

In Agreement with God

Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 12 (part I)

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Mark 12:1-27 NIV

Jesus then began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

"He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'"

Then the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "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?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. "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?"

Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

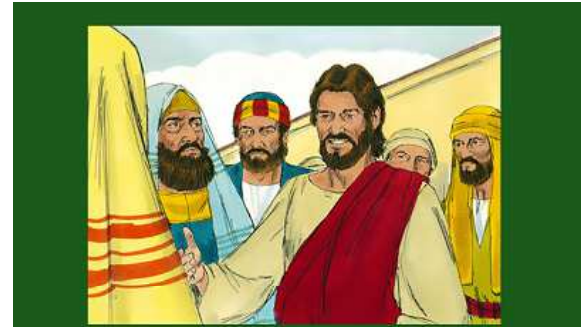
"Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

Once again, we're back in the Gospel According to Mark, and taking up his narrative with chapter 12. Because it's a longer chapter, we'll only cover the first half today. That part includes three sections: the story of the tenants in the vineyard, the question about paying taxes to Caesar, and the discussion with the Sadducees about the resurrection.

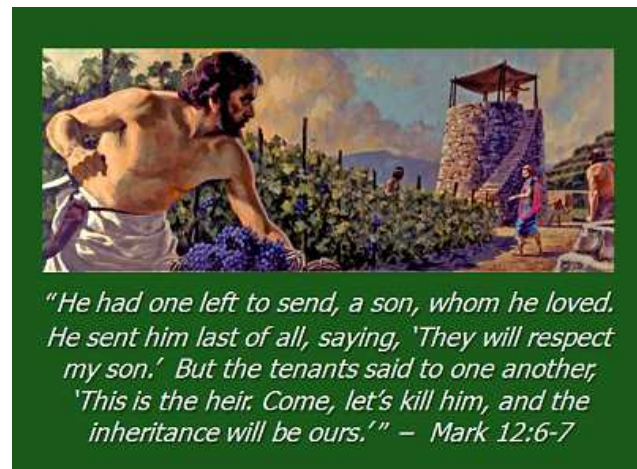
Well, everybody likes a good story, one that captivates our imagination and holds us in suspense wondering how it's all going to turn out. Jesus is a master at telling parables: brief stories that make a point about how God operates, and how his kingdom grows in the midst of our everyday life. Jesus takes his stories *straight out of everyday life*: a woman who loses a coin, a farmer planting seed, a son who squanders his inheritance, a business manager who "cook the books," a passerby who helps another traveler who's in trouble. In the ancient world there was nobody else we know of who developed the parable as a form of literature the way

Jesus did — for his parables *are* literature, even if they weren't written down till a generation later, after they had been translated from Aramaic into Greek and served as source material for Mark and the other Gospel writers.

In our reading today, Jesus tells a story about some tenant farmers who acted foolishly, even wickedly, and got themselves into big trouble. You all know how tenant farming works (and there are people in this congregation who have been tenant farmers). The farmer works the land and grows the crop for the owner, and when the harvest comes in they split the proceeds in whichever proportions they've contracted for. But these tenants, who were entrusted with a vineyard, wanted all the profits for themselves. So when the owner sent his representatives to collect what was coming to him, the tenants abused them or even murdered them. Finally the owner sent his son, believing the tenants wouldn't refuse him. But the tenants got it into their head, somehow, that if they killed the owner's son *they* would inherit the vineyard. So they murdered him, and threw his body out of the vineyard. As a result, says Jesus, the owner "will come and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others" (12:9). To drive home his point, Jesus quotes from Psalm 118: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:22-23).



"He taught them many things by parables." – Mark 4:2



"He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'" – Mark 12:6-7

Some parables aren't obvious, like the parable of the sower and the four soils in Mark, chapter 4. The meaning isn't supposed to be obvious; Jesus says, "He who has ears, let him hear," and he has to explain it to his disciples. But you didn't have to be a rocket scientist (or the ancient equivalent) to figure out who the parable of the tenants is talking about. Jesus has just been tangling with the religious authorities in Jerusalem, disrupting the trade in the Temple and then refusing to tell them by what authority he's doing such things. And these people weren't dumb. They understood only too well that Jesus was comparing *them* to the wicked tenant farmers. I said that everyone likes a good story — but there are exceptions, and these folks certainly didn't like *this* story.

