

This morning, we are in the fifteenth week of a sermon series I am calling “Savior and Lord,” looking at what it means to relate to Jesus as both Savior – the one who died for our sins to give us eternal life – and Lord – the one who we follow and emulate. We are working our way through Mark’s gospel in this series. Mark was Peter’s traveling companion, and the Gospel of Mark is mainly Peter’s eyewitness testimony of Jesus (Peter was first known as Simon before Jesus changed his name). Last week, Jesus entered Jerusalem, outing himself as the Messiah, the one who had come to save Israel, yet not in the way they expected. He has entered the temple, where he has been engaging in teaching and debate with those who are there, and from this point until his death, his life is going to be full of conflict and confrontation. We’re going to look at those conflicts this morning and what they teach us about Jesus and about ourselves. Let’s begin reading in Mark 12.

Mark 12:1-44 - *He 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 went away on a journey. ² At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. ³ But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. ⁵ He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. ⁶ "He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷ "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹ "What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Haven't you read this scripture: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; ¹¹ the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" ¹² Then they 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. ¹³ Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴ They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, 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 taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him. ¹⁸ Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ¹⁹*

"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 have children for his brother. ²⁰ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹ The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²² In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³ At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" 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 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!" ²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" ²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." ³² "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. ³⁵ While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? ³⁶ David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" ³⁷ David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight. ³⁸ As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely." ⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. ⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave

out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything-- all she had to live on."

This is a chapter full of confrontation and conflict. To help us understand what is going on, I'm going to group what happens into three confrontations.

The first confrontation we see is:

1) The conflict between the sinful nature and God

More specifically, the conflict between Israel's sinful nature and God, but as we look at this section we'll see it also speaks to our own sinful nature in opposition to God. Jesus begins by telling a parable that is clearly designed to confront the Jewish religious leaders about their sinful rejection of God, his prophets, and ultimately His Son. The vineyard was a well-known symbol for Israel in the Old Testament. For example:

Isaiah 5:1-2 - I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ² He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

In the parable Jesus tells, the man leaves his vineyard in the hands of farmers, just as God has left his nation, his people, in the hands of the religious leaders of Israel. But every time he sends a servant to the vineyard to check on its fruitfulness, they beat or kill him. This is the pattern every time God sends a prophet. Every time the nation of Israel was turning from God, God would send a prophet to them to warn them to repent and get back to what God had called them to do. But they often got killed. Think of Jezebel wanting to kill Elijah in 1 Kings 19, Isaiah sawn in two, Zechariah stoned to death, John the Baptist beheaded.

And so finally the man sends his son, believing that he will be respected. But the tenants recognize that he is the heir, and kill him. And so, Jesus says, the man will kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others. In the same way, the religious leaders are about to have Jesus killed, and then God will be forming a new people, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles. Jesus ends by saying:

¹⁰ Haven't you read this scripture: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; ¹¹ the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" ¹² Then they 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.

He quotes from a Psalm they would have been singing during Passover and applies it to himself. The one who is rejected will become the most important of all.

Even though this is a parable against the religious leaders of Israel, there is relevance to us today. There is something about human nature that is hostile to God. Just as God's people continually beat or killed any prophet who came to warn them that their sin was leading to death or rejection, our human nature resists being told what to do, resists conviction of sin, resists having a Lord. Our sinful nature wants to be its own god, and will not submit to God or worship Him.

Romans 8:5-8 - *Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ⁶ The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; ⁷ the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸ Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*

This is why Paul goes so far as to say:

Ephesians 2:1-2 - *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*

We are spiritually dead apart from God. We would rather kill him than worship Him. And we resist any prophet who comes to tell us about our sin.

We see this played out in the next two confrontations. First, we see Pharisees and Herodians coming to ask him whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Pharisees were nationalistic religious leaders, while the Herodians had sold themselves out to Rome, but neither of them liked Jesus, and so they conspired to expose him. **Their goal is to trap him, so that either the Jews following him will reject him as he is a traitor or he will be exposed as a rebel, an insurrectionist, and get in trouble with Rome.** Their motivation is to expose him, reject him, and ultimately see him killed. The Zealots saw the Jews who paid the tax as coward for putting up with mortal masters in place of God. But Jesus gets out of the trap by

telling them to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The coin has Caesar's likeness on it and says "Son of the divine Augustus," and so it belonged to him. On the other hand, we bear God's image, and so we belong to Him. It's not either/or – they both can be honored. Caesar can have his money; God will receive the worship He is due.

Next, the Sadducees come to him. Who were they? Wealthy and worldly, rejected the supernatural apart from God and did not believe in life after death. They only accepted the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They also come to discredit him with a question about the resurrection and Levirate marriage. Will the woman have seven husbands in heaven? Jesus chides them for not knowing the Scriptures. He first tells them that there is no marriage in heaven. Marriage points to a greater intimacy that we will have with Jesus on that day.

