

Owing All or Nothing

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] Open your Bible to Mark chapter 12 on page 848. And as you do, there are just a couple of announcements this morning from the announcement sheet.

Next week at the 11 o'clock service and the 9, we have a Bach Cantata. These are fantastic services to bring friends to. Neighbours who might be curious about why you drive out on Sundays at this time of day.

Or friends who are interested. And it's the Easter Cantata, Christ lag in Todes Banne, Christ lay in the bonds of death. Next Sunday, please know that.

And afterward at lunch, Jeremy Curry, who we sent out to Nepal, is back and speaking about the work there, a missionary lunch with Jeremy. The week after that we have, and you can see all sorts of information about our ANIC, our network, Western Regional Assembly.

The churches in the western half of Canada are gathering together. It's not synod, but it is a time of inspiration and encouragement. You can see some of the international speakers who will be there.

[1 : 1 0] And some of the free sessions from people from the Sudan, from England, and from Hong Kong.

So it will be a terrific international gathering. The only other thing is I commend to you the letter from Alistair on the front and the prayer card for St Peter's Fireside.

This is a congregational church plant we're supporting. And I think in some months' time, it may be that some of you would like to go to St Peter's.

You can't go unless I give you permission. And I have a list of who I'd like to go. I'm just kidding. That's something between you and God.

So I want you to have that. Well now, here we are in Mark 12. And this is a brilliant part of the Bible for Peter who have questions. Jesus welcomes questions.

[2 : 1 4] There's no such thing as a silly question to Jesus. You know Douglas Coupland, the Vancouver author, who wants to become a Christian, but he says the reason he can't is because if he becomes a Christian, he has to stop being curious.

As though when you become a Christian, you have all the answers. I didn't do this at the earlier service, but can we have a show of hands of anyone who knows all the answers? I don't know where people get that idea from.

They certainly don't get it from Jesus here. We have a course that's begun last Tuesday. It goes for five more weeks, where you're welcome to come with any question that you might have about Jesus Christ.

Tuesday nights here at the church. And I would also say that if you've been a Christian for five years or for 10 years or for 50 years, and you haven't recently asked a serious question about your faith, you might be stuck.

So Jesus welcomes questions. And here he is in the temple of Jerusalem, and the questions are coming thick and fast. There's a full court press of the Jewish authorities against him, Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and the questions are hostile.

[3 : 2 9] And at one level, the whole chapter is quite entertaining, really, to watch how Jesus completely runs rings around his enemies. These guys are very clever. But there's something about Jesus, and this is always true, isn't it?

There's something about Jesus that's either attracting or repelling. Don't you find this when you talk about Jesus, when you raise the conversation about Jesus at work or at a meal?

People are either repelled or attracted. I hope you do talk about Jesus. And they bring their A game, these questioners. They want to outsmart him and trap him and to bring him down.

And there's a mounting sense through the chapter that not only Jesus' answers are brilliant and incredibly gracious, and not only are they losing, but that Jesus is just not playing that game. He's doing something completely different. So just look at the end of some of the paragraphs, the end of the first 12 verses. What's their response? They run away to see if they can arrest him. [4 : 33] At the end of verse 17, they marvel at him. At the end of verse 34, no one dares to ask him any more questions. Verse 35, Jesus starts to ask a question because his point is not to win.

His point is something else. What is Jesus doing? With every question that he receives, Jesus uses that question to open a window.

That's what he's doing. He's opening windows. It is, as it were, that the questioners show that we live here in a room which is without light, without windows.

And when the questions come to Jesus, he takes each one of them and blows the window open. And at first sight, it's a bit overwhelming and blinding, as we'll see in the three stories today.

And what happens is, if you continue to look carefully, there's a figure who's outside. And we start to discern who that person is because that's what Jesus is doing.

[5 : 39] He's opening the window to show us who God is and what it means to belong to him, to meet him in very practical terms in today's passage. Last Sunday, we did 18 to 27, the Sadducee story.