The vineyard is a biblical symbol for Israel, the people the Lord chose to take his name to all nations. The prophet Isaiah begins what we call his chapter 5 with his "Song of the Vineyard," and he concludes, "The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress" (Isaiah 5:7). By the way, those are wordplays in Hebrew: the Lord looked for *mishpat* (justice) but only found *mishpach* (bloodshed); he looked for *tzedakah* (righteousness) but heard only *tze'akah* (a cry of distress). The Lord's vineyard hasn't been fruitful, it hasn't produced the fruit the Lord had planted it for, which was to extend the way of the Lord to all people and be a blessing to them.

Jesus builds on Isaiah's image, but instead of making puns he tells a parable. The managers of the vineyard are scheming to keep its produce for themselves, and not give the owner what he expects of them. The apostle Paul, in Romans 3:2, states that the Jews have an advantage "because the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God." But to be *entrusted* with something means you're taking care of it *for someone else's benefit*. The gospel of the



"The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." – Isaiah 5:7

kingdom of God is a message of rescue and deliverance for all people. Instead, the leaders of Jesus' Jewish community — chafing under the domination of Roman power — have taken that message as a warrant for exclusiveness and privilege for their own community. The people in charge of the vineyard haven't lived up to the agreement the owner has made with them.

As a result, the Lord will do away with those faithless tenants and place the vineyard, that word of deliverance and the community it forms, into the hands of others. The good news of God's presence, and the life he has for all who come to him, was to pass from the hands of the Jerusalem authorities and be taken forward by other Jewish people not belonging to the "elite" (and let's recall that almost all the earliest Christians were Jews), and eventually by Gentiles, people of other ethnic groups. That was not a story those Jerusalem authorities wanted to hear, and Mark tells us that the chief priests, "teachers of the law," and elders looked for a way to get Jesus arrested.



"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes." – Psalm 118:22-23

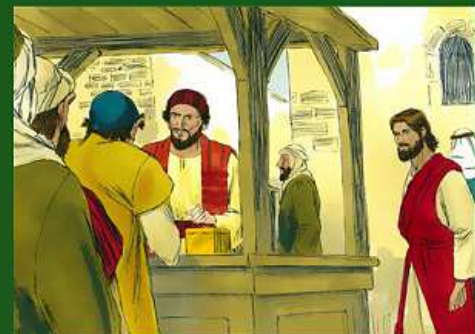
Indeed, when Jesus quoted the Psalm, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," this seemed like an obvious reference to himself as the foundation stone upon which God's new community would be built. Did Jesus see himself as the *son* in his parable, the son of the vineyard owner whom the wicket tenants would kill and cast out? There are plenty of indications in the Gospels that Jesus knew the price he would have to pay to get his message across, and in his humanity he wrestled with that destiny even into the Garden of Gethsemane. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (Hebrews 5:7). We should never picture Jesus just floating through Galilee

and Judea as some kind of robot or disembodied spirit unaffected by the opposition he was running up against. He was a human being, with feelings, like you and me. We won't understand and appreciate the Gospel story unless we remember how Jesus had to struggle with his own concerns about who he is, what God is doing through him, and how God's going to do it. In the parable of the tenants we get another hint of that weighty question that hangs over his ministry, until Jesus himself hangs upon the cross of Calvary.

What's our stewardship of the "vineyard" we've been entrusted with? As a church we do many good things that benefit people in our community and in other places. Are we careful to do these things because of our faithfulness to the calling of the Lord, and not be doing them to bring glory to ourselves? And as individual believers, do you and I serve the Lord because we want to be faithful to the agreement he has made with us, or do we practice our faith because it *makes us feel good* about ourselves? Yes, I understand that our motives in working our "vineyard" are often mixed motives — we're only human, after all. But maybe we should always be asking these questions, lest we — as individuals and as a church — should experience the same judgment from the owner of the vineyard as the tenants in Jesus' parable.