CS Lewis put it this way, when asked about sex in heaven: *"I think our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time. On receiving the answer, "No," he might regard absence of chocolates as the chief characteristic of sexuality. In vain would you tell him that the reason why lovers in their carnal raptures don't bother about chocolates is that they have something better to think of. The boy knows chocolate; he does not know the positive thing that excludes it. We are in the same position. We know the sexual life; we do not know, except in glimpses, the other thing which, in Heaven, will leave no room for it."*

Secondly, he quotes Exodus 3:6 to tell them that God is the God of the living, not the dead, that even though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have died, they are still alive forever with God.

The first confrontation is between our sinful nature, that wants God dead, humiliated, and discredited, and God.

The second confrontation is:

2) The conflict between God's standards and our ability to meet that standard

In verse 28, a teacher of the law who has listened to the debating asks Jesus which is the most important commandment. Jesus answers:

²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

This man answers with a genuine admiration and respect for Jesus' words. He acknowledges that loving God and others is better than giving sacrifices. And Jesus answers, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Two things – he is not far. He is close! But secondly, he is not yet in! Even though he respects Jesus and understands the importance of the greatest commandment, he is not in yet. What is he to do next? Strive to obey that law? He will quickly find that it is impossible. So what is he to do? Hope God grades on a curve?

Most of you have probably heard of the name John Wesley, a man who is associated with what we call the Methodist Church. He was an Englishman, ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1728. Set aside an hour each day for private prayer and reflection. Tried to conquer every sin. Fasted twice/week, visited prisons, assisted the poor and sick. Went to Georgia as a missionary to the Native Americans and utterly failed. Realized just how wicked he was – "I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who shall convert me?" On his way back, he spoke with some German Moravians and began to seek God in a new way. Eventually, on the morning of May 24, 1738 he read Mark 12:34 and it encouraged him that he was not far from the kingdom. That evening:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

From that point on, Wesley preached to hundreds of thousands and had a huge impact on the world for Christ.

Let this encourage you – some of you are very close to the kingdom. But what is the next step? Try to love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself? You'll fail. There's another next step.

Jesus follows up by asking a question of his own, quoting Psalm 110:1.

"How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David?"³⁶ David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'"³⁷ David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"

How can David call him Lord? The Messiah is not just a man; he is the divine Son of God. Jesus is not just a good teacher or a conquering hero. He is the Lord himself, come to save his people from their sins.

God's standard is perfection. As Jesus said in **Matthew 5:48**, **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** We can not meet that standard. But recognizing that God's standard is perfection means that we are close, because we will realize our need for a Savior, that we can not make it on our own. **He is not just teacher. If that's all he is, we are ultimately in despair. He is also our Savior.**

The third and final conflict is this:

3) The conflict between our desire for control and our need for a Savior

He ends this chapter by contrasting the scribes with a poor widow. The scribes thought they were following God, and loved to be honored and admired. But Jesus exposes them, saying that they are living for the applause of men, but they are unjust in their dealings and will be punished. But the poor widow gives all she had to live on – her very life, her very control. And she is honored by God because she gave her life into the Lord's hands, giving her trust and control to Him.

We see here that God's economy is different, that he sees our hearts when we give. But more than that, when we recognize our need for a Savior, we can choose to accept him or reject him. **But to come to Him as Savior and Lord is an act of surrender, of giving up control.** It is like giving up what you have to live on, trusting that the Lord will take care of you. Money is a clear way we do this. But there are other ways as well. Will you surrender today?

You are a sinner in need of a Savior. You can not make it into his kingdom on your own. Are you willing to trust Him and surrender? **After all, the widow points to Jesus, who gave His life for us.**

I was listening to a Tim Keller sermon recently that referenced a man named Charles Blondin, also known as the daredevil of Niagara Falls. Way back in June

1859, a 34 year-old French acrobat who called himself Monsieur Charles Blondin, traveled to Niagara Falls to walk on a rope 1300 feet long across the falls. 25,000 people arrived to watch him walk from the American to the Canadian side. On his first pass, he walked a third of the way, sat down, called for the Maid of the Mist to anchor beneath him, cast down a line, hauled up a bottle of wine, drank, and then kept going. He then went back the other way with a camera strapped to his back. He took the camera off and took pictures before continuing. Each time he upped the stakes, doing flips, walking backward, wearing a sack over his body, pushing a wheelbarrow, somersaulting and backflipping, even dangling by one hand from the cable. Once he even carried a stove and utensils on his back, and in the middle of the cable, started a fire and cooked an omelet, lowering it down to the passengers on the Maid of the Mist.

One crossing, he and his manager Harry Colcord decided that he would carry someone on his back. Blondin asked all who were assembled there if they believed that he could carry them to safety. All said they believed he could do it, but none was willing to go on his back. So Colcord had to do it. But he swayed Blondin so much that they almost fell. Finally Blondin is reported to have said, "Look up Harry... you are no longer Colcord, you are Blondin. Until I clear this place be a part of me, mind, body, and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself, or you will die."

It comes down to trust. Allowing him to become greater and you to become less. Trusting in Him and not going your own way. That is the only way to life.