

Mark 12:28-44

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[0 : 00] Well, if you take out your Bible and turn to Mark chapter 12, where we had our two readings, page 848. If you're new with us, great to have you with us. I thought when we started the service, what I might do is have a sort of a group discussion around this passage instead of a sermon. But there are too many people now. Sorry about that. So what we'll do perhaps is when we finish the service, there will be coffee on afterward. And I don't want to stop people from going to coffee. I know what it is to stand between someone and their coffee.

So you'll be most welcome to go to coffee. But I might do a small, see if people have input or questions or thoughts afterwards here after the service. Is that okay? All right, great.

Well, now here we go. Mark 12 and the passage is 28 to 44. And we are within 48 hours of Jesus' death. And this is the last three events, the last, the final moments of Jesus' public ministry. In chapter 13, he takes his disciples and explains the destruction of the temple. Then the last supper. Then the garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, the trial, his death and his resurrection.

So these are the final three moments of Jesus' public ministry. And they're full of Jesus' goodness. And what he does, Jesus pulls aside the curtains between two worlds, the curtains between heaven and earth, between the kingdom and this world, so that we can see what's usually hidden from us.

[1 : 43] We can see things from heaven's point of view. And he does that not to satisfy our curiosity or to make us spiritually smarter, but because he literally wants to draw us up into that other world, to take us, to lead us, to carry us beyond the surface, to enjoy all that he is and all that he's doing and all that he brings for us.

So when we come to church, we come, if you're anything like me, we come with lots of questions in our own hearts for God. We come with fears and anxieties, concerns that others in the congregation may have no idea about.

And we have the privilege this morning of hearing things and seeing things from God's point of view, what's really going on and what's most important and significant.

And it puts our own questions in a new light. Because the way Jesus teaches us is not the way we usually put things together. Everything revolves around him as king and lord.

I don't usually do this, but these are my three points. The three scenes, number one is about Jesus, the king of love, who takes us up into his kingdom.

[3 : 00] The second is the king of glory, who takes us up into his glory. And the third is the king of life, who comes to give us his own life. So that's for note takers, in case you're interested.

So the first paragraph, which is 18 to 34, which we had the puppet display on, the king of love, takes us up into his kingdom. And the first thing you notice coming into today's passage is that there's a delightful mood swing, full of ironies.

Jesus, since he entered the temple two days before, he's been under constant, angry, hostile attack by the Jewish authorities.

It's been like an ongoing, furious press conference where they're trying to trip him up. And now there's a let-up. And the lovely irony is that one of the group that want to kill him, one of the scribes, now comes to Jesus as a student, as a pupil, and asks him a question that's genuine, sincere, and real.

He says to Jesus, look, in face of everything that's going on, what's really most important? What does God require of us, first, over everything? What does it mean to live to please God?

[4 : 18] And in Jesus' answer, he does two things that I think are quite surprising. The first is this, he does not give him a command first.

He doesn't go straight to the command. Did you notice that? Jesus begins with the Old Testament revelation of who God is before he moves to the response to what he's done.

He quotes Deuteronomy 6, where the Lord had rescued and delivered and saved his people from slavery in Egypt and brought them to himself. The very fact that they are there at Mount Sinai is a testimony to his saving grace.

And before God gives the command in the Old Testament, he says this, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And Jesus takes that as his first statement.

This is the first surprising thing that he does. Because the whole structure of morality is built on the reality of who God is.

[5 : 24] Since there's only one God who made us and saves us, he ought to be, he deserves to be worshipped by all our faculties, all our allness.

He deserves to be loved by us in every part of our being. But our love for him is a response to who he is and what he's done.

We don't take the initiative. This is the Bible order. We always begin with God revealing his gracious purposes. Then our response is to obey his commands.

Because until God's grace comes into our lives, we don't even have the desire or the power to obey his commands. You know, there are so many people in the community around about us that think that Christianity is a form of weak moralising.

That basically we make it our aim to try and stop people having fun. But the message of the Bible is grace, not duty. And as Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6, he starts with God first and his love first and then with our response.