And I don't know about you, but I felt Jesus was more like blowing off the roof than he was opening windows. We're not going to look at that this week. Today, we're going to look at three little sections. Paying taxes to Caesar, the great commandment, and then Jesus' question.

And there's a key detail in each story that brings us to God. And I'm not sure how to mark that key detail except maybe to get Aaron to stand up on one leg or to sing us a song when we come to the detail.

No, I won't. I'll just mention it. So first, let's look at paying taxes to Caesar verses 13 to 17. This is one of the best known passages in all of the Gospels and it's a setup.

Pharisees and Herodians, they hate each other's guts. And the only reason that they are together is because they hate Jesus more. And the word for trap is not a clean word.

[6 : 59] It's a chasing, hunting, violent thing that you do with an animal. And so in verse 14, they try and disarm Jesus with the one approach that they know works for them.

Flattery. And they have awarded him most magnanimously an honorary doctorate of teaching. Teacher, they say. They don't think he's a teacher, they say.

We are so lucky to have you to answer our questions. You're the only one who's going to give it to us straight. I mean, so many other teachers, they want to be popular, they're influenced by finance, but you're very centered, you're very spiritual, you're very secure, you have special spiritual insight. Well, that's my translation of verse 14. Notice in verse 15, Jesus doesn't believe a word of it. He sees their crawling as hypocrisy, and he sees the hand of Satan behind it, testing.

Because what they really want to do is they want to skewer Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. You see their question? Verse 15, Is it the right thing to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

[8 : 07] See the way they ask? Don't give us any nuance on this, Jesus. Yes or no? Should we pay them or not? Now, this was a very, very hot potato.

When Jesus was a boy, the Roman occupiers decided to impose a head tax on everyone who lived in Judea. It wasn't a business tax.

It was a head tax. And the tax was one denarius. And the denarius was a Roman coin. And it was a dirty coin to the Jews because it had a picture of Tiberius on it.

And it said on one side that Tiberius was the son of God and the other side that he was the high priest. So the resentment in Israel ran very deep.

And when Jesus was about six years old, a man from his area called Judas the Galilean led a popular uprising. It was a big thing. And he captured popular sentiment by saying this tax is an offence to God.

[9 : 07] This is God's holy land. And if you pay this tax, you're being disloyal to God. And the uprising was brutally put down. I won't tell you the parts of that.

But this resentment, even after it was put down, continued to smolder very close to the surface in Israel. And you know, it broke out again after Jesus' death and resurrection.

In 66 AD, the people who had been founded by Judas the Galilean rose up again. And there was a military revolt against Rome.

And Rome marched against Jerusalem and annihilated Jerusalem. Flattened the temple. took all the precious things out of the temple to spoil back to Rome. You can go to Rome today and you can see a carving of this on the inside of the Titus Arch. And those who survived went out to the Judean desert, the wilderness, up to a mountain called Masada. [10:11] And they were besieged there for three years. And finally, about 960 of them committed suicide rather than giving in to the Romans. Romans, this was a hot topic.

And that is why they put the question the way they do because they just say, give us a yes or no answer, you see. What does Jesus do? He doesn't give them a yes or no. He opens a window. And you can see the first little stream of light. You can almost, you don't notice it at first. The first little stream of light is when he asks for a denarius. Think about this for a moment. They're in the temple. You're not allowed to have any images, any idolatrous coins in the temple. But without even thinking, the clergy around produce them from their pockets.

And Jesus, he could just stop there, couldn't he? He could just say, your question's devious and disingenuous. But he doesn't because he wants them to see who God is. So he holds up the coin and blows the window open and he says, whose image is this? [11:19] And they say, Caesar's. And then he says, give back to Caesar what belongs to him and to God the things that are God's.

