

Smarter Than God

Mark 12:13 - 13:1 ¹³ Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words. ¹⁴ When they had come, they said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and care about no one; for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? ¹⁵ "Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?" But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, "Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see it." ¹⁶ So they brought it. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at Him.

¹⁸ Then some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him; and they asked Him, saying: ¹⁹ "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother dies, and leaves his wife behind, and leaves no children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁰ "Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife; and dying, he left no offspring. ²¹ "And the second took her, and he died; nor did he leave any offspring. And the third likewise. ²² "So the seven had her and left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also. ²³ "Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife." ²⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵ "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶ "But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage, how God spoke to him, saying, '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 the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken."

²⁸ Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰ 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. ³¹ "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. ³³ "And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him.

³⁵ Then Jesus answered and said, while He taught in the temple, "How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the Son of David? ³⁶ "For David himself said by the Holy Spirit: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." ' ³⁷ "Therefore David himself calls Him 'Lord'; how is He then his Son?" And the common people heard Him gladly.

When I was in high school, I was drafted into the debating team. A typical team has three members. Two teams will debate a topic, one of them proposing an idea or statement, the other team opposing it. One by one, with each team taking turns, speakers give arguments supporting their side's views, until the last speaker, the summator, summarises and seeks to demolish the other team's arguments. The most difficult debates were when you went up against speakers who had amazing memories, great command of the language, and who could even think on their feet. But as good as some were, they were still limited people.

But what would it be like to debate God? If the all-knowing, all-wise God were amongst us, what would it look like to take him on in debate? We don't have to wonder, because such an event actually happened, and we just read about it.

Our Lord is in Jerusalem on the Tuesday before His crucifixion. Since the Sunday, He has been coming into the city, and going to the Temple, and sitting there as Messiah, declaring Himself, proclaiming Himself, and offering Himself to Israel as Messiah.

What Jesus is doing is an exact fulfilment of what was to be done to the Passover Lamb. According

to Exodus 12, the lamb was to be kept and watched for four days to make sure it was an acceptable sacrifice. The lamb was taken on Nisan 10, and kept until Nisan 14. Jesus Christ presented Himself to Israel as her Messiah on Nisan 10, which was a Sunday. That was the day He rode into Jerusalem and entered the Temple. There, for the next several days he remained, while the Pharisees, Sadducees scribes and Herodians examined him. All the people of Israel, who were at that time gathered at Jerusalem had the opportunity to examine Jesus' claim to be the Messiah who takes away the sins of the world for themselves.

The examination was not going to be an examination of physical defects, but an examination for spiritual defects, moral defects, defects in the man's doctrine, loyalty to God, understanding of the Word. And who better to ask Him than the intellectual and religious heavyweights of Israel: the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, and the lawyers.

In a modern Jewish Passover, there is a ritual that is followed, with certain Scriptures read, certain things eaten in a particular order. Some of the elements are modern and rabbinic, but some of them developed even before the time of Christ. One of the elements which seems to have been present even in Christ's day was the Four Sons. Each son represents a different kind of person: a wise person, a wicked person, a simple person and a naïve person, who is unable to ask a question. As these questions are asked, the one leading the Passover has the opportunity to explain the reason for the Passover.

Without stretching it, we have an amazing parallel in this Scripture. During this public challenge of Jesus, Jesus is asked three questions: a wicked question, designed to entrap him; a simple or ignorant question stemming from ignorance of the Scriptures; a wise question asking about obedience, until finally no one dares ask him any more questions, like the naïve one unable to ask.

As we take each of these questions in turn, we will see just how wise Jesus was. Did He pass the test? Was He wise enough, pure enough, balanced enough to show that he was indeed Messiah? Did He win the debate?

I. The Wicked Question

¹³ Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words. ¹⁴ When they had come, they said to Him, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and care about no one; for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? ¹⁵ "Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?"

The Pharisees come looking for a way to catch Jesus out. If He can only say the wrong thing in public, they've got Him! Theirs is not a question designed to enlighten them; it is a question designed to trick and humiliate Jesus. They try to flatter him, and say, we know you are no man-pleaser, and will give us a straight answer.

Here's how it worked. In Israel of the day there was a fierce national loyalty, and a general hatred of Rome. Nevertheless, they were under Roman rule, and that meant paying taxes to Rome. Refusal to do so was rebellion against the Empire. At the same time, there was a debate within Israel: isn't paying taxes to Rome a form of religious apostasy? After all, the image of Caesar on the coin was tantamount to idolatry for many Jews, and worse, the inscription read "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus", and on the reverse side "Chief priest." By paying Caesar, some Jews felt that they were admitting he was king; even submitting to a form of emperor worship, which is saying that Yahweh is not our king! Now in fact, the tax was only one denarius per year, which was a day's wage for a labourer. But the tax was hated not for its amount, but for what it symbolised.

