

Mark 12:13-34 'answers for life's questions'

We're turning back again this morning to Mark 12. Last week we lifted the lid on verses 1-12; today, we move deeper into the chapter with a big chunk to cover from verse 13 down to verse 34.

It seems to me at this point in Mark's gospel that the die is cast. The enemies of Jesus are determined to get rid of him, once and for all. Here we see them trying to trick him into saying something that will be the last nail in his own coffin.

They began with flattery in verse 14 ... this was the first of three loaded questions! You see, they needed to trump up some charges to put Jesus to death – but, the Lord's answers to those questions speak into our hearts as well.

It is so true that the Saviour can solve every problem, he can undo every tangle in life, he is the Christ of every crisis – he can also answer every question tossed in his direction. In fact, he has ultimate answers to all the questions we face in life!

Some folks say that the church is answering questions that no one is asking! Well, I say that we are answering the questions that Joe Public ought to be asking: what is life all about – is there an eternity – what about life and death, heaven and hell – where did I come from – where am I going? Those are the really vital issues that we wrestle with.

The first question the Lord Jesus answered here was all about life's political authorities – he does that in verses 13-17.

It's every interesting to read what it says in verse 13 – I mean, it's amazing what brings people together! We read about the Pharisees who were right-wingers and the Herodians who were left-wingers. These guys are political enemies, they are on opposite sides of the spectrum, they can't stand the sight of each other –

yet, when it comes to their hatred of Jesus, they are singing from the same page in the song book!

The word 'catch' is a very graphic word – it's a word that was used by hunters when they wanted to snare a wild animal. These guys covered their traps with flowers of flattery, trying to set Jesus up. You can read what they say in verse 14 ... then ... they toss in the red herring bait when they say: 'Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?'

That was a burning question back then – and it caused a lot of aggro – you can imagine it, the classic scenario of 5 people and seven opinions! It was a kind of poll tax – every adult in Israel was required by Roman law to pay it once a year.

On the one side you have the Herodians – they said, it should be paid – they took the side of the government. On the other side, you have the Pharisees – they said, it should never be paid as it was a sign of unfaithfulness and disloyalty to God.

That's why their question was one of those where you are on a hiding to nothing ... it was a Catch 22 type situation. One of those questions where you're caught between a rock and a hard place!

I love the way Jesus answered them – he doesn't try to wriggle around or mess around with weasel words; the fact is, he's not daft! He is very much aware of their hypocrisy (15) ... so he plays them at their own game, he asks them for a coin! And the rest is sensational ... vintage stuff ...

Look at the coin – one side has an image of Caesar on it, and the other has a few words that make him into a kind of god. They dug a hole and they fell right into it; as they say, it's a Roman coin with Caesar stamped all over it. That's when, in verse 17, Jesus gave them a

lesson on the authority of government – he said: “OK, give to Caesar what is Caesar’s ...” Yes, whether we like it or not, we have a responsibility to pay our way when it comes to taxes!

Jesus didn’t stop there, though. In the next breath, he also reminded them of the authority of God. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s AND to God what is God’s.” A kind of knockout punch ... that puts everything in perspective ... Jesus put Caesar in his place; the coin was Caesar’s because it bore his image – we are God’s because we bear his image. We have no right to run our lives, we owe everything we have and are to Him – we are made in his image and he longs to transform us into Jesus lookalikes in today’s world ... it’s only as we give to him what is his that we achieve our full potential in him.

The question is: we pay our way down here, but in all honesty, have we rendered to God what is his? None of us can evade the issue – this is where the rubber hits the road. The word ‘render’ that is used actually means ‘to pay a debt’ – the reality is, we are massively in debt to our Lord. A timely challenge for all of us!

The next section runs from 18 down to verse 27 where the focus is on life’s doctrinal realities. We have come across the Herodians and the Pharisees, now we meet the Sadducees, the only time they’re mentioned in the gospel of Mark – they were a relatively small group in Jewish society, but they held the purse strings – they were the wealthy aristocratic class. They were into high finance – they were high flyers because many of the high priests came from their grouping!