[6 : 30] That's the first surprising thing that Jesus does. The second surprising thing Jesus does is he does something nobody's ever done before. And that is he commands the love, he combines the command to love God with the command to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Now we're used to this. Even Clive is used to this. But it's completely radical. He brings together faith in God and our daily practice.

That is, what we do comes out of what we believe. And he just points out the eternal importance of the person who is sitting in front of you and behind you and next to you.

And as Chris was interviewing Graham and Beth up the front here, I think it's clear it's not always straightforward in how to love our neighbours, is it?

I don't think it's always easy to know how to do that. However, here is the King of love, Jesus himself, revealing the mind of God and the way that we show our love for God is by loving each other.

[7 : 41] We can't say that we love God if we carry on bitter and harsh and hostile to others, holding on to grudges and bitterness and resentment. That's clear.

And then for the first time in Mark's Gospel, the only time in Mark's Gospel, one of the religious leaders agrees with Jesus and moves even closer by saying something astonishing.

He says, you're right, Jesus. This is what the Old Testament teaches. And he says, these things, loving God and loving neighbour, are far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.

I mean, there he is, they're in the temple. The air is filled with smoke from the burnt offerings behind him and all around him. And the scribe waves his hand and he says, none of this means anything apart from loving God and loving one another.

And Jesus says to him, you're not far from the kingdom of God. It's beautiful. The great irony, of course, as we've been reading in Mark's Gospel, is that Jesus is bigger than the temple, bigger than the Old Testament sacrifices, that in the flesh, his body is the new temple built without hands.

[8 : 56] He's the king of God's kingdom. And all that the temple stood for is just about to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the man standing in front of the scribe. You know, in the Old Testament, the temple was the gift of God, where God said, I'm going to come and dwell with you and give you access to me regularly.

They had perverted the use of it to enrich themselves. They had blocked access to God for others. And Jesus comes as God in the flesh to open the kingdom of heaven to all who would follow him.

And when he gives his life on the cross in 48 hours, he gathers up all his love and all his mercy and gives away his life, and there's no more need for any sacrifices.

We've known this since chapter 2. The one who has authority on earth to forgive sins dies to put away all sin. And that means he is the end of the temple, the fulfillment and replacement of the temple.

And as a sign of that, when he dies, the curtain in the temple is torn from heaven to earth, from top to bottom, to open the way to us to come in.

[10:05] So when Jesus says to him, you're not far from the kingdom, it's full of encouragement and welcome to this man. It's an invitation to step in. Put your faith in me as God's king in the kingdom.

And then we have this one last sentence in verse 34 about this section. And no one dares to ask him any more questions. I think Mark loves it when he's able to write those sorts of things. And it could be a moment of great triumph. No one is able to ask him any more questions. But it's not what Jesus really wants. He has not come to silence his critics or even those who are asking him questions.

He's come to bring them into his kingdom, to open the door of heaven to them, to give them access to God. And that is why he then goes on the front foot with his own question in the second scene. And as we come to this second scene, it is like a towering high point in the gospel. It acts as a hinge between what comes before and what comes after.

[11:09] And we rise up into the throne room of heaven itself. So I move from my first point, which is the king of love takes us up into his kingdom. To the second point, verses 35 to 37, the king of glory takes us up into his glory.

And it's here I'd like to pause for questions, but I won't because there are too many of you. So he's just laid claim to be king of the kingdom, right? How do you back up that sort of claim?

We know that God the Father spoke at his baptism and spoke on the mountain. This is my son, my beloved son. Listen to him. We've heard his teaching. We've seen his miracles. We've heard his claims.

But how do you back this up? Well, here in the temple, what Jesus does is he asks a very simple question. And there's no one there who can answer the question.

Not even the disciples know the answer. Because the question opens up a chasm between heaven's view of Jesus and the human view. And the question is a time bomb.

[12:09] It's a time release question, if you will, that is set to go off in five days time at the resurrection. And then they'll come to understand. So I need you to track with me carefully through this question because it's quite unusual.

Just look down at the text. Point one, verse 35. Verse 35, Jesus asked, how can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? So what's the answer to that?

How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? And everyone in Sunday school says, because the Bible says. All right, that's what the Old Testament says, yes?

