

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Twenty-One – Mark 12:18-44

Mark 12:18 Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.

Who were the Sadducees?

In Jesus' time, Sadducees controlled the two most important institutions of Jewish society: The Temple and the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the governing body for both religious and legal issues of the Jews. The leader of the Sanhedrin was a High Priest given king-like authority—and was almost always a Sadducee.

Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas are two High Priests named in the New Testament. Both were Sadducees—and both played critical roles in the execution of Jesus. The New Testament often lumps the Sadducees together with the “Temple Priests.”

Sadducees believed that the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, was the only authority on matters of faith and life. The rest of the Old Testament lacked the same authority. As such, they rejected entirely the supernatural, refuting belief in angels, demons, heaven, hell, and resurrection. To their way of thinking “souls die with the bodies.” One's life carries on through their children and their reputation alone.

The New Testament is almost always critical of the Sadducees, who were in strong opposition to Jesus, who was a threat to the Temple system and their teaching – and also a threat to public order, and the cozy Sadducee relationship with the Romans – who, incidentally, arranged the succession of the High Priests.

- John the Baptist calls Sadducees a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 3:7)
- Jesus calls Sadducees a “wicked and adulterous generation” (Matthew 16:1-5).
- Jesus sternly warns his disciples against the deceptive teaching of the Sadducees (Matthew 16:1-12)

- When Sadducees test Jesus with a theological question, they're easily “silenced” by Christ who lectures them like children, calling them “badly mistaken!” (Matthew 22:23-34; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40).
- In the book of Acts, Sadducees frequently arrest—and are miraculously embarrassed by—Peter, John, Paul, and the other apostles (Acts 4:1-22; Acts 5:17-41; Acts 23:1-9)

Mark 12:19 *“Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.*

Deuteronomy 25:5-6 - *If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. 6 The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.*

Genesis 38:6-8 - *Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the Lord’s sight; so the Lord put him to death. 8 Then Judah said to Onan, “Sleep with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother.”*

Mark 12:20-23 *Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. 21 The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. 22 In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. 23 At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”*

Designed to Mock

The Sadducees are not asking the question with sincerity, but with an intention to mock Jesus, and all those who hold to belief in Resurrection (for example, the Pharisees). Oftentimes, people who ask difficult questions are not looking for an answer, but are using the questions as a form of attack or ridicule. Jesus answers sincere questions with sincerity, but often gives harsh answers to “trick” questions.

Mark 12:24 *Jesus replied, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?”*

A harsh answer: Jesus accuses the Sadducees of knowing neither the Scriptures nor the nature of God – a more devastating accusation cannot be given! And Jesus wraps up his answer with, *You are badly mistaken!*

Mark 12:26 *When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.*

Heaven is Different than Here

Any Biblical description of Heaven shows a form of reality and existence far different than that which we know. The visions given to Ezekiel and Isaiah in the Old Testament, and Book of the Revelation in the New Testament, paint a very different picture of reality, and

are obviously at a lack for words. Even the Apostle Paul, when speaking of the Resurrection, says, “We shall all be changed.” But rest assured – it will be good!

Jesus tells us that even marriage, which was understood as primarily for the production of a family, would no longer be required, as there would be no longer the need to reproduce to replace those who had died. As those in heaven will be eternal, offspring would no longer be necessary.

Mark 12:26-27 Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? 27 He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!’

Jesus uses an argument not from the books which the Sadducees regard as secondary, but from their primary source – the Five Books of Moses – particularly, God’s revelation to Moses at the Burning Bush in Exodus 3:4-6:

Exodus 3:4-6 God called to him from within the burning bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” 5 “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” 6 Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

Jesus’ point is that God is speaking in the “present tense,” as though the Patriarchs, long buried, nevertheless are alive in the presence of God – otherwise, God would have said, “I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” God, the creator of life, is not the God of the dead, but the living.

