

GIVING TO THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Mark 12:13-27

Key Verse: 12:27a, "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday. Jesus cleared the temple on Monday. Now it was Tuesday. Scholars call it "Teaching Tuesday." Jesus was teaching in the temple courts for the last time. He was grilled with many questions intended to defeat and trap him. His authority was questioned. Jesus told the ominous Parable of the Tenants. Now Jesus was asked about paying taxes to Caesar and about marriage at the resurrection. Jesus teaches that we have human obligations to fulfill. But more importantly, we have obligations to the living God. Let's listen and learn from Jesus, our wonderful Teacher.

First, "Give to Caesar; give to God" (13-17).

The Jewish chief priests, teachers of the law and elders didn't like Jesus' Parable of the Tenants, since they knew the parable was against them. They looked for a way to arrest Jesus. They sent some Pharisees and Herodians to catch Jesus in his words. They spoke flattering words to Jesus saying, "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. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

Clearly, this was a hot question at that time. This Roman imperial tax was a special tax levied on subject peoples, not on Roman citizens. So nearly every Jew was against this tax, except Jewish tax collectors. The Pharisees didn't like the tax, though they had to pay it. The Herodians, on the other hand, were supporters of Herod, and fully agreed to paying the tax. So, if Jesus said publicly, "Don't pay the tax," the Herodians would report it and have Jesus arrested for treason against the Roman government. But if Jesus said, "Pay the tax," he would lose favor with the people. It seemed that this question would defeat Jesus whatever he replied.

Jesus saw through their hypocrisy, knowing their intentions were not sincere. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." A denarius was a Roman coin worth about a day's wages. They brought the coin to Jesus, and Jesus said, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Governments mint money, such as coins or bills. The money is backed by the

government for trade, purchases and paying taxes. The coin or bill usually has the image of a national leader, and the value of the coin on it.

After looking at the coin, Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at Jesus.

What does it mean that we are to give to Caesar what is Caesar's? It means that we have the civil duty to pay taxes to our ruling government and to be good law-abiding citizens. Governments protect and provide for their people. In the USA, we are protected by our various military branches (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, National Guard, Coast Guard) as well as our city and county police officers. This week one Chicago police woman, 29 year old Ella French, was killed in line of duty. We should pray for our police officers. In addition, the government provides for public transportation such as trains, buses and highways, and for utilities such as water, and subsidized gas and electricity, as well as garbage collection, and emergency medical and fire services. We have three federal branches of our government—executive (President, Vice President, and cabinet), legislative (Congress which makes laws) and judicial (the courts, including the Supreme Court). We have a state governor--Pritzker, a city mayor--Lightfoot, and a neighborhood alderwoman—Silverstein. This was what I remembered on my own. Then I researched and learned so much more that the government does, which I had forgotten or not realized. There are 15 executive federal departments: Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health & Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing & Urban Development, Interior, Labor, State, Transportation, Treasury, Veterans Affairs, and Justice (Attorney General). In addition, there are hundreds of federal agencies and commissions with various responsibilities. Do these make mistakes? Are there misuses of funds and power? Are there selfish intentions? Yes. So what should we do? Some people make that an excuse not to pay taxes. But the Bible tells us to pray for those in authority. We should pray for wise, just and efficient decisions by our leaders, that honor God and help the people. Thank God for all these government benefits, blessings and privileges we have we received. We should pray for them and we should pay our fair amount of taxes to our government: sales tax, property tax, income tax, etc.

How about to a pagan or evil government? It's interesting to note that Rome at the time of Jesus was not a God-honoring empire. They followed another religion and other gods, and even worshiped the Roman emperor. Even so, both Apostles Peter and Paul wrote that we are to submit to our governing authorities. Paul wrote in Romans 13, verses 1 and 6, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God...This is also why you pay taxes..." Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:13-14,

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.” So we have civil obligations to our government.

The only exception to obeying the government is when the government demands something that is in defiance of God’s laws. In the book of Daniel, Daniel and his three friends refused to bow down to the king’s idol or to stop praying, even if it meant their execution. In the book of Acts, apostles Peter and John were commanded to stop preaching the gospel, but they said, “We must obey God.” This is the exception. But the rule is to submit to authorities. Jesus said, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.”

Jesus also said, “Give to God what is God’s.” Then what is God’s? One way to give to God is by giving a tithe of our income back to God. Tithing is a standard gauge of giving to God. Malachi 3:10 says, “‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ say 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.’” Tithing is one way to give to God. But giving to God is more than tithing. We thought about the provisions and protections we receive from our government. How about God? What has God given us? Just as a denarius was made by Caesar and imprinted with his image, so human life was made by God and stamped with God’s image. So our very lives belong to God. God has given us life, breath, all that we are and have. What rightfully belongs to God is our life, our love, our worship, our devotion, our obedience. With one sentence Jesus silenced the Pharisees and the Herodians: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

Second, the God of the living (18-27).

After answering the question of paying taxes, another group came to question Jesus. They were the Sadducees. The Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, nor angels, nor spirits (Ac 23:8). They claimed to believe only the five books of Moses. They came to Jesus with a morbid, depressing story. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

The story was based on the Jewish levirate law which said that a brother should marry his dead brother's wife if she had no child. The idea was that an heir could carry on the family name and the family property.