But ... they were renowned more for what they didn’t believe in – they were the liberal theologians of their day: they didn’t sign up to the supernatural, they didn’t believe in angels, they certainly didn’t subscribe to the resurrection. Essentially, anything that

smacked of the extraordinary or supernatural they didn’t buy into.

You can see what makes them tick when you read their question to Jesus – it spans five verses and it’s there in black and white in Mark 12. Basically, they thought Jesus was a country yokel, they were poking fun at the resurrection – in a sense, they were downplaying life-and-death issues – they thought they were being clever when they asked Jesus their mega question! It’s the kind of question that is asked with noses in the air and a snigger on the lips.

They were referring to what is called levirate marriage – that means, according to Jewish law, if a man died, his family line could be maintained; it also ensured that family property could remain in the same family. The won’t go away fact is that every one of us is closer to death today than we were this time yesterday ... we are a day’s march nearer home, as the old hymn tells us. It has been said that death is a subject that people spend a lifetime trying not to think about. President Eisenhower once said: ‘I am interested in eternity. I am going to spend the rest of my life there.’

Is there an after-life? Is there a resurrection? Will we meet our loved ones again? Is there an eternity? Well, to the Sadducee, they said NO ... but the Bible takes a different angle on it – so, too, does Jesus! Hear him in verses 24-27, where he takes no prisoners, he pulls no punches!

First of all, he talks about the power of God, in verses 24 and 25. He says, they deny it, they know nothing of it in their own lives – it has no place in their theology. In a handful of carefully chosen words, Jesus says that the afterlife will be exhilarating – it will be life on a whole new level with a totally new dimension attached to it – we will ‘be like the angels in heaven’.

Secondly, he talks about the word of God in verses 26 and 27. Jesus was dealing here with the great question of life after death. He says that the living God is not the God of dead people but the God of living people! The patriarchs had long since gone, yet he referred to them as having a conscious relationship with him!

It's clear from these verses that when our time comes and we are promoted to Glory that it's different over there – it's a case of all things new ... our relationships with other people change, but our relationship with God is taken to an entirely new level. It's better ... it's the crème de la crème ... it's a whole new world!

The final section is all about life's spiritual priorities, it stretches from verse 28 down to verse 34. See what happens here – one of these legal whizz kids, he was an expert in Jewish law – based on the five books of Moses ... he had one big question: 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'

You see, these guys had it down to a fine tee – their calculations told them that there were 613 precepts in the Pentateuch: 365 negative and 248 positive. So far, so good. Not content to leave it like that, they divided them up further into heavy commandments and light commandments – in other words, some were of more significance than others. Now you can see where he's coming from when he asked Jesus what he did!

The Lord's answer is straight up and down – he quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 ... in fact, this is something that Jewish people will say a couple of times every day – it's called the Shema ... Jesus actually made love the most important thing in life, because we know from Romans 13 that 'love is the fulfilling of the law'. If we love the Lord, we will experience his love within and we will express that love to others.

The fact is, we do not live by rules and regulations, but by relationships – a loving relationship to God – that's the vertical dimension ... the horizontal is seen in the loving relationships I share with other people. We can't love others the way we ought to love them until we love the Lord the way we ought to love him! This intelligent man dots every i and crosses every t – I mean, he has it all sussed out. You can see that in his response to what Jesus told him – but the chilling and sad reality is seen in what Jesus says to him: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

So near, and yet so far ... so close, but still on the wrong side of the fence! He knew the law, but he did not know the Lord. He had all the facts and figures at his fingertips, but there was nothing of God's love in his heart and mind. Therein lies the tragedy ... you can be religious and respectable, yet still be lost and end up in eternity without God!

That begs the question: how near are you to God? Are you on the inside? Or ... are you still on the outside? The story is told of John Wesley – he was the founder of what we know as Methodism. He was a preacher for many years, but didn't know the Lord personally. It was on the morning of 24 May 1738 that something happened which he would never forget!

He opened his Bible in a haphazard kind of way – and his eyes fell on the text of Mark 12:34 'you are not far from the kingdom of God' ... that shook him! And before the day was out, he crossed the invisible line from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light! He was 35 years of age ... this verse was used by God to change his life and destiny. That's amazing grace!