Mark 12:28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

“Most Important,” not “Only Important”

This teacher is not asking which laws need to be obeyed and which can safely be ignored. He is asking, “What is the fundamental premise of the law on which all the individual commands depend?” In other words, is there a commandment out of which all other commandments flow? But don’t forget the others!

Mark 12:29-31 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with

all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Deuteronomy, Leviticus

Jesus’ answers take into account the presence of the Sadducees, in that he quotes from the Torah, which they regard as authoritative. The “commandments” Jesus quotes not from the Ten Commandments, which we might expect, but from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The first quote is known as the Shema, or “Hear” from Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

The second, from Leviticus 19:18, appears in a chapter of various laws, covering anything from how to cut your hair to avoiding tattoos, from showing respect to the elderly to using honest scales, from providing for the poor to not bearing a grudge. Here is the verse in context:

Leviticus 19:15-18 “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. 16 “Do not go about spreading slander among your people. “Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the Lord. 17 “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. 18 “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

The Apostle Paul demonstrates that this teaching is continued on in the early church: Romans 13:9-10 *The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

Jesus’ brother James affirms this: *James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. **And John:** 1 John 4:7-8 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

Mark 12:32-33 “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

There is a funny component to this answer that is easy to miss. The man, introduced to us as “a teacher of the law,” is placing himself above Jesus in commending him for being correct. Imagine saying to Jesus, “You answered correctly!” In saying the answer is greater than all burnt offerings and sacrifices, the man places himself in conflict with the Sadducees, who would strongly disagree!

The teacher quotes the Prophet Samuel:

1 Samuel 15:7 22 - “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Mark 12:34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Jesus restores the proper balance in the relationship between himself and the teacher, in evaluating the teacher’s response, and deeming it wise. But why is the man “not far from the Kingdom of God?” In his response to Jesus, he recognises Jesus as correct, but still considers himself equal to Jesus in authority – not as subject to Jesus’ lordship.

This interaction wrapped up Jesus’ Q and A challenges from the authorities. Time after time, they have been bested by Jesus, who is winning over more and more of the crowd. From this point on, Jesus will be unchallenged by the Temple authorities. They can’t win against him, so they’ll do away with him entirely.

Mark 12:35-37 While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? 36 David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: “The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”” 37 David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?” The large crowd listened to him with delight.

This somewhat obscure passage would have been of great relevance to the people of the day. Remember, Jesus is being proclaimed as “Son of David;” how then can he be greater than David? Let alone, “Lord?” Note that Jesus asks this question himself; the authorities have given up asking!

It was well known that the Messiah was to be “the Son of David.” But Jesus is more than that; he is the Son of God, and so is David’s Lord. The crowd well understands the point – note that it is now a “large crowd” – Jesus is gaining popular support, among the crowded holiday Temple courts. His threat to the established order is growing.

The fact that Jesus is understood as claiming of himself that he is in fact the Son of God is made apparent in a lot of his teaching, but this is one of the most direct examples. This is why, when interrogated by the High Priest after his arrest, he is asked: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Not “the Christ, son of David?”

Mark 12:38-40 As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 40 They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

Jesus’ opposition to the Temple authorities and the High Priests is now out in the open. Mark tells us that Jesus was teaching “in the Temple Courts.” You can imagine him pointing at the resplendent and wealthy priests, who lived in the best districts, in the best houses, and who received a stunning percentage of the Temple revenue. “Devour widow’s houses” is intended to bring to mind Isaiah’s denunciation of the corrupt priesthood:

Isaiah 10:1-4 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, 2 to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. 3 What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? 4 Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain.

Mark 12:41-44 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. 43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

The contrast is made from one of these very widows exploited by the priests. Her poverty and self-sacrifice is in direct comparison to the wealth and self-service of the priests. The lesson is clear – our devotion is in proportion to our situation. To those to whom much is given, much shall be expected! It is a question we must ever ask ourselves.