

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Soul Searching Challenges - Mark 12

### Introduction

Our studies in the Gospel by Mark have now reached chapter 12.

This Gospel presents the Lord Jesus as God's Perfect Servant. Brevity, directness, ceaseless service and full devotion to God are its distinguishing features. In Chapter 12, there are 6 episodes which outline moral features which enable the Christian to deal with the inevitable challenges he meets as he seeks to serve the Lord.

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Let us think about them one by one.

### Challenge number 1: The parable of the vineyard - verses 1-12

Let us first of all recognise that this episode is not at all about eternal salvation. It is about the faithfulness in life and service of those of us who are already saved. We have believed on the Saviour Who shed His precious blood, that our sins might be forgiven. As Christians, we are to be faithful to the Saviour, Whose precious Name we have confessed. We are to accept the commitment to be true to Him until He comes again.

During His last visit to Jerusalem, the Lord Jesus was fully aware that **the leaders of the Jews** were already conspiring against Him. Their real aim was to have Him put to death. With that in mind, let us look at the parable itself. It describes a man planting a vineyard. He took every possible care. He spared no expense. His commitment was unstinted. He provided every necessary resource to ensure that a good yield was assured. He then left his tenants to get on with the job. He himself went away to another country.

In due course, the owner sent an agent to receive the rent from his tenants. They took him, beat him, and sent him back empty-handed. The same thing was repeated again and again. In some cases they even killed the agent. Ultimately, the owner said to himself, "There is only one answer. I will have to send my only son, whom I dearly love. They are bound to respect him, and give me the return on my investment to which I am due." Sadly, they treated the son no better, but rather the worse. They said to each other, "Now then! This is our opportunity. If we kill the Master's heir, the vineyard will belong to us." And they did! Just that! The owner's reaction was swift. "Right! I will have to deal with these rebels as they deserve. I will punish them most severely, get rid of them and give the vineyard to others who will respect me and work hard. They will give me the return I require."

Now, the Jewish rulers would know exactly what the Lord Jesus was talking about. The parable is a quotation from Isaiah chapter 5, written about 800 years previously. Like the farmers in the parable, the Jews had been given every possible advantage and privilege by God. Yet, they had ignored the claims and requirements of the God they claimed to serve. The Lord Jesus exposed their position fully. This so exasperated them that they would have laid hands on Him immediately, but they feared the common people. At the time, the parable had a special application to the nation of Israel, and especially its rulers. But we cannot be like the man we read about in Luke 12:13, who came to the Lord Jesus and said, "Master, speak to my brother", that is, someone else. Oh, no! The history of Israel is the history of man everywhere. In their record, we see a reflection of our own hearts. We need to say, "Lord, speak to me". The judgment of the nation of Israel about which the Lord spoke on that day followed in AD 70, less than forty years after the Lord uttered the parable. Likewise, the judgment of the life and service of those who have since then taken the Name of Jesus as Saviour and Lord is rapidly approaching. Let us apply the lesson to ourselves.

**Challenge number 2: Paying taxes - verses 13-17**

Here we have a challenge as to how we are to meet our responsibilities relative to God and to our fellow men.

Following on from the parable of the rebellious tenant-farmers, the Jews sent **Pharisees and Herodians**, clever and influential people, to try to trick the Lord Jesus. They no doubt hoped that he would say something that would give them the excuse to both accuse Him of inconsistency, and, if possible, get Him into trouble with the Roman authorities. They approached Him with apparently due deference. They asked Him a seemingly fair question. "Is it right or not for us to pay taxes to Caesar?"

The Lord's response was clear and unequivocal. "Bring me a coin!" They did so. "Whose head is on the coin?" The answer was beyond doubt. "Caesar's!" "Well, then! Render to Caesar what is due to Caesar, and to God what is due to God." How succinct! How wise! What a glorious guide to those who would do the right thing in every situation, given the wisdom and the opportunity. Not what is convenient, or what we would prefer to do! No! No! What is due! What is true, and honest, and just, and pure, as we read in Philippians chapter 4.

You know, most of the time the problem is not that we don't know what we should be doing. Oh! no! If there is a problem, it is that we know what we should be doing, but we don't really want to do it. Let us seek grace from God to face up to this challenge, and give due weight to what is due to God, and give it to Him. Then we must consider what is due to our fellow men, and render it to them, as the Lord directed here. If we have any wisdom at all, we shall see that this is the right order. If, first of all, we render to God what is due to Him, what should be rendered to our fellows will fall into proper perspective.

**Challenge number 3: The sect of the Sadducees and their views about resurrection - verses 18-27**

We are given here, a clear challenge as to how we meet and deal with those who lead people astray by teaching things that are inconsistent with what the Bible teaches.

We are told that the **Sadducees** did not believe in resurrection. They raised a quibble with Christ concerning conditions after the final resurrection. "What about the case of a woman who married one of seven brothers? Her husband died. She then married another of the brothers. The second brother died. The same circumstances were repeated, until eventually she had been married to, and then been widowed by, each of the seven brothers in turn." Now, this was the question raised by the Sadducees. "In the resurrection, whose wife would she be?"

The Lord's answer was very clear. Marriage and distinctions of gender are only for this life in this world. There will be no such distinction 'in the resurrection'. Distinctions of gender are only for procreation and continuation of the human race on earth. They relate to the finite, natural world in which we live now. Christ answered their quibbles by appealing to the authority of scripture. "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Let us, too, accept the guidance that scripture gives on every facet of the present life. Let us not try to fit what the Bible says into our own preconceived ideas about things. Let us accept the instruction and challenge that the word of God gives and submit to it.

