

A SERIES OF QUESTIONS

Mark 12:13-37

Early in this memorable day of public teaching, Christ had been attacked by the elders and chief priests and scribes. He had defeated them, exposed them to ridicule and indicted them as apostates and murderers. In their furious hate they would have killed Him at once, but they feared the multitudes with whom He was so popular. To bring about His death, therefore, they must first discredit Him with the people. To accomplish this they decided to try to entangle Him in His teaching. Thus to entrap Him, they returned with a series of three crafty questions. Christ evaded each snare, answered each question fairly and completely, and then asked a question by which His enemies were silenced.

I. The Question Of Paying Tribute. 12:13-17.

In this amazing incident the first thing that strikes us is the alliance of the Pharisees and Herodians, for they were not only of opposing political parties but they were foes. The Pharisees protested against the yoke of Rome being laid upon the shoulders of God's ancient people. Holding that God was the Ruler of Israel they maintained that it was wrong to pay taxes to support a heathen state. The payment of taxes to Rome was an insult to their national honor. The Herodians accepted the Roman yoke, claiming that the Jewish nation at that time had to be subservient to Rome, for Herod was a vassal of Rome. The Herodians desired to strengthen the frail grip that the House of Herod had upon political leadership and prestige. To do this they desperately needed the support of the Roman government. Hence, for the sake of expediency, they were in favor of paying tribute to the Roman Empire.

The taxes which were imposed by the Roman government were of three kinds:

(1) A ground tax.

This consisted of one-tenth of all the grain and one--fifth of the wine and fruit produced. This tax was paid partly in kind and partly in money.

(2) An income tax.

This amounted to one percent of a man's income.

(3) A poll tax.

This tax was levied on all men from fourteen to sixty-five and on all women from twelve to sixty-five. This tax was one denarius, or approximately fifteen cents per person. It was a tax which everyone had to pay simply for the privilege of existing.

These two parties, which were always at strife or war, formed a coalition against Christ. All through history infinitely diversified factions have made common cause against Christ and His churches, and

this is the beginning of it. The motive of these parties was to entrap Christ by talk. These hypocrites did not brow-beat Christ, as the preceding party had done, but complimented Him. The approach of the Pharisees and the Herodians was very subtle. They began with flattery. That flattery was designed to disarm the suspicions that Christ might have had, and to make it impossible for Him to avoid giving an answer without losing His reputation completely. They asked their question with sinister intent. Their trap was covered with the flowers of flattery, but all they said about Christ was true. He was truthful and impartial. All of His teaching was based on truth. Nobody can say anything too good about Christ, but one may say the best things about Him with the basest motives. These men did.

In leading up to the trap, and intending to disarm the Lord Jesus of suspicion, they put this question to Him: "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? Shall we give, or shall we not give?" The matter was put plainly enough, and a categorical answer of "Yes," or "No," was demanded. But there are innumerable questions which do not permit such an answer. These men thought that only one of two answers was possible, and that either answer would incriminate Christ. Their question was a masterpiece of shrewdness and cunningness. They thought that they had Him impaled on the horns of a completely inescapable dilemma. If He said that it was lawful to pay tribute to Caesar His influence with the populace would be gone forever, and the Pharisees would denounce Him as a traitor and a coward. If He said that it was not lawful to pay tribute, the Herodians would regard Him as a traitor, have Him arrested as a rebel and declared guilty of high treason. They were sure that they had Christ in a trap from which there was no escape, but they had something to learn from Him.

Christ said to them, "Bring me a denarius that I may see it." He did not even have a Roman coin. Have you ever considered what a wise move that was? Had Christ asked for a Jewish instead of a Roman coin, the result of the interview might have been very different. The answer to their question was on the coins which these men were carrying. Our Lord took the denarius and examined it, looking first on the one side and then on the other, where were the likeness of the emperor and his title. He asked them whose image and superscription it bore. They, of course, replied, "Caesar's." Christ therefore insisted that if they accepted the coins of Caesar they should pay taxes to Caesar. In other words, if you accept the protection of a government and the privileges provided by it, then one is under obligation to support that government. We have a duty to the state as well as to God. Those who used the coin of the Empire were obligated to pay to Caesar whatever the earthly sovereign had the right to demand of them. Our Lord hastened to add that there is also a sphere in life which belongs to God and not to Caesar. Therefore, they must also render unto God, their heavenly sovereign, whatever He demanded of them. Whereas the enemies of Christ had suggested a conflict of duties, He showed that there was perfect harmony. He intimated that there was a great danger of forgetting God and our obligations to Him of trust, worship, love and service. Man has no right to substitute any allegiance for loyalty to God.

