so that we may meet the living God and live as his people.

First, give to Caesar; give to God (13-17). Jesus’ first opponents were a team composed of Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees were pious people who kept God’s law faithfully. At a critical point in Israel’s history, in the time between the testaments, they had courageously rejected the spread of pagan Greek culture. They were respected shepherds of their people. But in Jesus’ time, they had become hypocritical and began to burden their people. Jesus rebuked them sharply, and they became his adversaries. In contrast to them, the Herodians were totally secular and very involved in Roman politics. Pharisees and Herodians were usually opposed to each other. But this time,

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under the leadership of the Sanhedrin, they were sent together in order to get rid of a common enemy, Jesus.

In approaching Jesus, they disguised their malicious intention and used flattering words. Flattery can be a sweet poison to anyone. One who is infected by flattery loses discernment and becomes vulnerable. So we should be alert to the danger of flattery. Nevertheless, what was said about Jesus was true: **“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”** (14a). Jesus was a man of integrity. He was sinless; he once asked the religious leaders, **“Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?”** (Jn 8:46) Peter described Jesus as the Lamb without blemish or defect (1Pe 1:19). Out of his perfect purity, Jesus taught the truth. He didn’t teach what people wanted to hear, but what they needed to hear. Because of that he was hated and persecuted. But he was not swayed by anyone, be they rich or powerful. When he later stood before Pilate, who said, **“You are a king, then!”** Jesus answered, **“You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me”** (Jn 8:37). Jesus is the King of truth. If we are on the side of truth, we must listen to Jesus and proclaim the truth. Surely we will be hated. But in this way we can learn of Jesus and become people of integrity like Jesus.

After flattering Jesus, they set their trap: **“Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”** (14b-15a) They pressed him to say “yes” or “no.” If Jesus said “yes,” then he would alienate the crowd. No one likes to pay tax. The imperial tax was especially irritating because it represented their submission to a foreign power and this hurt their pride as God’s chosen people. If Jesus said “no,” the Herodians would arrest him right away. It seems Jesus had no way out. The Pharisees must have smiled as they thought, “We have got you now!” Jesus knew their hypocrisy and exposed their motive, saying, **“Why are you trying to trap me?”** (15b) Then he said, **“Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.”** When they brought the coin, he asked them, **“Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”** **“Caesar’s,”** they replied (16b). On one side of a denarius was a profile of Tiberius Caesar, with a Latin inscription: “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” On the opposite side was a picture of the Roman goddess of peace, Pax, with a Latin inscription, “High Priest.” After

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looking at the coin Jesus said, **“Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him (17).**

What do Jesus words, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” mean? This means that the people should carry out basic duties as citizens even under the oppressive rule of Rome. Jesus did not oppose paying taxes to Caesar because Jesus knew that Caesar’s authority came from God (Ro 13:1). God is the one who raises rulers and deposes them in order to fulfill his own will and purpose (Dan 4:17). As citizens we need to pay tax, serve on jury duty, vote, educate our children, shovel the snow, mow the lawn, recycle, and in the time of war, serve in the military. Doing our basic duty as citizens is essential to be effective Christian witnesses in our community.

What do Jesus’ words, “Give to God what is God’s” mean? Actually, everything belongs to God because God is the Creator and Provider and the Sovereign Ruler over everything. As an acknowledgement that all things came from God and belong to him, God wants us to offer a tithe. It is not because he needs money. God wants us to express our respect and love so that he may bless us all the more. So he says in Malachi 3:10, **“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”** God does not want just our money, but our hearts and minds and souls and strength so that we may have an intimate love relationship with him (Dt 6:5).

As the coin had the image of Caesar, so man is made in the image of God. So we should give ourselves to God. God is not like Caesar. Caesar wants our money and duty for his own benefit. But God wants us to have a relationship with him. As God has loved and cared for us, and graciously provided all we have, he wants us to give back to him to express our love and thanks and to enjoy fellowship with him. In this way we can have a vine and branch relationship with him. Then his love and blessings flow in our lives. We can grow in his image and live a meaningful and fruitful life. Let’s give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s!

Second, God is the God of the living (18-27). In the first round, Jesus soundly defeated the Pharisees and Herodians. When the bell for round two

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sounded, the Sadducees appeared. They were secretly rejoicing that the Pharisees had been defeated and thought this was their chance to show their superiority. The Sadducees were the party of the high priest and his associates. They were most interested in administration of the temple. They were wealthy and political. They rejected extra-biblical traditions, such as the traditions of the elders and the oral law. They embraced only the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, as their canon. Since the word “resurrection” was not explicitly mentioned in the Pentateuch, they said that there was no resurrection (18). They also did not believe in any spiritual realities, such as spirits, angels, and the immortality of the soul (Ac 23:8). Though they appeared to serve God, they were practical atheists.

In order to ridicule the resurrection, they concocted a weird story based on Deuteronomy 25:5-10 and brought it to Jesus. There were seven brothers. When the oldest one came of age, he married a woman. But suddenly he contracted a strange disease and died without having a child. Then, according to Moses’ law, the second son married the widow. But then he died accidentally, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In this way, all seven married the woman and died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman, who seemed to be a source of curse for the family, also died. After telling this terrible story, the Sadducees asked Jesus, **“At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”** (23) This story reflected their thoughts and desires as those confined to the visible world. They only thought about marriage, barrenness and death, as though death is the end of everything. They thought of the resurrection as causing a lot of problems. According to their logic, there should not be a resurrection. Though they had wealth in the world, they had no hope or vision. They were pessimistic and fatalistic under the power of death. They were so miserable.