**Challenge number 4: The great commandments: verses 28-34**

Now another **scribe** comes up and asks, "Which is the first commandment of all?" That is, "Which is the most important?" What a glorious answer the Lord gave! "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

Scripture is abundantly clear that our eternal salvation is entirely a matter of grace and faith. It is not based at all, or in any way, on anything that we can do. But, having been saved, we then have a responsibility to live in such a way as to meet our responsibilities both to God and to our fellow men.

Now, there is no doubt at all that the life of Christ on earth is seen to be the only period when the full implications of the Law have ever been fulfilled in every respect. That is, only when Christ lived on earth was there a man living on earth in a way that gave full satisfaction and delight to God. This was clearly prophesied in advance. The prophet Isaiah foretold in chapter 42 and verse 21 of his prophecy. "The Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will magnify the law, and make it honourable."

Just think about it. Only in the life of Christ on earth could it be said that there was a man who loved the Lord His God with all His strength. In particular, this is emphasised in the Gospel of Matthew, which depicts Him as the King, in all His regal dignity. Similarly, only in the life of Christ could it be said that there was a man who loved the Lord His God with all His mind. This is emphasised in the Gospel of Mark, which presents Him as God's Perfect Servant, totally

dedicated to the fulfilment of the will of God. Likewise, only in the life of Christ could it be said that there was a man who loved the Lord His God with all His soul. This is clearly outlined in the Gospel of Luke, which characterises Him as The Perfect Man. Then, only in the life of Christ could it be said that there was a man who loved the Lord His God with all His heart. The Gospel of John, which sets Him out as God's well-beloved Son, emphasises this aspect.

After this summary of the way in which the Lord Jesus glorified God in every aspect of His life on earth, the Lord gives a very telling and significant addendum. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." That is, the personal faith of those who know God is intended to be the springboard for the way we act towards our fellow men. That is exactly what transpired after the Christian church was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost. The fulfilment of what the Lord called here the second commandment was truly seen in the early years of the Christian church.

Putting all this together, we see in the four Gospels the fulfilment of the Law of Moses in the personal life of Christ on earth. Then, in the Book of Acts we see how the features of that life were continued in the lives of Christians in their lives on earth. Their Lord and Master had gone back to heaven at the Ascension.

The continuation of the features of that life were seen, and were intended to be seen, in the lives of the first generation of Christians. The corollary to that is this. In our day our lives are, and are intended to be, an exhibition of things that were demonstrated to the world first of all in the life of Christ, personally, and then continued after His departure to heaven in the lives of the early Christians. They are intended to be exhibited in the lives of you and me, if we say we are saved by the precious blood of Christ and are on our way to heaven. As we read in Romans 8 verses 4, "The righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit." A mighty challenge indeed!

#### **Challenge number 5: Who is the Christ? - verses 28-34**

We have here an implicit challenge to recognise that our links with Christ depend upon a true appreciation of the true personal status and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this stage, **the Lord** turns the tables on his questioners. "You are full of questions. Alright! Here's one for you! In the Psalms, David calls Messiah His Lord. Yet Messiah is prophesied to be a descendant of David. How can both these things be true?" The **scribes** were filled with consternation. They had no answer. On the other hand, the common people were quite pleased to see the scribes, who were very powerful in the Temple hierarchy, put on the spot like this. Interestingly enough, the Lord Jesus does not at this point answer His own question. Instead, speaking now to the onlookers, the Lord said, "Beware of these scribes. They are much more interested in their own image than in providing spiritual help to others such as yourselves. They even devour widow's houses and for a pretence make long prayers."

What a great challenge this is! Robbing the rich, who will hardly notice their material loss, is bad enough. On the other hand, the very idea of robbing widows is really obnoxious. I am sure we are all disappointed and perhaps even irritated when those who pray in public test the patience of those present by going on and on repetitiously. But without the Lord's comments here, we would hesitate to make this apparently strange and anomalous comparison.

It certainly makes those of us who pray audibly in public stop in our tracks and think about it. The Lord Jesus says that praying long prayers in public is as bad as and can be classified with robbing widows of the few material possessions they own. What a terrible thought! We have to remember that in those days, there was no welfare benefit system to care for the poor. Widows were normally extremely poor. In the main, life for them was a constant struggle to make ends meet. They could ill afford to lose the little they had. To lose it by being robbed of it was much worse to bear. And yet, the Lord puts praying long prayers in the same category. What a challenge!

The Lord then moved on, finally in this chapter, to consider and commend the attitude and actions of one of those self-same widows.

#### **Challenge number 6: The widow's mites - verses 41-44**

In this section, the practical challenge of our personal stewardship before the Lord is brought before us! How do we use the many resources He has entrusted to our care? We learn in several scriptures that we shall have to give an account of our stewardship, personally to our Lord and Master, when our life and service in this world is over. As said earlier, this is quite apart and distinct from the matter of the salvation of our souls.

This little incident is by no means an anticlimax to the chapter. Indeed, it is a serious reminder that Christianity is essentially practical in its effect upon our lives and service. We have already considered that, in those days, widows were poor, very poor. Life for them was a constant struggle to make ends meet. Against this background, we read here that **the Lord** was watching as people gave their donations to the funds for the maintenance of the Temple. This

widow came along and, without ostentation, quietly put her contribution into the box provided for the purpose. No one else would notice, or even care, probably.

The Lord, knowing all things, saw that she cast in two little coins, indeed the smallest items of currency then in common use. The Lord alone would know that this constituted all the money she had. Having only two coins, she would have had every excuse for putting in only one of them. But, no! The Lord made it plain. "She hath put in all that she hath." Relatively, she had contributed more than anyone else had given that day. What a commendation for her! What a practical challenge for us! What we shall be judged by is not merely what we have given to Him, but what we have kept back for ourselves.

We must leave our chapter there. But let us face up to the practical challenges that come to us from all the Bible, and seek grace to respond to them with humility and simple obedience.

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