Unto us a child is born. The government will be on his shoulder. He will reign on David's throne. Or Jeremiah, I will raise up a king. David, a king. Or to Samuel, God promises a descendant who will sit on the throne.

The Messiah is David's son. Point two, next verse. If you look at Psalm 110, written by David himself, David looks up into heaven under the power of the Holy Spirit, and he calls this Messiah who is going to come, my Lord.

[13:23] He looks down the long line past his great, great, great, great, great, great grandson, and he quotes God as speaking to his great, great, great, great grandson, saying, sit at my right hand in heaven till I put your enemies under your feet.

So how can King David come before this Christ, and how can he be greater than Christ, and yet at the same time call him Lord?

You with me still? We'll have questions afterwards, okay? I think this goes straight to the heart of the mystery of the incarnation, that Jesus is at the same time both fully human, a descendant of David, and fully divine, the Son of God.

And what Jesus does is he invites his heroes up into the throne room of heaven just for a moment to glimpse his majesty and his power from heaven's point of view. And when you do, when you begin to see, of course David should call him Lord, because he's not only David's son, he's God's son.

Now, it's difficult to express how important this is. This quote that Jesus makes here comes from Psalm 110, which is the most quoted piece of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

[14:45] And when Jesus rose from the dead, he gave his disciples a 40-day seminar on how to preach the gospel. And when they began preaching from Acts 2 onwards, this text, Psalm 110,

becomes the centre of their preaching.

Acts 2, Acts 5, Acts 7, Acts 13. And the text is both beautiful and chilling. It's chilling because as God's son, honoured by God, given the seat of authority and majesty in heaven, and God says, I'm going to put all your enemies under your feet, including those people who are standing around him in the temple, planning not just to cancel him, but to kill him.

And it's thoroughly beautiful because it reveals Jesus as the perfect combination of meekness and majesty, of grace and power together.

And those two things together lie at the heart of how we're saved. He forsook the glory of heaven, born as a vulnerable child, abused, misunderstood, opposed.

And when he gives his life, the king of glory opens the door to glory for us, the glory we lost in Eden. Now we receive more glory back, the glory of becoming like Jesus Christ, as we are daily now transformed from one degree of glory to another.

[16:11] But as Jesus is standing there two days before he's crucified, this is glory and authority beyond our wildest dreams. And any view of Jesus that does not see him as infinitely more majestic and glorious than any other human who's ever lived is woefully inadequate.

So it's right that these verses are a little bit befuddling to us because their brain exploding, their category exploding. They're trying to unlock glory for us to put everything else in perspective.

The same Jesus who had compassion on the leper, the same Jesus who welcomed the children into his arms, has for 2,000 years been enthroned in heaven in the place of honour and glory.

And if Jesus is at the right hand of the Father now, the main thing that God is doing in history is putting all things under his feet. That's what God is doing.

That's what God is doing with your life and my life, with this church, with world history. That's what he's doing. He's putting all things under Jesus' feet. So as we seek to plant a new church in May, what is God doing?

[17:22] God's putting all things under the feet of Jesus Christ. As we welcome refugees, what's God doing? He's putting all things under the feet of Jesus Christ. As we meet for Vestry tomorrow night and vote for the budget and other things, what's God doing?

He's putting all things under the feet of Jesus Christ. What about the difficulties in my life, which seem utterly stubborn and unfixable? What's God doing?

He's doing the same thing. What about the war in Ukraine? Is it true there? Is Christ in control?

Well, I don't think we can always say with confidence what heaven's point of view is on every specific thing.

But I read yesterday, did you know that Poland has received 10 million refugees from Ukraine in this last year? And Samaritan's Purse, which is a Christian charity, reported speaking to a pastor, Here is one church in Poland who are caring for 30,000 families each week, 30,000 Ukrainian families.

And this is what the pastor said. You helped us in showing them Jesus Christ, he said. The church has awakened. We've stopped being religious. We've become real Christians.

[18:40] We're now ministering to strangers. God puts, God's putting all things under Jesus' feet. So he's not just the king of love who takes us up into his kingdom.