See, they want to keep their civic life and their life of faith apart. and Jesus won't allow it. The answer is not a binary yes or no just as there's no one Christian way to vote. You can't think of your civic and your financial life as something separate from your life of faith. Nor can you think of your life of faith apart from your financial commitments and your civic commitments.

It's not that God has one area and Caesar has another. The New Testament recognises the legitimacy of human government even when it's a wretched totalitarian self-deluding leader who thinks he's God.

But as Christians we are not just to pay taxes but we're to be the kinds of citizens that live in the kind of way that makes the gospel look good. And as the light flows into the room we begin to see a figure, the source of the light, God himself.

[12:35] And the point is that Caesar is not God. Sure he minted the coins out of his own treasury he can have the coins back but God alone is God he is our creator and everything belongs to him.

And that means that Caesar and all human authority is relative it's not absolute. Human government can never assume complete control of the place of God. Our civic responsibility is not total.

It comes out of the fact that we belong to God. We seek to be good citizens because we belong to him. But here is the detail I want you to see in this first story.

This is the detail. In verse 14 their question is should we pay? And in verse 17 Jesus uses the words translated here render.

It's an odd way to translate it. It's literally pay back. It's very strong. Jesus is saying there are things that belong to Caesar.

[13:38] How do you tell? It has Caesar's image on it. There are things that belong to God. How can you tell? They will have his image on them.

Where is the image of God? It's in you and in me. He sees and I own his coins but God owns you utterly totally completely and you and I must pay back to him what belongs to him.

Everything you are everything you have Jesus says here you have to pay back. You are not your own. We're not sovereign to decide to do choose to do whatever we want to do.

You and I we are owned by God we belong to God and therefore we have to pay him back. It's very like the parable of the tenants two weeks ago. You remember we saw we own nothing everything we have everything we are is God's he's our creator.

There's nothing you have that you made ultimately. We are entitled to nothing. We have been entrusted with everything. And I don't know about you but I find this the brilliance of this a bit overwhelming really.

[14:59] As you think through the implications of this it means that our debt to God is beyond imagining. Our obligation is eternal and infinite and none of us can pay him back really.

There's nothing we can do to square the ledger with God or to put God in our debt. And the image of God that's in you is God's claim on you and me and every time I make a decision where I act as though I belong to me I distort the image and I damage the image and I degrade the image.

And that's where Jesus leaves it. We'll come back to it in a moment. He just says pay back to God what belongs to him and the story finishes they all marvel in stunned silence.

So there's the first window. God is the creator. He owns everything. We owe all we are and all we have to him. Let's move to the second question.

And I want to go down to the great commandment verses 28 to 34 because the atmosphere changes completely. This is lovely.

[16:08] Here is a scribe. He's part of the group that want to kill Jesus and he's been listening very carefully to Jesus and he comes to him with a genuine question. He loves what Jesus is saying.

And it's a bit of a side detail here but the reason I mention it is because we sometimes read the Gospels as though they're a pantomime. You know when the Pharisees come on stage we all boo. Scribes come we get the rotten tomatoes ready. But Jesus it's more complex than that. His view of Jesus and Jesus answers is that they are the word means brilliant beautiful.

He recognizes something of the light and the beauty of God about what Jesus is saying and he's drawn to it. And his question in verse 28 is a bit hard to translate. He's not just asking about the greatest commandment.

He says what is the one thing that's above everything else to which I can give my allegiance?

What's the one priority? What's the one thing I can live on here and now?