We need to move on to the second part of our passage from Mark 12, the question about paying taxes to Caesar. The taxes levied by the Roman emperor were a cause of great resentment on the part of the Jewish people. Although they were living in their ancestral land of Israel, they felt they were still in exile because they were under the domination of a foreign power. The Roman taxation system worked like this: a local person contracted with the government to pay a certain amount in taxes, and then he collected the money from his fellow townspeople. Such a man was called a publican. If he collected more than he

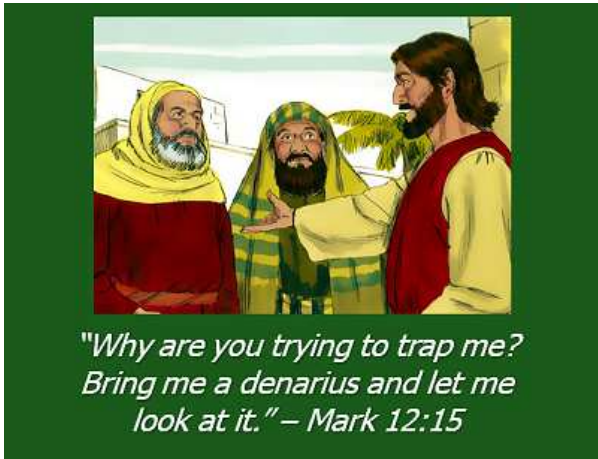
owed the government, he got to keep the excess, and some publicans became wealthy. Of course, their fellow Jews hated them because they were collaborators with the resented Roman occupation. But one of Jesus' disciples, Levi, had been a publican, and Zacchaeus was another one who met up with Jesus, responded to his



Jesus called Levi, a publican, to become one of his disciples.

message about the kingdom of God, and gave half his wealth to the poor and made recompense to those he had bilked.

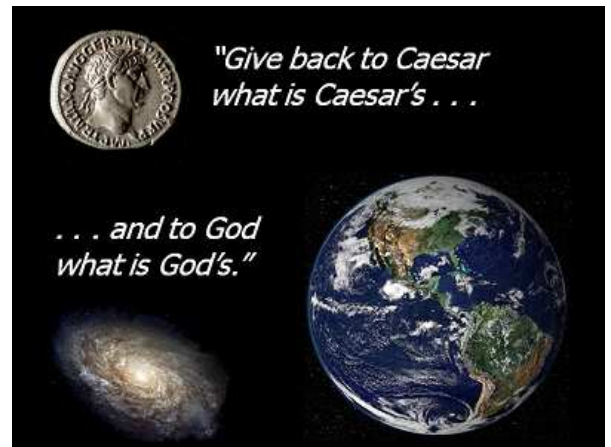
In this incident, Jesus' adversaries want to trap him with a trick question, soft-soaping him in the process: "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" (Mark 12:14). Jesus, of course, knows what they're up to. If he says No, he gets in trouble with the Roman authorities. If he says Yes, he loses credibility with his fellow Jews. So Jesus does what he always does in such situations: he replies with another question. Asking them to show him a coin, he says, "Whose image and inscription are on this coin?" Of course, they are Caesar's. So Jesus replies, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."



Sometimes this saying of Jesus has been taken the wrong way, as if Jesus is teaching that some things belong to God — the "spiritual" things — but other things, most of what concerns our daily life, come under the authority of the state and its rulers. This is called the "two kingdoms" theory, and it

has been used to justify complacency on the part of Christians toward the unjust policies of their government. Justice is the cornerstone of biblical ethics; any reading of the prophets of Israel will demonstrate that. The biblical words we translate into English as "righteousness" could just as accurately be translated "justice." So what is Jesus saying in his response to those who're testing him about paying taxes to Caesar?