Their question was, "At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" Recall that the Sadducees didn't even believe in the resurrection. Then why did they ask this question? They wanted to make the resurrection look ridiculous, even humorous. Would the seven brothers fight in heaven over whose wife she would be? Would the woman choose in heaven which husband she loved the most on earth? Their point was to discredit the teaching of resurrection and eternal life in heaven.

Notice that their story was tragically sad. A woman had seven marriages followed by seven funerals of her husbands. Each time she married, she hoped to have a child. But she had none. Finally, she also died, childless. Their story was fatalistic and full of death. Romans 8:6 says, "The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace."

So how did Jesus answer their question? Look at verses 24-27.

²⁴ Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵ When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶ 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'? ²⁷ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

Jesus' answer is indeed marvelous and beautiful. The Sadducees were in error and badly mistaken, because they didn't believe in God's word nor God's power. They were practical atheists. Atheists believe that this world is all there is, and we should only be concerned with our lives here and now. It sounds reasonable, but this way of thinking can be summarized by one repeated word in the book of Ecclesiastes: meaningless. Ecclesiastes 2:11 says, "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."

The Sadducees didn't know the Scriptures or the power of God. Jesus says we must know the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the word of God and the wisdom of God. There are so many wonderful blessings in the Scriptures, like joy, hope and peace. Psalm 19:7-9 describes some of these blessings:

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.

The Scriptures declare that God is faithful, true and trustworthy. By knowing and believing the Scriptures, we can come to know God, who is faithful and true.

The Sadducees also didn't know the power of God. God is powerful. God is almighty. God created the heavens and earth. God can raise the dead. God gives life to the dead. Our lives are so weak and prone to disease and failure. The other day I felt sick, perhaps from something I ate. My whole body felt weak and aching. I felt I needed God's power. When I felt better, I thanked God for restoring my health and strength. I also thanked God for the hope I have in Christ beyond this body and this life.

God wants us to know and experience the power of God. This week we saw God's power, if even in small way. The forecast didn't look good for our children's outdoor Bible conference. But we prayed for good weather. On the first two days it rained only after the program finished. On the third day the rain stopped during set up. It was a small mountain that God moved for us. God also blessed Theresa and Esther to get baptized yesterday. Friday night, when I felt sick, I was a little worried that I wouldn't be able to attend the ELC meeting on Saturday morning and I might be too sick to prepare this message, even though I never missed preaching due to sickness. I thank God for his help and mercy. We need to experience God's power in our personal lives, even daily, through faith and trust in him.

Jesus said, "When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." Jesus didn't say, "If the dead rise." Jesus said, "When they dead rise." The dead will rise again. How do I know this? Because Jesus said so, and Jesus never lies. Jesus is trustworthy, faithful and true. Heaven and earth will pass away, but Jesus' words will never pass away.

In heaven people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. Why not? For one thing, no one can die in heaven, so there is no need to repopulate heaven. Also, in this world, we usually focus on loving our families. But in heaven, we are all one big family, and Jesus is the focus of our love. Our love will not be focused or limited to a few family members. We will love one another with God's love. We will be like the angels in heaven.

What will heaven be like? The Sadducees assumed that if there was a heaven it would just be an extension of life on earth. But it will be different. Paul described the difference

of our earthly bodies with our heavenly bodies to come: "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1Cor 15:42-44).

Heaven will be wondrous, beyond our imagination. One Bible commentator made an analogy of a baby being born into the world. For over 9 months a baby lives in a mother's womb, in darkness. A baby could never imagine life in this world until the wonder and beauty and power of being born. Perhaps heaven will be such a radical a change like this birth, beyond our imagination.

Jesus then taught the Sadducees the Bible from Exodus: "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'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!" Jesus taught from a Bible passage that the Sadducees claimed to believe, from the book of Exodus. Exodus chapter 3 tells the story of the call of Moses at the burning bush. God identified himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. These three men had lived hundreds of years before Moses. Yet God said he was their God.

God is the eternal, ever-living God. God cannot die. What is more, God's children cannot die either. They are alive in him forever more. Why would God identify himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, if these men were dead? It would mean that God could not keep them alive. Jesus said, "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Luke adds the phrase, "for to him all are alive" (Lk 20:38).

God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is the God of history. He is the God of individuals. Each person can have a personal relationship with God. God doesn't want us to relate to him based on the faith of our parents or children or someone else. God wants each of us to know him as "my God." David wrote in Psalm 18:2, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." God wants us to relate to him personally as our loving, faithful, powerful, eternal Father in heaven. We can each know God personally as our Father in heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through this passage I personally received newly the importance of two things: knowing the Scriptures, and knowing the power of the living God. For the past two weeks, I've been more interested in the Olympic medal results than in reading the Bible. So I could say how many gold medals the USA has, but my Bible reading fell further behind. Regarding God's power, we must not live in weakness or discouragement or unbelief or

doubt, but rather believe and experience the power of God in our personal lives, our families, our ministries, and our church.

We who believe have hope and promise in our eternal, living God. We have hope in the promise of resurrection, that we will be like the angels in heaven. We have the joy and privilege to give our hearts and lives to our almighty, living God, who is the God of the living. We are alive in him. He is worthy of our hearts and lives.