[17:12] God is to love God and what Jesus does is he opens this window gradually in three stages and the first little bit of opening doesn't seem like much because Jesus quotes what we all know in the Old Testament love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength literally we are to love God with all our allness all our muchness above everything else but what's surprising in this first crack in the window is what Jesus says before the commandment he tells he explains to the scribe why we are to do that verse 29 he says the most important is hear O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one and we immediately begin to see the figure outside the window the source of light the reason we hold nothing back from loving

God is because he is one see in pagan religions where there are many gods you cannot afford to give one God all of your allegiance in case the other gods hear about it and get jealous or become vindictive when you travel you offer to one God when you plant your seeds you offer to another you never give your loves to God and no one would ever think of committing all their heart mind soul and strength to a God because you've got to have some left over for the other gods but at the heart of the revelation of God in the Old Testament is this I the Lord and God there is none beside me it's not I'm the best of a very good group it's not I'm the strongest and the largest it's not I'm the God of many faces the Lord our God the Lord is one and I could give you a string of quotes from the Old Testament let me give you just one from the prophet Isaiah God says

I am the Lord there is no other God besides me a righteous God and a saviour there is none besides me turn to me and be saved obviously because there are none that can save us all the ends of the earth for I am God and there is no other and then Jesus squeaks the window open a second piece by adding a second commandment he says love your neighbour as yourself love your neighbour as yourself a lot of people think Jesus is telling us that we need to love ourselves here he's not he assumes that we love ourselves this also comes from the Old Testament but what is new is that he's never been united with the command to love God in this way because for Jesus they belong together just as you can't separate your civic life from your life of faith we cannot separate our life of faith from the way we treat those people who are our neighbours those people sitting around us those people who live beside you and in front of you in your street the way we show that we love

God is by loving them the way God shows his love for them is through our loving them so put it negatively we can sing about the fact that we love God but if you treat your neighbour poorly if you use them or misuse them or ignore them saying you love God is just empty the love for God and love for neighbour they go together and since God is one and since your neighbour bears his image just as you do to love God means you must love them scribe thinks this is brilliant he says wacko that's exactly right and then he says something just a little bit surprising himself verse 33 he says to love God and neighbour is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices it's a very dangerous thing for a scribe to say in the middle of the temple there he is he says all the apparatus

of sacrifices and priesthood they're not the end they're not the main game they are there as a means to help us to love

God and others and then Jesus opens the window all the way in verse 34 we read when Jesus saw that he answered wisely he said to him you are not far from the kingdom of God and after that no one dared ask him any more questions that brings us to the second detail the detail in the second question are you ready for this verse 30 we flew over this if you look back at it where

[22 : 39] Jesus is quoting the great command it's very interesting Jesus does not say that we are to love God with all our heart and with all our soul but from all our heart and from all our soul and you might think that's very subtle but it's not it's night and day I drink water with a glass but I drink it from the tap I read with glasses but I read from the book to love God with your heart means your heart is a tool it's a device and loving God is one of the things that you do with it amongst a whole bunch of others and the command would then mean that when you do love God don't do it a quarter do it all amongst the other things but to love God from your heart means out of your heart so that your heart is the source of your love for God the place that love starts is in my heart soul mind and strength it originates in me but there's only one exactly what we cannot do and for those of you who have been in

Bible study you'll remember this that in chapter 7 around verse 20 21 22 23 Jesus says this I'll read it to you what comes out of a person same word is what defiles him for from within out of the heart of man out of the heart of woman come evil thoughts sexual immorality theft murder adultery coveting wickedness deceit sensuality envy slander pride foolishness all these things these evil things come from within and they defile a person that's why Jesus says to the scribe he's not far because he's one thing to know that what we are meant to do it's a very different thing to do it and the problem is our hearts and it doesn't matter how hard we try we just can't muster up on our own the love that we need to

God from within or to our neighbor something radical needs to happen before we enter into the kingdom the scribe is close but there's one thing missing and it's this his admiration for Jesus must turn to worship he has to become a disciple of Jesus to enter the kingdom and that's why Jesus asks this last question the third question and we're going to look at fairly quickly verses 35 to 37 so here is the third point and it's lovely isn't it verse 34 no one dares ask him a question anymore but Jesus hasn't finished his purpose is not to win or to silence his opposition what's his purpose it's the people who come to faith in him so now Jesus asks an amazing question he takes the initiative and he asks a question that opens the largest window of all not just so that we would see God and what we must do but that we might meet him and know him as our heavenly father think about this you see there are all sorts of questions information diagnostic questions yes no questions this question this question of

