

# It's A Trap!

Mark 12:13-27

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The internet is an interesting place. There are wonderful benefits to the internet, such as the fact that we have more information at our fingertips than ever before. When I asked my parents a question growing up, they either knew the answer or told me to go look it up for myself in an encyclopedia. Today, when my kids ask me a question, if I don't know the answer, I just ask Google, and we get an answer instantaneously.

There are lots of downsides to the internet as well. Since anyone can put anything out there, the internet has enabled many crackpots who would normally just be dismissed to develop large followings. Additionally, as so much of our lives now takes place online, there are more and more ways that people try to hijack your identity and your financial information. If you spend much time online, you begin to get a sense for when something seems just a bit off, or too good to be true. In those situations, your guard is probably raised and you become very cautious about what you do, because you sense that it might be a trap designed to steal your identity or otherwise harm you.

While Jesus didn't have to deal with the internet, He still had to deal with people trying to trap Him. In our passage this morning, we'll see two first-century traps that were laid for Jesus, with the intent of getting Him in trouble. Jesus, however, was far smarter than those trying to trap Him and immediately sensed what was going on. This morning we're going to look at these traps and unpack Jesus' masterful responses to them. Not only does Jesus silence His critics, He also gives believers much to ponder.

## Trap #1

If you recall, the religious leaders had been looking for ways to get Jesus into trouble, because they didn't like what He was doing and saw Him as a threat to their power and position. They questioned His authority, Jesus responded masterfully and then told a story designed to remind the religious leaders of their sin. Undeterred, these religious leaders regrouped and returned to Jesus with another ploy to get Him in trouble. We see the first ploy in verses 13-17 of Mark 12.

<sup>13</sup> Later the leaders sent some Pharisees and supporters of Herod to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. <sup>14</sup> "Teacher," they said, "we know how honest you are. You are impartial and don't play favorites. You teach the way of God truthfully. Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

<sup>15</sup> Should we pay them, or shouldn't we?" Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said, "Why are you trying to trap me? Show me a Roman coin, and I'll tell you."

<sup>16</sup> When they handed it to him, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. <sup>17</sup> "Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." His reply completely amazed them. (Mark 12:13-17, NLT)

Mark tells us that some Pharisees and supporters of Herod came to Jesus trying to trap Him. The fact that these two groups were teaming up tells us quite a bit about the level of desperation they were feeling about needing to get rid of Jesus.

The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of the day. They were staunchly committed to following Jewish law, and they hated everything about Rome. They viewed Rome as an occupying army that had no place in Israel. The Herodians, however, were supporters of King Herod. There were several members of the Herod family who served as kings, but their kingship was dependent upon Rome allowing it. The agreement was fairly simple—as long as they didn't cause problems for Rome, they would be allowed to keep their position of power. As such, the Herodians were quite in favor of Rome and had little need for Jewish teachings. If the Pharisees were the conservatives, the Herodians were the liberals. Today, it would be like if the Republicans and Democrats decided to work together on something—this was that unlikely! Under normal circumstances, these two groups would be enemies, but they found themselves united against a common enemy: Jesus. Jesus was a threat to both of them, so these two groups that made strange bedfellows were suddenly teamed up for a common cause.

They came to Jesus and tried to trap Him. They started by trying to flatter Him, referring to Him as teacher and praising Him for His honesty and impartiality. They said that He taught the way of God truthfully. Of course, they didn't actually believe these things, and Jesus wasn't convinced for a moment. He knew they were trying to butter Him up, getting Him to let down His guard before they asked their question.

Their question was fairly straightforward: is it right for Jewish people to pay taxes to Caesar or not? In the minds of these men, this was an impossible dilemma for Jesus. They asked Him a yes or no question, believing that either answer would get Jesus in trouble.

If Jesus said yes, it was right for them to pay taxes to Caesar, He would lose support and people would no longer believe He was the Messiah, because most people believed the Messiah would lead a revolution that would overthrow Rome. If He said no, then they could turn Jesus in to the Roman authorities for sedition and have Him prosecuted and killed for inciting a rebellion. They saw no way for Jesus to escape their cleverly laid trap.

Jesus, however, instantly saw through their hypocrisy and asked why they were trying to trap Him. Instead of immediately answering, He wisely asked for a Roman coin.

The Roman coin Jesus asked for was a denarius, which was roughly equal to a day's wage. The denarius was the only coin with which people were permitted to pay their tax to Rome. Rome levied several taxes including a poll tax, which was a tax simply for existing. Every year, adult males had to pay a one denarius tax. So to many, the denarius was a symbol of Roman oppression. On one side of the coin was a picture of Tiberius, the emperor, with an inscription that identified him as a god. On the reverse was the inscription "pontifex maximus" which meant high priest of the Roman nation. So

most Jews looked at these coins as representations of everything evil about Rome. They taxed the people of Israel and were pagans who stood against the Lord.

