

This week I received an email that reopened some old wounds. Even though it was healed up for decades, the emotional wound started to ooze a little bit. I try to keep guard over that wound of the heart. My wound came from abusive church leaders.

- Abusive leaders are not new, even John named one. He said, 'Diotrephes, who loves to be first (3Jn 9 NIV).'

My brain tells me that if God were to judge church leaders instantly, there would be no leaders, but still my heart cries for justice.

- Despite everything, Paul says that 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ep 5:25 NIV).'
- The church has an unseen, spiritual side as well as a human and seen side.
- Even though the Church is made up of imperfect and selfish people; He loves us and covers us with his grace.

We are looking at the large segments of Mark that belong together.

- In the first half, Jesus served people through miracles, deliverances, and preaching repentance. Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29) is the turning point to the second half.
- In the second half, Jesus is the suffering savior who purchases our salvation with his life.

Today's segment is long that I am breaking it into two weeks. Let's pick up where we left off last week.

- Jesus and his disciples arrived in Jerusalem for the final week before his death.
- The next day, in their walk from Bethany to Jerusalem, Jesus cursed the fig tree and kicked out the merchants.
- Time slows down even more on the third day's journey into Jerusalem. Jesus compared the withered fig tree to the Temple.
- In today's segment, they arrive at the Temple and Jesus begins to publicly teach in the Temple.
- Immediately, there are religious adversaries that seek to destroy him.

Religious Adversaries

Mark 11:27-12:27



Let's jump right in ...

1. Sanhedrin - Authority, 11:27-33.

'Again they entered Jerusalem. As Jesus was walking through the Temple area, the leading priests, the teachers of religious law, and the elders came up to him. ²⁸ They demanded, "By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right to do them (Mk 11:27-28 NLT)?"'

When Jesus kicked out the merchants, he stepped on the authority of the religious powers. There are three stories. In them Mark emphasizes that all the influential religious leaders in Jerusalem were hostile to Jesus.

First to attack are the Chief priest and scribes.

Five main groups of religious authorities.

- Chief priests – The core membership of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin.
- Scribes – Professional class of experts in the Torah.

Remember that Jesus' harshest words were for religion leaders. He called them blind guides, hypocrites, snakes, vipers, and decorated tombs. As a pastor, it makes me pay attention.

They were concerned about authority; Jesus acted as if he oversaw the Temple.

Jesus answered their question with one of his own, a common rabbinic custom.

"I'll tell you by what authority I do these things if you answer one question," Jesus replied. ³⁰ "Did John's authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human? Answer me!" ³¹ They talked it over among themselves. "If we say it was from heaven, he will ask why we didn't believe John. ³² But do we dare say it was merely human?" For they were afraid of what the people would do, because everyone believed that John was a prophet. ³³ So they finally replied, "We don't know." And Jesus responded, "Then I won't tell you by what authority I do these things (Mk 11:29-33 NLT)."

John's ministry divided the people from the leaders. The people and Jesus knew that John's ministry was ordained of God and to retain their power, the religious leaders had to deny this.

They had two choices. ...

- They could be charged with unbelief.
- Or they could discredit themselves in the eyes of the people.
- They created a third option, to evade by saying – ‘we don’t know.’

Because they refused to answer Jesus’ question, his authority remains. Jesus has all authority on heaven and earth.

Jesus then tells a parable against these religious leaders ...

2. Evil Tenants, 12:1-12.

‘Then Jesus began teaching them with stories: “A man planted a vineyard. He built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. ² At the time of the grape harvest, he sent one of his servants to collect his share of the crop. ³ But the farmers grabbed the servant, beat him up, and sent him back empty-handed. ⁴ The owner then sent another servant, but they insulted him and beat him over the head. ⁵ The next servant he sent was killed. Others he sent were either beaten or killed, ⁶ until there was only one left—his son whom he loved dearly. The owner finally sent him, thinking, ‘Surely they will respect my son.’ ⁷ “But the tenant farmers said to one another, ‘Here comes the heir to this estate. Let’s kill him and get the estate for ourselves!’ ⁸ So they grabbed him and murdered him and threw his body out of the vineyard. ⁹ “What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do?” Jesus asked. “I’ll tell you—he will come and kill those farmers and lease the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Didn’t you ever read this in the Scriptures? ‘The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. ¹¹ This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see (Mk 12:1-11 NLT).”