The Pharisees knew that this question would trap Jesus whether He said yes or no. If He said, no, do not pay taxes, they would report Him as a political rebel, an insurrectionist, and get Him arrested. If He said yes, they would call him a religious traitor, disobedient to the call to have only God as King. It's a question designed to incriminate, like the question "Have you stopped stealing money from your work?"

Is the Lord caught in their net? Is He beaten by the wicked question?

God in flesh simply dazzles us with His genius - He asks for a coin. Whose head was printed on every Roman coin in circulation? Caesar's. And if it has Caesar's face, it's Caesar's property. So, in the first place, what's the harm in returning to Caesar his own property? In the second place, by using Caesar's coins, they were already submitting to his government, enjoying the benefits of the civil order that Rome and its economy provided. So if they took the benefits of a currency and trade and Roman roads and Roman laws, then they owed Caesar taxes.

On the other hand, whose image is imprinted on every human being? God. And if so, what do I have that belongs to God? What should be returned to God? My whole being, all that I am. He said give Caesar back his coins, since you are choosing to use them anyway, and simultaneously, give to God your all.

With one swift blow to the jaw, the Pharisees were reeling. He had taken their question and turned it back on them. Instead of being trapped by their question, Jesus had exposed how foolish it was, how elegantly simple the answer was.

II. The Simple Question

¹⁸ Then some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him; and they asked Him, saying: ¹⁹ "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother dies, and leaves his wife behind, and leaves no children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. ²⁰ "Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife; and dying, he left no offspring. ²¹ "And the second took her, and he died; nor did he leave any offspring. And the third likewise. ²² "So the seven had her and left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also. ²³ "Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife.

Next contenders are the Sadducees. The Sadducees were largely the group that made up the priesthood, and were typically wealthy and well-connected politically. The Sadducees were famous for their denials of the supernatural. They did not believe in angels, demons, or any form of resurrection. They only accepted the first five books of Moses as Scripture. So this was going to be their bone to pick with Jesus. They thought they had found an unsolvable problem. They took a situation from this life, and overlaid it with the future resurrection, and thought it would stump Jesus.

The situation in this life is that if a man had a wife, and he died, Levitical law said that a man's close relative could marry her. So in their scenario, it is seven brothers, who each marry her, and each time they die. So she has been lawfully married to seven men, one at a time. But now as they superimpose the life in eternity over this picture, they think they have a confusing picture. After all, they will all be alive at the same time, and all of them married her. Is she a wife with seven husbands? Do they all share the same wife?

They probably thought that Jesus would be utterly stumped by this situation. How can He uphold the resurrection without allowing and condoning eternal polygamy?

²⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵ "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶ "But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the *burning bush passage*, how God spoke to him, saying, '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 the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken."

Jesus says they are ignorant of two things: the Scriptures, and the power of God. They do not realise what God can do, which is raise the dead, and they do not realise what God has said in the Scriptures about resurrection.

What did He say? He said in the first five books of Moses "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." He did not say, "I was the God of Abraham, when he existed, and I was the God of Isaac, when he existed, and the God of Jacob when he existed." No, He says I **am** their God, as much then as now. They are still with me. By simply using the tense of the verb, present tense, Jesus has demonstrated their disbelief in the resurrection is false.

Then Jesus supplies truth that comes from His own authority. In the resurrection, people are as angels, they do not marry. And if they do not marry, then no one remains married after death. The resurrection is not only a continuation of this life, it is more than a continuation. It is a promotion, a deeper and more abundant life, where reproduction and physical maturing in families does not take place.

This question which seemed so complex to these Sadducees was as simple as remembering angels and God's promises to Israel.

As the Sadducees walked away, silenced, humiliated, and with plenty to think about, up came the third contender.

III. The Wise Question

²⁸ *Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?"*

Not every Pharisee was as perverse as all the others. In fact, when they were right, the Pharisees were some of the best you were going to find in Israel. This was a man with a difference. Picture yourself in his shoes. You have this one rare opportunity to ask Jesus one question. He turns to face you. What are you going to ask him?

Some would waste their question, asking about some minor quibble of religion. Some would try to seem knowledgeable in asking something they already knew. Some would try to match wits with the spiritual genius that Jesus was. Only the refreshingly honest soul would ask what we would all like to know. When God the Son is among us as a man, what we really want to ask him is, "Lord, what is the priority of life? What is the central idea of life? If we are to summarise the Christian life in one sentence, what is it? What is the chief end of man?"

That's what this man asked Jesus. He went for nothing less than the bullseye of meaning and purpose. Here was a man who knew how not to waste an audience with the greatest Prophet Israel had ever seen. "Which is the first commandment of all?" means "what is the most important thing?" He was not asking which command comes first in *sequence*; he was asking which command comes first in *importance*.