Jesus had a shepherd’s heart for them. So instead of rebuking them for their evil intent, he taught them the life-giving word of God, saying, **“Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?”** (24) Jesus knew their root problem was that they did not know the Scriptures or the power of God. Of course, they read the Pentateuch so many times and even memorized it. But they tried to understand it only intellectually, by their reason. So they did not catch the spiritual meaning and they did not meet God through his words. The words of God written in the Scriptures are God-breathed (2Ti 3:16a). The Scriptures were spoken through

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human beings who were fully inspired by the Holy Spirit (2Pe 1:21). Therefore, without the help of the Holy Spirit we cannot understand the Scriptures (1Cor 2:13-14). When we study the Bible, we need the Holy Spirit's help. When we depend on him, the Holy Spirit guides us into all truth (Jn 16:13). On the other hand, if we analyze the words of God only with human reason we cannot discover the life in them. It is because the word of God is living and active (Heb 4:12). The moment we try to analyze living things, the life flees. For example, when we cut open a live fish to analyze it, its life vanishes and we can analyze only the dead carcass. The purpose of Bible study is to encounter the living, Almighty God and to listen to and respond to him. It is vibrant interaction, like a dance with God. When I was in theology class at Wheaton, one classmate was a brilliant scholar. He had all the answers. But he did not believe the word of God from his heart and was full of agony. So he asked me to pray for him. Of course, we need to exercise our intellectual ability when we study the Bible. But that is a small piece. The most important thing is to humbly rely on the Holy Spirit.

Jesus corrected the Sadducees' error regarding marriage and the resurrection very clearly in verse 25, **“When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.”** God has almighty power not only to raise the dead, but to transform our lowly bodies into glorious spiritual bodies (Php 3:21). When God created human beings, he gave us bodies fit to live in this world and we need to marry in order to procreate (Mal 2:15). But in heaven we no longer need to marry. There will be no more desire to marry and no more struggles among married couples. We will be like the angels in heaven: pure, holy, free from all kinds of carnal desires and physical limitations, wholly devoted to God, full of love and joy and peace. There will be no more marks of aging such as wrinkles and baldness, no more disease—such as cancer—no more pain, no more death, no more mourning. We will be imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual (1Cor 15:42-44). In short we will all be like Jesus (1Jn 3:2).

In order to support his teaching, Jesus quoted from Exodus, one of the books of the Pentateuch, saying, **“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’”** (26). At that time, Moses was in exile in the wilderness. Though he had been a prince in Egypt, he secretly tried to help his own people, who were

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slaves. When this was exposed, he became a political criminal, condemned to death by Pharaoh. So he fled to the wilderness, where he lived for 40 years as a shepherd of his father-in-law's sheep. The most painful wound in his heart was from the rejection of his own people. He had lived in frustration, bitterness, and deep despair—without any hope, vision or life direction. In fact, he was as good as dead. God appeared to him in a burning bush in order to arouse his curiosity. God called to him, **“Moses! Moses!”** Moses said, **“Here I am.”** God said, **“Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”** Then he said, **“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.”** Then God gave Moses a mission to deliver his people Israel from bondage in Egypt. When Moses hesitated, God revealed himself, saying, **“I AM WHO I AM”** (Ex 3:1-14). God's name **“I AM”** is a whole sentence, which contains both a noun and a verb. So he is not just a character, but he is active and alive and he always exists—past, present and future. God is eternal. On the other hand, all other gods are known only by a noun name. It is because they are not active. They don't do anything. They are just man-made idols. Some people think of God as impersonal, detached or mechanical. Greek philosophers thought of God as the ultimate idea. But when God said to Moses, **“I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,”** it means that God is personal. He knows his people by name and identifies with them as individuals. God is the God of history. God is the God of covenant promises. He continues his redemptive work from generation to generation based on his promises. Though Abraham lived a long and blessed life, he died. Isaac and Jacob died as well. But God is still the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When Abraham, Isaac and Jacob died, God did not die. Even though Abraham, Isaac and Jacob died, they were still alive, because God made them alive. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were patriarchs who lived by faith. They lived as foreigners and strangers on earth. But they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one—whose architect and builder is God. They had resurrection faith. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Heb 11:13-16). God is pleased to bless those who believe he is living, almighty and eternal. God proved that their faith was right by making them alive. Several centuries after Jacob died, God appeared to Moses. God wanted to be the God of Moses. When Moses had faith in God, he was truly alive. He was able to perform many miracles and delivered the Israelites from the bondage of slavery. By faith he became a history maker.

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Jesus concluded in verse 27, **“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”** “The dead” are those who do not have faith in God like the Sadducees. To people like them, everything is dark and tragic and miserable. Death is the end of everything. There is no true hope or vision. Their way of thinking is dead. They are always negative and pessimistic. Though they are physically alive, they are actually as good as dead. They cannot see God or experience the power of God. Nietzsche, who was a German philosopher (1844-1900), said “God is dead.” But God said, “Nietzsche is dead.” “The living” refers to those who have faith in God. They are full of spirit in their words and actions. Their lives are vibrant and dynamic. They are full of hope and vision. They are joyful and thankful and positive, finding some possibility in any situation. Through their faith God works out his salvation purpose. Are we living or dead? It is easy for us to limit God in our reason and experience. God is beyond our reason and experience. God is the Almighty and Eternal God. Nothing is impossible with God. He can do abundantly more than all we ask or imagine. If we feel dead or frustrated, the problem is not God, but us. We need to honestly ask ourselves, “Am I living by faith in the living God, or not?” God is not the God of the dead but of the living. May God help us to live by faith like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. Then God is not ashamed to be called our God. May each of us know the Lord as “my God.”