This was a common situation in the Ancient Near East. It would have been easily understood.

Isaiah had prophesied using a similar story. Song of the Vineyard, Is 5:1-7

- The vineyard is loved, but only bears bad fruit, vv. 1-2.
- Exasperated, the owner removes its protection and tears it down, vv. 3-6.
- ‘The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in (Is 5:7 NIV).’

These religious leaders knew ...

- They were the tenant farmers in the story.
- Who the owner’s son was. Jesus is increasingly revealing himself, even in the Temple courts.
- By killing the owner’s son and heir, the field would become ‘ownerless property’ and they would have the right of ownership. Jesus is saying that they have rejected God’s final messenger.

'The religious leaders wanted to arrest Jesus because they realized he was telling the story against them — they were the wicked farmers. But they were afraid of the crowd, so they left him and went away (Mk 12:12 NLT).'

When a weak leader's authority is challenged, leaders do despicable things. Most of the time they try to get rid of opposition.

- Here, it is only Jesus' popularity with the crowds that protect him (11:32; 12:12; 12:34, 37).
- Everyone in this room needs guardrails in their life. That is one of the functions of the church and our fellowship together.

Next up the Pharisees and Herodians.

3. Pharisees & Herodians - Taxes, 12:13-17.

Five main groups of religious authorities.

- Chief priests – The core membership of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin.
- Scribes – Professional class of experts in the Torah.
- Pharisees – A group devoted to their unique observance of the Torah. Today's rabbis consider themselves to be the descendants of the Pharisees.
- Elders (Herodians) – Lay members of the Sanhedrin.

'Later the leaders sent some Pharisees and supporters of Herod to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested. ¹⁴"Teacher," they said, "we know how honest you are. You are impartial and don't play favorites. You teach the way of God truthfully. Now tell us—is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? ¹⁵Should we pay them, or shouldn't we (Mk 12:13-15a NLT)?"'

They are thinking, 'If we can't get rid of someone, let's undermine his credibility.'

This is a carefully crafted statement and question – designed to discredit or trap him. They hope to force him into a 'one or the other' situation just like he did to the Chief priests and scribes.

'Jesus saw through their hypocrisy and said, "Why are you trying to trap me? Show me a Roman coin, and I'll tell you." ¹⁶When they handed it to him, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. ¹⁷"Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." His reply completely amazed them (Mk 12:15b-17 NLT).'

Taxes were a sensitive thing. For a long time, Israel had been subject to Roman tax.

- The Zealots refused to pay Caesar's tax as it implied rulership over them.
- The Herodians supported Rome's taxation on principle.

- The Pharisees resented the tax along with most of Israel.

It's interesting that Jesus did not have a Roman coin. It was a small silver coin with Emperor Tiberius portrayed on it as a semi-divine son of the god Caesar Augustus, worth about 18 cents.

Jesus' action is brilliant because, unlike our currency which the bearer owns, Romans believed that 'the emperor owned the coins which bear his image.'¹

- By saying give to Caesar what is Caesar's he recognizes civic authority.
- But even civil authority needs guardrails, otherwise there is a 'tendency to reach beyond its appointed function ... which leads to self-transcendence.'²

His adversaries were amazed at him and his answer.

The last group to try are the Sadducees.

4. Sadducees – the After Life, 12:18-27.

Five main groups of religious authorities.

- Chief priests – The core membership of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin.
- Scribes – Professional class of experts in the Torah.
- Pharisees – A group devoted to their unique observance of the Torah.
- Elders (Herodians) – Lay members of the Sanhedrin.
- Sadducees – An aristocratic group, religiously conservative, politically, and socially secular.³

'Then Jesus was approached by some Sadducees—religious leaders who say there is no resurrection from the dead. They posed this question: ¹⁹“Teacher, Moses gave us a law that if a man dies, leaving a wife without children, his brother should marry the widow and have a child who will carry on the brother’s name. ²⁰Well, suppose there were seven brothers. The oldest one married and then died without children. ²¹So the second brother married the widow, but he also died without children. Then the third brother married her. ²²This continued with all seven of them, and still there were no children. Last of all, the woman also died. ²³So tell us, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? For all seven were married to her (Mk 12:18-23 NLT).”'