The Pharisees had identified 613 commandments in the law, 365 negative and 248 positive. They had divided them into *heavy* and *light* commandments, i.e. more important, and less important. So it was a fairly common question to ask, which is the heaviest? Which one sums them all up?

This was a wise question. It was really the best question you could ask Jesus. And Jesus tells him what should be the theme running through our minds all the time:

²⁹ *Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰ 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. ³¹ "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*

Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. He starts with, "Hear, O Israel, the lord our god, the lord is one," because that is the foundation of loving God with all the heart. You only love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, when you recognise that He alone is God, and no other. No one else deserves that kind of love. That kind of love is the love you give to a God, and there is only One.

Then the second is a love command. Love your neighbour with the love you naturally have for yourself. Do for him as you would want it done to you. Now what Jesus doesn't say here, because it wasn't asked, is how you do that. You can only love God ultimately, and love your neighbour unselfishly if you have a new heart, if you have been born from above, and the Holy Spirit lives within you, and you are daily growing in His grace. But for the question asked, Jesus hit the absolute bull's-eye.

And the Pharisee answered in a way that showed he was wise and seeking wisdom.

³² *So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. ³³ "And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."*

I'm sure each of us wishes that this man got even closer and right into the kingdom of God. Ask Jesus a wicked question, and get a riddle of an answer. Ask Jesus a foolishly simple question, and receive a foolishly obvious answer. Ask Jesus a wise question, and receive a wise answer.

And then in the Jewish Passover there is the fourth son, the naive son, unable to ask a question. Look at the end of verse 34: But after that no one dared question Him.

Think of what has just happened. Three teams have successively stepped into the ring, and thrown their pre-planned, hardest questions at Jesus. And now each one is flat on the ground, their trainers squirting water into their faces, fanning them with towels.

This is what happens when you debate God in the flesh.

But now with no one left standing, and all the challengers silenced, it is His turn to ask a question. And since He answered their questions till they had none left, they need to be able to answer His question.

³⁵ *Then Jesus answered and said, while He taught in the temple, "How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the Son of David? ³⁶ "For David himself said by the Holy Spirit: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at*

My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." ' 37 "Therefore David himself calls Him 'Lord'; how is He then his Son?"

Jesus basically asks, Who exactly is Messiah? Everyone knew that Messiah is the descendant of David. It was one of the ways that people spoke of Messiah. In fact, when the people were looking at the miracles of Jesus, one of the questions they asked in Matthew 12:23 was, "Could this be the Son of David?" They knew that much: Messiah is descended from the line of David.

But now Jesus presents them with a mystery. Psalm 110 was written by David. David begins that Psalm by saying the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool. In the Hebrew, it is Yahweh said to my Adonai. Everyone understood that this was a Messianic psalm, with God giving Messiah authority. But Jesus forces them to think about something they probably hadn't. In Israelite society, fathers did not call their sons or their descendants *lords*. So here is David, calling Messiah, my lord, and yet Messiah will be descended from David? How can Messiah be both David's son, and David's lord?

The answer is in fact in Jesus Himself. Only if Messiah is fully God, and fully man, do the prophecies harmonise. Only if Messiah is both pre-existent, and also born of a virgin at Bethlehem, can He be both David's lord, and David's son.

All along, they have been examining the ultimate Passover Lamb. They have been scrutinising Him to see if He is the one promised in Isaiah 53 who would bear our iniquities. And when the hardest of their questions found no fault in Him, and an fact displayed His unearthly wisdom, Jesus now gave them the last question. Since you are looking for Messiah, do you even know what you are looking for? You need to be looking for a descendant of David, but also the one David worshipped. You need to be looking for the God-man. He is the Christ, He is Messiah.

When Jesus speaks like this, the people around him seem like mental and intellectual midgets. The wisest in the land seem like children next to him. But in fact, that's what we are next to the Lord Jesus. He is the fullness of wisdom, the pinnacle of brilliant truth, the completeness of knowledge.

Colossians 2:3 ³ *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*

So this leads us to two choices for two sets of people. If today you do not know God as Father, you do not know where you would go if you should die, then who but Jesus Christ should you turn to? Who is wiser than he? And if so, what would be the wisest decision of your life? The wisest thing you can ever do is to turn from a life of self-serving, and trust Jesus Christ to be your Saviour from sin and the Lord of your life.

The second choice is for you if you are born again. Where do you get your wisdom for life? Where do you learn to make your decisions? Who influences you most when it comes to decisions? If Christ is your Saviour from sin, then He is also your Saviour from foolishness. And that means being deeply rooted in the word of Christ. Proverbs 4:7 says:

⁷ *Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.*

Are you taking in the mind of Christ? Is His kind of thinking becoming yours? Can people say of you what they said of Peter and John, who though uneducated and untrained, spoke so wisely and boldly that they realised they had been with Jesus. That should be your goal with Christ, that you so live in His presence, that His wisdom becomes yours, and people say of you, this one has been with Jesus.