He's not just the king of glory who takes us up into his glory. Thirdly and finally, he's the king of life who comes to give his life for us. Verses 38 to 44. Again, Jesus pulls aside the curtain and allows us to see what's going on then and now from heaven's point of view.

And in this very last moment in his public ministry, it's a very religious moment. And he sees right through the showy hypocrites, as well as the unimpressive godliness of a poor widow.

It's a very searching contrast here. And it reveals what we do with our religious expression. It shows that we ultimately belong to one of two worlds.

We either belong to this passing world, where our horizons are for approval, or we live for the eternal world, where our horizons are vertical and horizontal and we have God's approval.

[19:52] And Jesus says in verse 38, beware of living just for this world. And he gives six signs of living just for this world. And some of them seem pretty harmless, don't they?

I mean, robes. Robes. Seats. Greetings. It's not violence or corruption. And one of them is more serious.

Stealing. The reason Jesus is warning us is that there is a way of wearing robes which has to do with your motives. You notice Lorna and I are wearing robes this morning.

I hope we're doing it for the right motives. You can have seats and approval in the marketplace for approval and applause from each other to try and build our own esteem. But when we do that, it shows our hearts are fixed on the glory now.

And if we exercise our faith for the applause of others, it means our hearts belong to this world, not to the Lord. And I just, I say this, it's a particular temptation for those who teach the Word of God.

[20 : 54] It is possible to teach the Word of God to be recognized and for your approval. So never give your preachers approval. Thank you.

I'm glad some people are still listening. Once we begin down the track of looking for approval through religious expression, Jesus' words become very painful.

He says, you will receive the greater condemnation. And then he calls the disciples to himself and he wants them to see something. He wants them to see one poor widow who puts two small coins in at a time.

Yeah. So they're in the treasury in the temple and there are these big trumpet shaped boxes, 13 of them, with big open mouths at the top.

And you could go and you could say to the priest, I'm going to put in 200 shekels. And the priest would call out, 200 shekels! And he'd throw them in and they'd go, down into the bottom.

[21 : 57] And this woman comes and puts two tiny dimes in. It's not impressive to the crowd or anyone who looks on. It doesn't make much of a dent in the temple budget, but it's massively impressive to Jesus.

But we have to read carefully here. Here's the last event in Jesus' public ministry. It's very important. It's not there so that we'd follow the example of the widow and give generously to the offering.

Jesus is not criticising the wealthy for making large contributions. He's not saying, take all your money and give it away and become dependent on others.

But he's saying, if you look at this woman, there is something going on for this widow. She has a wealth that she is depending on that no one can see, which is setting her free. She's the freest person around to do with money.

And when Jesus uses this phrase, she's put in everything that she had to live on, it's not that she sold a house and her pots and her pans and she's taken it all and given it, but she's taken what she had to live on perhaps that week or that day or those few days, maybe a couple of \$5 notes.

[23 : 09] But the point that Jesus makes is what her heart is set on. Her heart is set on God. And her life, she knows, comes from God. And so she wants to give her whole life back to God, and it's beautiful.

This week I heard that when a pastor is released from prison in mainland China, his church community does the exact opposite of what might be expected.

They go to the prison, to the front door, and with flowers and gifts and photo opportunities and his family, with the prison as the backdrop, they welcome the pastor out to cheering and singing.

And the purpose of being in prison in that context is to shame people. And what they do is that by welcoming, they turn the shame into glory.

It's a little bit like the cross of Jesus Christ. And I think it's enormously impressive to him. Heaven looks and rejoices at this Jesus as he goes to the cross.

[24 : 13] As he takes the path full of humiliation and dishonour and death from a human point of view. But from heaven's point of view, it's full of glory and it's full of love and it's full of life.

And you can be rich and famous or poor and unknown. What matters is not what other people think of you. What matters is what Jesus thinks. A friend of mine who's a preacher says that at every funeral, he says, what is said at the funeral on this side of the river is moderately important.

But what's said on the other side of the river, either welcome or depart, that is of infinite importance. And the King of love has come to draw us up into his love.

And the King of glory has come to draw us up into his glory. And the King of life has come to draw us up into his life so that we would share his life together. Amen. Amen.