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection.

¹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark NICNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 424.

² Lane, *Mark NICNT*, p. 424-25.

³ Scott, *Jewish Backgrounds*, p. 208.

- They cozied up to the Roman government for power and to seek business opportunities. It is amazing to me how every time the belief in heaven is lost, people turn to government as a god.
- The Sadducees only believed in Moses' Law; hence their trap comes from Dt 25:5f. Their intent was to trap Jesus and ridicule the idea of a resurrection. This is a real 'what if' question, though 'seven brothers' seem sarcastic.

Rule followers like rules. Don't misunderstand me, we need boundaries to know right from wrong. The problem is that rule followers often get a harsh attitude.

- For example, in a church I pastored some rule followers were concerned about a member's lifestyle, and they were nasty about it. Without going into details, it was impossible for this new believer to untangle the effects of prior sin. They gladly accepted my help. It took about two years and some money to put things in order. I thought that the attitude of the rule followers was worse than this individual trying to sort out the consequences of sin.
- I can't help but think of the Jerusalem Council, when it was decided to let the Gentiles into the church. The rule followers wanted the Gentiles to become Jewish and adhere to Jewish law. But the Council's conclusion is wonderful: 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ ... food sacrificed to idols, from blood ... sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things (Acts 15:28-29 NIV).' James did not need to include the phrase 'not to burden you,' but he did. Because he knows that rules and authority in the wrong hands can be harsh and abusive.

When people come to Jesus, it takes a little while for them to learn how and why to live holy lives before God. Until then, we are to gently encourage our new brothers and sisters towards Christlikeness.

Jesus sets them straight: 'Jesus replied, "Your mistake is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God. ²⁵ For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶ "But now, as to whether the dead will be raised—haven't you ever read about this in the writings of Moses, in the story of the burning bush? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, God said to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' ²⁷ So he is the God of the living, not the dead. You have made a serious error (Mk 24:24-27 NLT).'"

- The Sadducees were wrong about two things: 1) there is a heaven, and 2) the nature of the life in heaven.

- Jesus appeals to the book of Exodus, a portion of Scripture the Sadducees believed in.

Mark has given us three waves of attacks on Jesus by all the major religious leaders of Israel.

Conclusion.

Leadership and structure is a good thing; it is needed and brings order; it sets the standards we all need.

Let me speak transparently to those who have been hurt by abusive church leadership.

- Despite the failings of human leaders, God still loves his church.
- Don't give up on what Jesus loves.
- Is it perfect? No. But it still Christ's body here on earth.

Let me go back to my healing. I could not trust spiritual leadership based on what I had been through.

- It is interesting that my healing came as I submitted to a humble godly leader.
- A new leader came into office, and he told me, 'Watch my life and what I do for a year.' He was a humble leader who made good and godly decisions.
- He was the one who told me to 'continue with your adoption proceedings and go find a church to pastor.' We did. That is why we moved to Connecticut.

Friends, we all need spiritual guardrails in our life, even pastors and leaders. We are to do two things:

- 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ep 5:21 NIV).'
- 'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (Jn 13:34-35 NIV).'

Real spiritual leaders do not jockey for position like James and John (Mk 10:35-45). That is what the rulers of this world do to 'lord over' people (v. 41). As Jesus said, 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:44-45 NLT).' That last verse is the key verse of Mark. Note how closely it is connected to authority and power – and the giving up of position and power.

Salvation plea.

- Jesus gave his life in exchange for our sin, like a ransom.
- His purity, his holiness is of greater value than our sins.
- Earlier Jesus said, 'I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins (Mk 2:10 NLT).' He then healed a paralyzed man as proof of his authority. Jesus has all authority on heaven and earth. Only God has power and authority to save us.

Prayer.