

# “Conundrum & Commitment”

Mark 12:35-44 <sup>1</sup>

If you’re paying close attention, you’ve noticed that I’ve begun to hop around a little bit in the sequence of Mark’s Gospel. When we’re done, we won’t have skipped anything, but I’m saving some of these texts for particular Sundays, and the Passion Narratives themselves we’ll hold for Holy Week in the spring.

What I’m skipping over today is the question put to Jesus, “Which of God’s commands is the most important of all?” I promise that we’ll come back to it.

Taking that interaction into account, on this Tuesday in the Temple, Jesus has now confounded each of the major leadership groups in Jerusalem—the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the Scribes—and now Jesus took the initiative to ask a question of His own. Here’s what He said:

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he asked, “*How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself says by the Holy Spirit: **The Lord declared to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’** David himself calls him ‘Lord’; how then can he be his son?*” And the large crowd was listening to him with delight (Mark 12:35-37).

Jesus was quoting Psalm 110:1, which is the one verse the New Testament quotes most frequently from the *Tanakh* (our “Old Testament”).<sup>2</sup> Many, but not all, Jews of the first century regarded Psalm 110 as a Messianic enthronement psalm.

The superscription attributes Psalm 110 to King David, from whose lineage Messiah was prophesied to come, and the phrase, “Son of David,” was a common messianic title. You may remember that Bartimaeus had recently used it of Jesus in Damascus, as had the crowds when Jesus made what we call “the Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem two days before.<sup>3</sup>

The conundrum was this: The first “Lord” in the text translates YHWH, God’s personal Name. The second “Lord” referred to God’s coming Messiah, who would be a descendant of David. Fathers do not normally bow to their sons, so what sense does it make for David to refer to his own descendant as his “Lord”?

The context for the question is the all-day-long challenge the Jewish leaders have been mounting to Jesus’ authority. The sense of the conundrum is, “If you guys are not able to understand one of the key messianic texts in the *Tanakh*, how can you possibly understand

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 7, 2018. Parallel and related passages include: Matthew 22:41-46, 23:1-7; Luke 20:41-47, 21:1-4.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 110 is also the OT chapter quoted most often by the NT. See Acts 2:30-36, 7:55-56, 13:33-39; 1 Corinthians 15:22-28; Ephesians 1:19-23; Hebrews 1:3-14 and chapters 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:48, 11:10. See also 2 Samuel 7:16; Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-10; Jeremiah 23:5-6, 33:15-17; Ezekiel 37:24; Zechariah 12:10; cp. Revelation 22:16.

the reality of Who I AM?”<sup>4</sup> Jesus didn’t answer the question, but left it hanging in the air; and the crowd was delighted to see Him stump the experts once again.

While He was on the subject of the Scribes, Jesus continued, *“Beware of the scribes, who want to go around in long robes and who want greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and say long prayers just for show. These will receive harsher judgment”* (Mark 12:38-40).

In fairness, we should note that it’s unlikely that all of Jerusalem’s religious leaders were guilty of these charges. Most of the Pharisees were probably sincere in their efforts toward personal godliness and in their commitment to God’s Word. At the same time, there were obviously influential leaders who were guilty of these abuses, and Jesus’ exposure of their real character and motives motivated their bitter hatred of Him.

It is perhaps sufficient for us to remind ourselves that power is intrinsically corrupting, that pride and greed are perennial human sins, and that none of us is exempt from these temptations. We’ve seen that Jesus had to address these issues repeatedly with His disciples, and humility is in order for us, as well.

As the day was winding down, Jesus sat down in the Court of the Women to watch people putting their offerings in the thirteen shofar-shaped receptacles provided for that purpose. *Many rich people were putting in large sums. Then a poor widow came and dropped in two tiny coins worth very little. Summoning his disciples, he said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. For they all gave out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had—all she had to live on”* (Mark 12:41-44).

This familiar story is often known as “The Widow’s Mite,” because “mite” was the 17<sup>th</sup> century English equivalent the King James Version used in its translation. The coins the woman offered were actually called “lepta,” and they were the smallest coins used in the Roman Empire. Each was worth 1/100 of a denarius.

The denarius represented a typical day’s wage for manual labor, which meant that one lepton represented about five minutes of work at minimum wage. It really wasn’t very much money, but it was apparently all she had.