Jesus very interesting he doesn't give us an answer someone needs to write a letter to Doug Douglas Coupland and tell him Jesus doesn't give the answer here but this question has tremendous ongoing lasting power it's like radioactive and the more you think about it the more you get from it the question Jesus asks involves three main characters one is God in heaven the second is old King David a thousand years BC the great King of Israel and the third is the Messiah and those of you who were with us a couple of years ago when we trawled our way through 1 and 2 Samuel will remember that God promised to King David that he would take one of his sons one of his descendants and God would bring him and make him a son of God and that he would raise up one of those descendants and make that son the Messiah and bring that Messiah would then bring all

God's people into the new Eden and God would establish that son's kingdom forever and here is the detail if you let's just read the words Jesus says that Jesus quotes Psalm 110 written a thousand years ago by King David and King David calls his descendant the Messiah my Lord so let's look at it Jesus taught in the temple verse 35 he said how can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David David himself in the Holy Spirit declared the Lord that is God in heaven said to my Lord the son the Messiah sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet David himself calls him Lord how is he his son and the great throng heard him gladly which I think is an utterly inadequate response personally let me put it very simply

[28 : 20] Jesus is saying I am the son of God I'm not just superior to David King David I'm God's own son and just as King David prophesied about the future there's going to come a day when God the Father will raise me from the dead and he's going to place me in the seat of honour at his right

hand and God is going to work for me he will work by putting my enemies under my feet see what he's doing he's not just opening the window so that we can see God who's the source of light he's saying I am the source of light I am the son of God I am the face of God I am the light that's come into the room and I want to finish with this I want to show how this changes everything just from our passage here let's just try and gather it together none of us let's be honest have loved God from all our heart soul mind and strength none of us have loved our neighbours as ourselves but Jesus has he loved

God from the heart of the true son and he loved us and all his neighbours beyond measure and he has done that for us or if you go back to the Caesar issue God is our maker and our owner we owe him everything but we cannot pay him back and you and I are under a tremendous load of debt to God which is beyond our capacity to pay and that's what Jesus came to do he came to pay our debt for us at the end of this chapter Jesus walks out of the temple for the last time we follow him he goes over to the Mount of Olives and then into the Last Supper and back to the Garden of Gethsemane arrest and trial abuse and then he is hung on a cross and executed and there in the strange mid-afternoon darkness Jesus has already told us that he gives his life as a ransom payment for our debt he pays the debt we never could he pays back to

God what we owe to God and like the scribe you can know all this and still be on the threshold of the kingdom of God you can be very close to the kingdom you can be a church girl for many years and still not know him God as your heavenly father and still not have entered in and of course the way we do that is to become disciples of Jesus not to appreciate him admire his teaching but to confess him and bow to him as the son of God and to put our faith in him and to acknowledge that I have a debt to God that I cannot pay but Jesus has paid in full and to worship him as my king and as my saviour and what happens is because Jesus is the very image of the invisible God as we place our faith in him he not only welcomes us but he begins to remake us and to restore the image of

God in us he begins to change us and to draw us further in near to him he gives us new desires new affections they feel like they come from the outside and we begin to genuinely love God from our hearts and to love our neighbours as ourselves so let me finish with just a couple of open ended questions would you let me do that so let me finish on the issue of finances and our debts to God do you find it really difficult to give generously to the work of God 10% 5% 15% why would that be or do you have a sense that you want to give more and that you have this growing sense that Christ has paid all your debt and you want to increase your generosity if that's happening where does that come from or let me ask you do you have a sense a growing sense that God is just more excellent than you can even speak and you find yourself drawn to him in love and you're thinking of new ways to love your neighbour where would that come from or perhaps you feel you are on the threshold of the kingdom you've never really entered in

I can tell you where that comes from that comes from Jesus and I encourage you to enter in