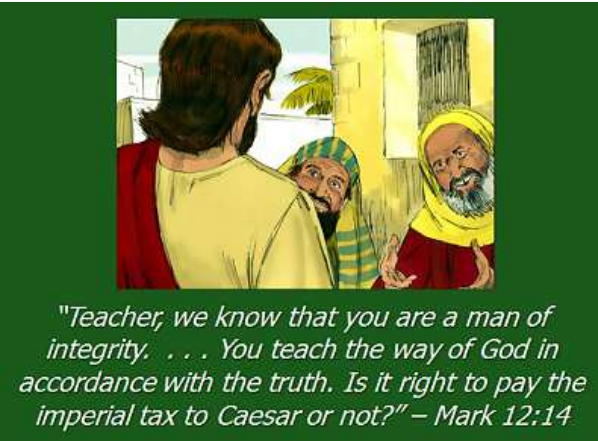
Picture the scene. Here's Jesus, or one of his questioners, holding up a coin with Caesar's image and inscription. And Jesus is saying, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." What belongs to Caesar in this picture? Just a pitiful coin, a denarius worth a day's wages. What belongs to God in this picture? The *man* holding the coin, the other *people* looking on, the *earth* they're standing on, the sunny *sky* above and what can't be seen beyond the blue sky — the moon and planets of our solar system, billions of stars in our galaxy, the 200 billion-plus galaxies in this vast universe. Let Caesar have his measly coin, Jesus is saying; *everything else belongs to God* and we're responsible to him for how we deal with it or use it, according to the agreement God has made with us.



Paul, in Colossians, speaks of Jesus as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him" Colossians 1:15-16). And in Ephesians, he reminds us that God has "placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over all things for the church." As followers of Jesus and members of his body, we can never surrender to the state the control of every aspect of our lives, for our lives don't belong to Caesar but to the Creator of all things. Government has its proper role under God, and as good citizens we vote, pay our taxes, and obey laws that contribute to an orderly and just society. But when government intrudes into areas where it doesn't belong, we have a duty to question that intrusion because the rest of life belongs to God, and Jesus the Son of God is our Head. (For example, I was reviewing the latest Illinois statutes and one of them forbids therapists from converting a homosexual client to a heterosexual orientation, or calling homosexuality an abnormality. God, in his Word, has told us what *his* policy is about that subject, and the state has no business telling a Christian counselor what he or she should consider pathological behavior.)

That's the point Jesus is driving at in responding to the question about paying taxes to Caesar. But he knows his questioners are hypocritical, trying to "butter him up" to put him off his guard: "Teacher, we know

you're a man of integrity; you teach the true way of God." Who's asking Jesus the question? Mark says it was a group made up both Pharisees and Herodians — that is, both teachers who stood for strictly following the traditions and the laws of Moses, and others who collaborated with Rome as client rulers and often lived more like Gentiles than like Jews. Opposition to Jesus creates strange bedfellows, for these two groups normally despised each other. And when Jesus asks for a coin, they produce one with Caesar's image on it — a flat contradiction of Moses' law against graven images. The Jews hated these Roman images, yet they're carrying one around in their own purse, the evidence against their sincerity.



That's something we all need to watch in ourselves, isn't it? Do we say we believe one thing, and then by our actions reveal that we really believe something else? Do we sing, "I am thine, O Lord, I have heard thy voice" — and then fill our ears with a hundred other voices from TV, radio, the Internet, or people we know, instead of the Word of God? Do we sing, "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold" — and then skimp on our giving to support the work of God? Do we sing, "I know who holds tomorrow" — and then worry about what's going to happen to us next week or next year? Worst of all, perhaps, do we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" — and then hold on to resentment toward someone we believe has wronged us? The questioners of Jesus didn't really believe what they were saying about

him, and they didn't really believe what they pretended to believe about following the law of God. Let's not be like them — just saying.

