

TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE

Mark 12:1-34

Introduction:

What does God think of religion? What is religion? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines religion as *“a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices.”* Christianity is often referred to as a religion. You have probably had people refer to you as a “religious” person. According to the dictionary that would mean that you are devoted to certain religious beliefs or observances.

So, accepting the premise that religion refers to a commitment to certain beliefs and practices, I ask again, what does God think of religion? In Mark 12 we have several religious people or groups confronting Jesus with their religious views and beliefs and questioning him in an attempt to trap and incriminate him.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry he was continually being confronted by the Jewish religious leaders of his day, because they thought he didn’t pay enough attention to the requirements of the Law and the observances that they felt were important. In return, Jesus continually pointed out how their religious beliefs and practices often got in the way of compassion for people and did not promote a sincere relationship with God. Instead they were focused on religion and the observances of their religion as an end in itself, rather than seeking a relationship with the living God.

This morning we are going to again take a quick tour through these encounters between Jesus and some of the religious leaders and then look at how this all relates to us today.

Chapter 11 ended with a group of Pharisees – some scribes and elders coming to question Jesus about his authority. They wanted to know who gave Jesus the right or the authority to interfere with the worship and trade practices they had fostered within the temple courts. Jesus refused to answer their question, knowing that they would neither believe or accept his answer anyway.

Jesus Speaks in Parables – vv. 1-12

So now come to chapter 12. But keep in mind that a new chapter does not mean a new setting or a change of focus.

“And he began to speak to them in parables.” This was not unusual. Jesus used stories to make a point. Here Mark records one parable, but if you look at the gospel of Matthew you would find three parables—the two sons; the tenants (the one we have in Mark); the wedding feast. They are all directed at these leaders of the Jews who are making their final rejection of him, their Messiah.

Go through the parable:

- The careful preparation of the vineyard - Israel
- Leasing it out to tenants, thought to be reliable caretakers – Jewish leaders
- Expectation of a harvest of fruit
- Mistreatment of the servants – escalates with each attempt
- One other – the beloved son
- Desire by the tenants to have everything for themselves – they kill the son, hoping to have it all—the vineyard, and the harvest
- The verdict – the landowner will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. This is seen in the message been passed to the Gentiles and the establishing of the Church, which was primarily Gentile.

Verses 10-11 are a quote from Ps. 118:22-23. John MacArthur says of these verses: *“This refers to his crucifixion; and the restoration of ‘the cornerstone’ anticipates his resurrection. **the cornerstone.** To the superficial eye, this quotation from Psalm 118:22–23 is irrelevant to the parable that precedes it. But it is taken from a messianic psalm. Jesus cited it to suggest that the son who was killed and thrown out of the vineyard was also ‘the cornerstone’ in God’s redemptive plan.”*

In verse 12 we see the reaction of the Pharisees – they were quite perceptive. They understood that he was speaking against them, and they were very anxious to arrest him and get rid of him—actually fulfilling the story Jesus just told. But their fear of the people kept them from doing anything yet.

The Question of Paying Taxes to Rome – vv. 13-17

Now begins a series of attempts to corner Jesus, to trap him in his words, to get him to say or do something that would give the Jewish leaders a cause to arrest him. And it all has to do with their religion and what they perceived to be a lack of commitment by Jesus to the standards and principles of the Law of God.

“And they sent to him...” “They” are the Pharisees, according to Matthew 21:15-16 – “Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his talk, And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians...”

This was a very interesting combination. The Pharisees, who were determined to see Israel set free from the bonds of Rome, and the Herodians, who were a Jewish political party who sympathized Herod, the puppet king of Rome. They believed in submitting to the rule of Rome, in order to maintain peace and security in Israel. So you have two parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum coming to Jesus with a question, which was really nothing more than a trap.

The question – Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? If he said yes, the Pharisees would accuse him of supporting the worship of Caesar and surrendering to Rome. If he said no, the Herodians would report him to Herod and have him arrested for treason against Rome.

In Jesus’ answer I think we have the beginning of the idea of the “separation of church and state.” He points to the fact that we must surrender ourselves to God, while at the same time, live under the rule of what ever government is in place – *“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*

They were unable to respond to such wisdom – they marveled at him.

The Question of the Resurrection – v. 18-27

Second question – second attempt to trap Jesus. This time it is the Sadducees. The Pharisees couldn’t seem to get anywhere, so the Sadducees decide it is time for them to give it a try. Maybe they can trip him up with a question about their religious views.

Who were the Sadducees? They were an aristocratic sect, prominent members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council. They supported the Roman regime, mostly on a pragmatic basis. They did not believe in spirits or anything that was unseen, or that there was any resurrection. Since this material life was all there was, they felt the best way to enjoy life was to go along with the Romans, so as not to bring any undue hardship upon themselves.

So, they come to Jesus with a question designed to disparage belief in a resurrection. The essence of their argument is that the very idea of the resurrection does not make any sense when put up against the Law of God, particularly the rules about Levirate marriage – *explain briefly.*

Yet again, Jesus responds with great wisdom, pointing out a couple of important areas of misunderstanding in their argument. He said to them, *“...you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”* He pointed out that in heaven there will be no marriage relationships, so the issue of whose wife she will be is a moot point.

Then referring to the words of God to Moses, he makes the argument that there has to be a resurrection in order for God to say, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – men who had long since died. He ends with the bold but clear statement to these Sadducees, *“You are quite wrong.”* Matthew tells us that the crowd was astonished at his teaching, and I can imagine the Sadducees slinking away, knowing they were soundly defeated.

The Question of the Greatest Commandment – vv. 28-34

Well, the religious leaders make one more attempt. Matthew again adds a bit of extra information – *“But when the Pharisees saw that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.”* (Matt. 22:34,35)

They sent one of their own – Mark calls him a scribe, to ask him another question, in another attempt to trap him. *“Which commandment is the most important of all?”* They probably figured that no matter which commandment he named, they could argue against him. But he avoided that controversy by going straight to the heart of the matter.

Jesus took them to most familiar passage in all of the book of Moses – the Shema – Deuteronomy 6:4,5. Love God... Then he adds a second commandment for good measure – Love your neighbor... All of the Law can be summarized in those two statements.

Now, what I really want you to notice is the response of this scribe – *Go through vv. 32-33 and Jesus response to him* – You are so close to the kingdom of God. You have the knowledge – you just need to have it in your heart. You need to live it.

Conclusion

So, what does all this mean for us? At the beginning of this message, I asked the question, “What does God think about religion?” The Pharisees and Sadducees were the most religious people of their day. The Pharisees, especially, were vitally concerned with keeping all the rules and guidelines that were laid out, not only in the law itself, but in all the teachings and traditions that they had added to the law. This included the sacrifices and burnt offerings which were a part of the daily rituals and activities in the temple.

But, I want to look at the statement that was made by this scribe who came to Jesus. He was commended for his wise response and I think we would do well to consider what he had to say – *read vv. 32-33*. Religious activity without the right heart attitude means nothing. There are two OT passages that I would like to consider before we close.

In 1 Samuel 15 – the account of Saul and the destruction of the Amalekites – *review briefly*. God’s message to Saul was, “*Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.*” (1 Sam. 15:22) Compare to the statement of the scribe.

The other passage I want to look at is in Micah 6. *Turn and read Micah 6:6-8*.

God is far more interested in our obedience and doing what pleases him, than he is in our religious activity. And ultimately, what that comes down to is loving God and loving others.