The point Jesus emphasized was that the crucial thing was not how much the giver gave, but how much the giver had left after giving. “Those rich people gave lots of coins—not paper money—so their gifts would make lots of noise going down,” He said, “but they will never miss the money, no matter how much it was. This dear woman gave all she had to God. She kept nothing back.”

Although Jesus didn’t point it out at the time, He was about to do the very same thing for you and for me. Just hours later, He would “leave it all on the field,” keeping nothing back, in order to secure our redemption. Sing with me . . . *How Great Is Our God!!!*

Well, there are many directions in which I might go to talk about giving and about generosity, but I’m just going to tell you two stories. The stories are true, and I think I’ve told one of them to you several years ago, but it does me good to go over it again.

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<sup>4</sup> Remember that it is YHWH Himself who announces that Jesus is His beloved Son (Matthew 3:17, 17:7). The shortened title, “the Son” plays an important role in Matthew 11:25-30 and 28:17 and parallel passages.

I've told you that one of my very favorite movies of all time is *The Perfect Storm*. I've seen it at least five times, and I like it not only because of its recording of the vast power of the sea, but also because the ragamuffin crewmembers of the ill-fated *Andrea Gail* were very much like what Jesus' disciples must have been like.

The film is based on Sebastian Junger's book, *The Perfect Storm*, and long before he became a famous author, Junger hitchhiked across the country as an adventuresome young man. The following encounter took place while he was making his way through the aftermath of a blizzard in Gillette, Wyoming:

"After two or three hours I saw a man working his way toward me along the on-ramp from town. He wore filthy canvas coveralls and carried a black lunchbox, and as he got closer I could see that his hair was matted in a way that occurs only after months on the skids. I put my hand on the pepper spray in my pocket and turned to face him.

"You been out here long?' he asked. I nodded.

"Where you headed?'

"California.'

"Warm out there.'

"Yup.'

"You got enough food?'

"I thought about this. Clearly, he didn't have any, and if I admitted that I did, he'd ask for some. That in itself wasn't a problem, but it would mean opening my backpack and revealing all my obviously expensive camping gear. I felt alone and exposed and ripe for pillage, and I just didn't want to do that. Twenty years later I still remember my answer: 'I got some cheese.'

"You won't make it to California with just a little cheese,' he said. 'You'll starve.'

"At first, I didn't understand. What was he saying, exactly? I kept my hand on the pepper spray.

"Believe me,' he said, 'I know. Listen, I'm living in a car back in town, and every day I walk out to the mine to see if they need me. Today they don't, so I won't be needing this lunch of mine.'

"I began to sag with understanding. In his world, whatever you have in your bag is all you've got, and he knew 'a little cheese' would never get me to California. 'I'm fine, really,' I said. 'I don't need your lunch.'

"He shook his head and opened his box. It was a typical work meal—a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bag of chips—and I kept protesting, but he wouldn't hear of it. I finally took his lunch and watched him walk back down the on-ramp toward town.

"I learned a lot of things in college, I thought, and I learned a lot from the books on my own. I had learned things in Europe and in Mexico and in my hometown of Belmont, Massachusetts, *but I had to stand out there on that frozen piece of interstate to learn true generosity from a homeless man.*"<sup>5</sup>

**The Bible tells us that we are always rich enough to be generous** (2 Corinthians 9:6-15).

<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Junger, "Welcome, Stranger," *National Geographic Adventure* (June 2006).

Tim Klimmek was the Supply Officer on the USS CONE (DD-866), and he and I spent a lot of time together. Tim was a new believer, and I learned a lot from watching his growing faith. One of the things Tim often said was, “If you get a bunch of unexpected money, just know that God is preparing you for an unexpected expense or an unexpected opportunity. Don’t spend it until you know what God is up to.” This next story is of that sort . . . .

One of the editors of *Christianity Today* told a personal story about how God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others: “About five years ago,” he wrote, “my wife and I visited a man who had once been our pastor. We discovered that he and his wife lived not far from us, and we renewed our old acquaintance. During one of our first visits, the man’s grandsons—14-year-old twins—came for a visit. The moment I met them, an inner Voice told me that someday I would play a role in one of their lives. I brushed it off and thought little more of it.

“During the next several years, we got to know the twins well, and one of them shared with us his sense of call to the ministry of music. When the twins were 17, they and their parents visited us and toured the campus where I teach. The one called to music ministry was immediately impressed that he was to attend this particular university and none other. Over the next year, it became clear that he was very serious about this, and as far as I could tell, it had nothing to do with the fact that I teach there; he was following an inner sense of divine guidance.