When they gave the coin to Jesus, rather than answering the question directly, He posed a question: whose picture and title are on the coin? That was an easy answer—it was Caesar's. Jesus' response stopped everyone in their tracks: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." Everyone was shocked and speechless.

While this silenced Jesus' questioners, it raises some questions for the rest of us. What does this command mean, and how is it supposed to play out in our lives today?

Jesus' statement was that the things that bore Caesar's image (such as these coins) belonged to Caesar. Therefore, they should be given to him. That makes sense. What is it that belongs to God? The answer is everything that bears *His* image! What bears the image of God? Everything! In particular, we bear the image of God! So while we should give to Caesar what is Caesar's, we should give everything, give ourselves, to the Lord.

The Apostle Paul goes into more detail about how this should work in Romans 13. In essence, Paul says that God has ordained human governments, so we owe allegiance to those governments, including paying taxes, following the laws of the land, and showing proper respect to those in positions of authority. Sometimes people object saying, well they didn't have the kind of leaders we have today. True, but both Jesus and Paul said these things under the control of Rome! Rome was godless, corrupt, and actively seeking to harm both Jesus and Paul. Yet, they still taught that part of the duty of a Christian is to be a good citizen of the government under which they live, even when that government is evil and godless.

At the same time, our greater citizenship is in heaven. The general principle is this: we should follow *all* the commands of our government and *all* the commands of our Lord. If the two commands contradict one another, that is, we cannot obey one command without breaking the other, then our ultimate allegiance is to the Lord, and we should disobey the commands of our human leaders, while fully recognizing and accepting that they have the authority to punish those who do so.

This instruction should still guide Christians today. Though we may disagree with much of what our government is doing, we have a responsibility to follow the laws of the land, even the ones we don't like or think are foolish. We have a responsibility to pay our taxes, even though we may not approve of all the ways they are used. We owe our leaders respect and honor, even when we think they are wrong. Our task is to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. We should also give to God what belongs to God. This means we strive for perfect obedience to Him. It is possible that these two principles will come into conflict. In those times (and only in those times) we must choose to violate the law of the land in order to keep the law of the Lord, accepting whatever consequences result from that. This is the principle that should guide Christian citizenship. Two thousand years later, this command continues to leave us speechless.

## Trap #2

The second trap is brought to Jesus by a different group—the Sadducees, most of whom were wealthy priests. They were friends with Rome, because the Romans enabled them to maintain their power and wealth. The Sadducees only recognized the first five books of the Old Testament as authoritative and ignored the rest of the Old Testament. They believed the first 5 books did not teach about resurrection or life beyond the grave, therefore, they did not believe in either one. This makes their question to Jesus that much more interesting.

<sup>18</sup> Then Jesus was approached by some Sadducees—religious leaders who say there is no resurrection from the dead. They posed this question: <sup>19</sup> “Teacher, Moses gave us a law that if a man dies, leaving a wife without children, his brother should marry the widow and have a child who will carry on the brother’s name. <sup>20</sup> Well, suppose there were seven brothers. The oldest one married and then died without children. <sup>21</sup> So the second brother married the widow, but he also died without children. Then the third brother married her. <sup>22</sup> This continued with all seven of them, and still there were no children. Last of all, the woman also died. <sup>23</sup> So tell us, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her.”

<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, “Your mistake is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God. <sup>25</sup> For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven. <sup>26</sup> “But now, as to whether the dead will be raised—haven’t you ever read about this in the writings of Moses, in the story of the burning bush? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, God said to Moses, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ <sup>27</sup> So he is the God of the living, not the dead. You have made a serious error.” (Mark 12:18-27, NLT)

The Sadducees asked Jesus a question they had likely used before when trying to dispute the notion of resurrection with others. Their question probably stumped opponents before, so they thought they could stump Jesus with it. They were wrong.

The question centers around an Old Testament command from Deuteronomy 25 (also seen in practice in Genesis 38). The command was known as the law of levirate marriage. The principle was this: if a family was living together on a property, multiple brothers on the same land, and a woman’s husband died before they were able to have children, then one of his brothers was responsible to marry the widow and father a child with her. The child that resulted would be counted as a child of the deceased husband, thus enabling the family line to continue and providing for the widowed woman. This seems a bit strange to our modern sentiments, but it made sense within that culture.