Now we'll take up the third section of our reading from Mark 12, the Sadducees' question about the resurrection. The Jewish community in which Jesus did his work was a diverse community; they didn't all have the same beliefs, expectations, or lifestyle. The Sadducees were the priests who ran the Temple, and their name "Sadducee" comes from Zadok, the high priest of King Solomon's time. Unlike the Pharisees, they didn't accept the writings of the prophets of Israel like Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest. Their Bible was limited to the five books of Moses. Partly because of that, and partly because they followed a lifestyle more like the prevailing Greek culture, they didn't accept the idea of resurrection from the dead. As someone has said, "The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection — so they were sad, you see."

A group of Sadducees came to Jesus trying to disprove the idea of the resurrection. Now we need to understand, first of all, what resurrection meant to the Jews who believed in it, like Jesus and the Pharisees — and what it means everywhere in the New Testament. Resurrection doesn't mean immortality: that our soul never dies. That was a Greek philosophical idea, from people like Plato. And resurrection doesn't mean going to heaven forever, without a body. It doesn't mean life after death; it means *life after life after death*. Resurrection means receiving a new body when God restores his creation that has been damaged by sin; as Paul tells the Philippians, "We eagerly await a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20). Resurrection without a body is incomprehensible, so when the New Testament writers talk about the resurrection they don't mean a bodiless, purely "spiritual" existence. That's why the Apostles' Creed states, "I believe in the resurrection of the body."

But the Sadducees didn't believe this, and tried to stump Jesus with their trick question. The Law of Moses said that if a man died without children his brother was to take his wife, and the children born to her would be considered children of the deceased. This was so a man's name and heritage wouldn't be blotted out. So the Sadducees told Jesus a story of seven brothers, each of whom died without children, and then the next

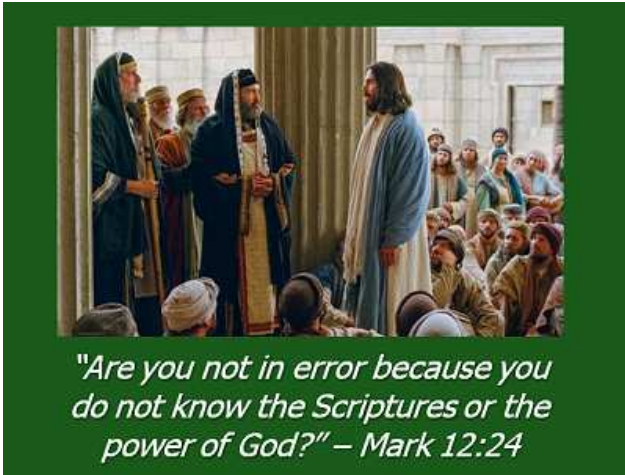
Resurrection in the Bible doesn't mean:

- Immortality
- Going to heaven forever
- Life after death.

Resurrection means:
Being raised in a new body in the renewal of God's creation.

brother married the widow, until only the widow survived. "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" they asked.

This is just a bogus story they made up. It never happened, and Jesus knows it. Besides, they've raised a false issue, he tells them. "When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." (Notice he doesn't say the risen from the dead *are* angels in heaven — a common misconception — only that they are *like them* in this one respect.) And Jesus goes on to suggest that since the



Lord says, "I *am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" — not "I *was* their God" — that the Hebrew patriarchs are still present to him in some way. "He's not the God of the dead," Jesus says, "but of the living."

But I think the key statement in this passage is Jesus' retort to the Sadducees: "You're wrong about this whole issue, because you don't know either the Scriptures or the power of God." (I like the classic translation: "Ye do err, for ye know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.") Friends, when it comes down to questions about what we're to believe, as people loyal to the Lord and in agreement with him, these are the two criteria: *what the Bible tells us, and what it says God is able to do.* If we have any reservations about whether the Scriptures are *really our*

authority, we've stepped outside the realm of Christian belief. If we're not certain that God *really has the power* to change our lives, to heal us, to bring about his purpose in human affairs, and to raise us into his renewed heaven and earth, then we've compromised our agreement with him.

We'll continue our study of Mark, chapter 12, next week.

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