“But my university is expensive, and his family is of modest means. During his senior year of high school, he applied for scholarships at my school without success. Even so, his enthusiasm for studying for ministry at this particular university remained strong. I wanted to help him, but professors don’t make a lot of money, even at expensive Christian schools, and my books had never earned very much.

“On one beautiful morning in October 2005, I went for a walk and began to cry out to God for my young friend. ‘Dear God, please use me to make it possible for him to go to this university!’ I don’t know what I expected to have happen, but I committed myself to letting God use me however He wanted to on this young man’s behalf.

“The next week, I was at the same spot in my morning walk when something truly amazing happened. *A book title came to me, completely out of the blue. It was so clever that I knew two things instantly: it wasn’t my idea, and it would sell.*

“*Then, in almost the same instant, the entire outline of the book appeared in my mind—every chapter and its title.* I went home and immediately began to write. As I wrote, I had the distinct feeling that it was not I doing the writing. I had never written anything like this before. The words just poured out, and two weeks later, a 200-page manuscript sat on my desk.

“I knew it was good, but what was I to do with it? I’d never before written a book without a contract; but as I sat and looked at the printed pages, the name of a well-known Christian publisher suddenly came to mind. I’d never dealt with the company before, but I had met the chief editor at professional society meetings. I felt directed to contact him, even though I knew that publisher did not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

“I sent my acquaintance an e-mail containing the title and the outline. I received an encouraging response the very next day. He wanted to read the manuscript, and within weeks, I had a contract that amazingly required only very small revisions to what I had first sent.

“On top of this, the publisher wanted to pay me an astonishing advance royalty for the book—*ten times* anything I’d ever received up front before. I felt like I’d won the lottery!

“On another morning walk, I wondered what to do with this financial windfall. It seemed providential that the cost of my house’s much-needed new roof was the same as the advance payment from my new publisher, so it seemed clear that we should get a new roof.

“And then God spoke: **‘It’s not your money.’**

“What do you mean it’s not my money?’ I asked, defensively.

“**‘It’s not your money. It’s his.’** The Voice inside my head was as real as if it were audible, and I was certain that it wasn’t my imagination, because I didn’t want to hear it.

“Then whose money is it?’

“The Voice named the young man for whom I had been praying. **‘It’s for him to go to the university and study for the ministry.’**

“All of it?’

“**‘That . . . and the rest.’**

“I knew ‘the rest’ meant any further royalties the book might earn, and I raised my fist and asked resentfully, ‘*Well, what about my roof?*’

“The Voice answered, **‘I’ll take care of your roof, if you’ll be obedient.’**

“If you want to use me to help him go to the university, why don’t you give me everything it will cost? Why just this?’

“**‘Others have to be obedient, too,’** I heard in reply.

“When I got home, I told my wife, who had been looking forward to a roof that wouldn’t leak, about this conversation. I was shaking with emotion and sobbing almost uncontrollably. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

“Because my wife is more spiritual than I am, she immediately agreed to this plan. We would wait for a new roof. And I’m happy to tell you that today, my young friend is indeed attending my university in preparation for service as a Minister of Music.”<sup>6</sup>

**If you don’t remember anything else this morning, remember this:  
“Others have to be obedient, too.”**

Those who study such things tell us that if all the churchgoing Christians in the United States tithed their income, there would be enough money to eradicate malaria, provide food, clothing and shelter for every refugee on the planet, and a bunch of other stuff. Long ago, Paul wrote that “If you give generously, those who are blessed by your giving *will glorify God for your obedient confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them*” (2 Corinthians 9:13).

My friends, we who follow Jesus are called to live simply so that others may simply live. Jesus watched people give their offerings, and He could see what was in their checkbooks. More importantly, He could see what was in their hearts. **What does He see when He watches you?**

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, “My Conversation with God,” *Christianity Today*, March 2007, 45-47.

No person is rich to whom the grave brings bankruptcy. Neither is that person a fool who releases that which cannot be kept in order to gain what cannot be lost.<sup>7</sup> Oh, my friends, **God's instructions about generosity are not intended to take something from us, but rather to give something to us**—an eternal treasure that moths and vermin cannot destroy and that thieves cannot break in and steal (Matthew 6:19-21).

*And that has been God's purpose, all along.*

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<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Elliot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Elliot)