The Sadducees ran with this principle and took it to an absurd degree to create a situation they believed showed resurrection must be impossible. They envisioned a woman who married one of seven brothers. Her husband died without fathering a child, so the second brother married her under this principle, then died. This pattern continued until all seven brothers married the woman and died. Their question was when the

woman died too, since she was married to each of the brothers, to whom would she be married when she was resurrected?

Jesus told the Sadducees that they were confused on this subject for two reasons: they didn't know the scriptures, and they didn't know the power of God! Jesus then pointed them to a passage in the first five books of the Old Testament that demonstrates that God raises the dead.

The argument Jesus made comes from Exodus 3, when God called Moses from inside the burning bush. The voice from inside the burning bush told Moses that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The tense is important. Jesus points out that God did not say that He *was* the God of these men, but rather that *I am* the God of these men. If these men were simply dust in the ground, then God would not speak of them in the present tense, but past tense. Jesus' argument is that since God is not the God of the dead (i.e. beings that no longer exist), but the God of the living, the fact that He speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the present tense indicates that there is life beyond the grave, and though these men had experienced death on earth, there is a life that is beyond this life. While this argument may seem a bit convoluted to us, it would have made perfect sense to the Jewish mind.

Jesus goes on from there, however, to explain why the problem imagined by the Sadducees is not a problem at all. His response is that when the dead rise, marriage will no longer be relevant.

Those with good marriages may hear this and begin to worry—does this mean I won't be married to the person I love in Heaven? Well, yes, but that's not the whole story. Marriage is unique in this life as it is the most intimate and open relationship we can have with another person. Nobody knows more about your strengths and weaknesses than your spouse. You share a level of understanding and a bond that no one else can share.

Sin prevents us from opening ourselves up to just anyone. That kind of openness requires a level of trust that we cannot have with just anyone. That's part of what makes marriage relationships so unique. But in Heaven, sin will be removed! There will be no reason for distrust, we will have nothing to hide, and we will be able to know everyone and be fully known by everyone. Do I still think we will have a special relationship with our spouse? Absolutely! But that relationship will change, as will every relationship we have in Heaven. We cannot completely wrap our heads around what this will mean because it is so far outside our experience. It is like trying to describe the ocean and a beach to a child whose only experience with water is in the bathtub. It will be far greater than we can conceive of right now. But rest assured, we will not be disappointed.

Some have gotten confused because Jesus says we will be like the angels. Some hear this and conclude that when people die, they become angels. That is not what Jesus said. He said we become *like the angels* in the sense that we will not be married. That is the only sense in which Jesus says we will be like them. The scriptures are quite clear

that when we rise from the grave, we will continue to be human beings. We will have bodies, we will be delivered from sin, and we will reflect the image of God more completely than we ever have. Again, we cannot conceive of all that this entails, but we can get the rough outline—and we know that what will be is going to far exceed our grandest thoughts.

## **Conclusion**

We see Jesus' brilliance in the way He responded to these people who were trying to trap Him. These were foolish attempts to get Jesus to say something that would make Him look bad. Instead, we see Him respond with great wisdom that left everyone speechless. With that said, there are some lessons we can take away from these responses.

**First, Christians should be good citizens.** The scriptures do not exempt Christians from following their government leaders. On the contrary, we are told to submit to governing authorities so long as doing so does not prevent us from obeying the Lord. Paul tells us that our submission to these authorities is actually a way of submitting to the Lord. There is no loophole simply because we disagree with them or do not like what they believe. Christians should pay taxes, obey laws, and give respect to all government leaders.

**Second, our ultimate allegiance is to God.** The Lord has given government leaders authority over some areas of life, but He maintains authority over every area. Our obedience to the Lord is not just about paying taxes or following a set of rules. We have a responsibility to offer every part of ourselves over to Him. We must align our thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions with what God says. We must submit our desires to His. If we are put in a position where obeying our government would cause us to disobey God, then we obey the Lord, accepting the consequences of our rebellion. Christians can do this because we trust that the judge of all the earth will ultimately do what is right, even when the judges on earth do not.

**Third, this life is not all there is.** Jesus clearly teaches in these verses that there is life beyond the grave. This means a couple things. First, what we do here matters for eternity. We must choose carefully where we stand. Make sure you stand with the Lord now so you will be with Him for eternity. Second, it gives us hope. It gives us hope when those we love die, and it enables Christians to face death without fear, because we know it is not the end of the story. It also enables us to endure hardship in this life, because we know the Lord will ensure justice is served. This isn't wishful thinking, it's a fact demonstrated by Jesus in His resurrection.

The world will try to trap us the same way they tried to trap Jesus. Sometimes it's a website that wants to steal your identity; often the stakes are far higher. We find wisdom from Jesus by seeing how He responded. In every case, the answer is the same: we must stand on God's Word, because it stands firm, both now and forever.

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