

# **LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for February 7: When your priorities are challenged**

January 27, 2010

This week's lesson passages present important insights into how to keep one's relationship with God as a first priority, how to satisfy his desires and how to handle demands on one's life from outside interests.

The events of chapter 11 provide the background material for the present lesson material. At the beginning of chapter 11, Jesus entered Jerusalem in a procession that has been called his triumphal entry. The Gospel of Mark says little of this entry other than it was a celebrated occasion by his followers. The residents of the city appear to have shown no interest, and Jesus retired for the evening across the Mount of Olives to the town of Bethany.

The next day, Jesus cursed a fig tree and cleared the temple of commerce and money changers. This event attracted the public interrogation of Jesus by various religious leaders. These interrogations spill over into chapter 12. Prior to the events in this lesson's focal passages, Jesus successfully answered his opponents and even delivered a parable religious leaders understood to speak against them. The parable encouraged a second wave of interrogation from which the present passages are taken.

## **What do I owe government? (Mark 9:13-17)**

Tuesday of Passion Week (see Mark 11:27) was a busy day for Jesus as he fielded a barrage of questions from a variety of leaders. The exchange between Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians in this passage grew out of

the previous event. In verses 1-12, Jesus spoke in a parable that summarized Jewish religious history as a constant sending of God's messengers culminating with the sending of his Son. All God's messengers were mistreated by Israel's religious leaders.

The curious point is that the religious leaders listening to Jesus understood the parable to speak against them. They countered by devising a ruse to trick Jesus into making the ever-dreaded politically incorrect misstatement.

Verse 13 states the Pharisees and Herodians conspired to "catch" Jesus in his words. This coalition would have been preposterous in theory, but Jesus' threat to the core of life in Israel was so acute that dire measures must have been regarded as necessary. Some 100 years prior to the present situation, the Jewish leader, Alexander Jannaeus, capped off a victorious end to the Jewish civil war by crucifying 800 insurgents, many of whom included Pharisees who had supported Alexander's opposition.

Later, Herod I, the Great, would marry the Hasmonean princess Mariamne. Thus so great was their opposition to Jesus, that the Pharisees unbelievably joined with descendants of their previous enemies. Furthermore, though the Pharisees had a long history of opposing foreign political powers, they were now cooperating with the ruling party allied with Rome. Nevertheless, more twists would emerge in this particular episode.

Notice the words of authority in verse 14. By setting up a teacher/student interchange the Pharisees and Herodians unwittingly set themselves up for an embarrassing failure. With false flattery, they made their request of Jesus. Busy with flattery, they did not notice the importance Jesus' coming request.

The ruse of the religious and civic leaders must have seemed to be a master stroke. It wedded two opposing concerns: freedom of religion and the rights of the state. Normally, these parties had opposing answers to the

question they collectively posed. Knowing its brutal history, they sensed, and happily anticipated, its deadly impact on Jesus' reputation.

Jesus' answer features sleight of hand. Jesus asked for a denarius, which his questioners generously provided. The denarius was the standard unit of currency for the Roman emperor. The mere act of providing Jesus the coin lost the moment for Jesus' opponents. In their actions, they showed that they accepted the rule of Rome because they had in their possession a Roman coin. Furthermore, they were familiar with the inscription and image on the coin. By having this coin in their possession, they themselves showed the public that the Roman government had a valid presence in their land. Since the action of the religious leaders made his point, all that remained was for Jesus to state clearly the lesson of the moment, the famous line: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

By so doing, Jesus showed secular governments have the right to tax their subjects. Of course, the taxes pay for governmental services, none of which are discussed as to legitimacy or correct administrative handling. Thus Jesus, as Paul taught in Romans 13:1-7, legitimized a government's claim upon the lives of the citizens of God's kingdom. God's people, then, are to pay taxes to support governments, because human governments are ordained by God to rule over human beings.

The application of this lesson to the lives of learners is far reaching. God's children are expected to submit to government authorities. They are expected to pay taxes and live peaceful, crime-free lives. Therefore, to claim religious reasons to refrain from submitting to governmental authority is not a legitimate position to take in God's eyes.

Yet the question of which has higher authority in one's life could be asked. The Hebrew answer would be that since God legitimizes governmental authority, and governments do not legitimize God's authority, then God has the higher priority. Christ's answer makes God the highest and first of

several priorities in one's life.

### **What do I owe God? (Mark 12:28-30)**

The last question asked of Jesus by religious leaders focused on a standing religious debate. The question asked of Jesus had been asked, and answered, elsewhere. The question flows counter to the method of the Pharisees, who had adopted the ways of the rabbis, who in turn had meticulously explained commands of the Hebrew Bible and had given a myriad of corollary commands to assist the keeping of the corresponding biblical command. Therefore in a culture that seemed to look for more religious commands, this religious expert asked for something less: the most important command in Scripture.

The stakes for answering such a question were high because misunderstanding could destroy the observation of any commands considered less important. Jesus immediately answered that the command to love the Lord was the greatest of all commands. The brilliance of the answer left no other commands in danger of being ignored. As the command to love the Lord is fulfilled, all commands regarding one's relationship with the Lord will be fulfilled. Thus one command is greater in that it fulfills and therefore represents all other commands.

The greatest command is located in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This command even summarizes the first table of the Ten Commandments, that is, the first four commandments. It also provides for the fulfillment of all commands given by the Lord.

In a seemingly odd switch of direction, this command features the instruction to love the Lord. In absolute authority, and as Creator of the human heart, God can command humans to love. Those who respond rightly and love their Lord will find that, out of love, they naturally fulfill all commands that bear upon one's direct relationship with God. Thus in God's

kingdom, love prevails as the character trait that sets the pace for godly performance.

The elements of the greatest command are significant. One is to love the Lord with all one's heart, mind, soul and strength. The heart is the place of the will, thus one is to love the Lord decisively. The mind is the place of thought and reflection, thus one is to love the Lord with all one's deliberative efforts. The soul is the fullness of personhood, thus one is to love the Lord with all one's being. Strength refers to one's power in life, thus one is to love the Lord with all one's living power. Thus the command appeals to one's whole being, not merely the parts of one's life.

Every discussion of God's commands must note that God's commands are accompanied by promises. Many commands do not have promises explicitly attached to them, but the fifth of the Ten Commandments is an example of one that does have a promise. The implicit promise is that God will be happy and satisfied with the lives of those who obey his commands. God will invest in the lives of such ones and bless them.

### **What do I owe others? (Mark 12:31-34)**

Not satisfied with one answer, Jesus offered a second answer. He indicated a second most important command exists. This command is found in Leviticus 19:18.

Again the command features the instruction to love, this time to love others as one loves oneself. This command likewise summarizes the second table of the Ten Commandments—six commands that regulate interpersonal relationships.

By commanding love-produced activity, this command eliminates the need for meticulous applications of God's commands. Motivated by love, God's followers naturally find the best methods and practices to fulfill God's

commands. No meticulous rules or guidelines are necessary. Love senses the best way to fulfill God's expectations and thus fulfill the Lord's desires.

By making this command the second most important command, Jesus now has directed his people to prioritize obligations to God and to others as well as to handle other important aspects of human life, such as the demands of government. In God's kingdom, priorities can be maintained while the demands of lesser authorities can be satisfied.