Our Lord set forth a timeless principle in His answer to His enemies. This principle applies with equal force to our own day. As citizens we have certain binding obligations that we simply cannot evade; it is our solemn duty to fulfill them. As servants of God, we have other obligations that are equally binding upon us. If these two obligations are in irreconcilable conflict then our paramount duty is to God. Loyalty to God must come first.

II. The Question Of The Resurrection. 12:18-27.

It seems that the religious leaders would at length have grown weary of trying to ensnare Christ, but they held on doggedly. If they were to retain their leadership, they simply could not countenance defeat at the hands of Christ. Therefore, it was not long before another group confronted Him.

This time the Sadducees came, and their appearance was characteristic of them. The Sadducees were not a large Jewish party. They were aristocratic, wealthy, proud, self--confident and cynical. Where others had failed, they thought they could succeed. They included most of the priests. The office of high priest was held regularly by a Sadducee. Being the wealthy and aristocratic party, they wished to retain their comforts and their privileges. It was from them that the governing classes came, those who were prepared to collaborate with the Romans in the government of the country. The Sadducees were the rationalists of their day. They accepted only the written scriptures, and not the oral law, traditions and regulations which were so dear to the Pharisees. Their Bible was the Pentateuch and on the written Mosaic Law they took their stand. They said that in the early books of the Bible there was no evidence for immortality, so they did not believe in it. They contended that the spirit died with the body and that there was no resurrection.

These Sadducees came to Christ with a question which was designed to make the belief in the resurrection of the body appear ridiculous and absurd. They proposed the far-fetched case of a woman, married successively to seven brothers from each of whom she was separated by death, and they asked, "In the resurrection therefore, when they shall rise, whose wife shall she be of them?" They were hoping that Christ would either deny the orthodox belief as to the resurrection or make some statement contradictory to the law of Moses which permitted such successive marriages. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). The Sadducees imagined that the only way out of the difficulty which they presented to Christ was a denial of the resurrection and immortality. How cock-sure ignorance can be!

It really was not a question of husbands and wives, but of resurrection and immortality. In His reply Christ referred only incidentally to the domestic matter, but dealt particularly with the questions raised by it. He declared that their error was due to their ignorance. They were ignorant of the Scriptures and the power of God. Even though these Sadducees were full of intellectual pride, they were lacking in the understanding of God's Word and in faith in God's power. Relative to power, Christ said that God can and will raise the dead, and that in the risen life earthly relations will be dissolved.

Christ taught that when a person rises again, the old laws of physical life will no longer obtain, and things like marrying and being married will no longer enter into the case. After the resurrection there will not be any sex consciousness or function; our domestic relations will no longer exist. In other words, the life to come cannot be thought of in terms of this life at all. In the great resurrection chapter, I Corinthians 15, the Holy Spirit tells us through Paul, "We shall all be changed" (51). Who can tell all that is implied in that statement?

Having spoken of the power of God, Christ turned to the Word of God. Since the Sadducees had appealed to Moses, Christ turned to the writings of Moses in order to show them that they did not understand the Scriptures which they pretended to believe. Their own Scriptures, if properly understood, should have removed all doubts from their minds as to the reality of the resurrection of the body.

Moreover, Christ declared that the Sadducees did not understand the nature of the character of God. He is the God of the living. A proper understanding of the character of God makes belief in the fact of life beyond the grave inevitable. In Exodus 3 God called Himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. If He is the God of these patriarchs even yet, they must still be alive. To His argument the Sadducees could not present an answer. Once a man has entered into a personal relationship with God that relationship is eternal.

III. The Question Of The Great Commandment. 12:28-34.

Then a scribe, having observed that Christ had answered His questioners well, came to Him with the question, "What commandment is the first of all?" He was honest and sincere in asking that question as to which commandment was first in importance. Christ replied, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."

This is a summary of the Ten Commandments, four of which have to do with man's relationship to God and six of which have to do with man's relationship to man. The scribe found himself in agreement with what Christ said. Then our Lord added, "The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Perhaps for the first time the scribe saw the relationship of these two commandments. They belonged together. Love for God must be coupled with love for man if God is to be pleased. The only way that a man can prove that he loves God is by showing that he loves men. One cannot really love God and not love his fellow man. We should have the same solicitous regard and care for our neighbors which we have for ourselves; what we wish of good for ourselves, we should wish for them, and what we wish others to do for us we should be willing to do for them. This passage is comprehensive, because we sustain no other relations than these, to ourselves, to our fellow men and to our God.

When this scribe enthusiastically accepted the interpretation of Christ, our Lord warmly commended him saying, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God."

IV. The Question Of Christ. 12:35-37.

Then Christ proposed a counterquestion. The question concerned the person of Christ; is He to be regarded as man or God, or as at once both God and man? With this question He left them, warning those who listened against the hypocrisy of the scribes. There was but one answer to His question, namely, Christ is both human and divine. He is the Son of David and also the Son of God.