

March 1, 2026

THE DEVOTION DEMANDED BY OUR LORD

Mark 12:13-44

(7 of 15 in a series through Mark 10-16)

In book eight of Augustine's *Confessions*, he writes about his conversion. He had been sitting in a garden in bitter agony, wanting to walk away from his lust and fleshly pursuits yet struggling to let go of these fleeting pleasures. He writes, "I flung myself down beneath a fig tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes. . . . In my misery, I kept crying, 'How long shall I go on saying, "tomorrow, tomorrow"? Why not now? Why not make an end of my ugly sins at this moment?' . . . All at once I heard the singsong voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain, 'Take it and read, take it and read.' At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these, but I could not remember ever hearing them before. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open the book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall."<sup>1</sup>

"So I hurried back . . . seized [the book of Paul's epistles] and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: 'Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites' (Romans 13:13-14). I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."<sup>2</sup>

Augustine would go on to be one of the greatest theologians that the church has ever known. We find ourselves today standing very much on his shoulders in many areas. And yet, amazingly, the key moment of his conversion came from overhearing someone who wasn't even speaking to him. We don't know who the child was talking to or the meaning of his or her words, of course, as Augustine didn't know it. But some child was saying to someone unknown, "Take it and read," and Augustine's life was changed.

My hope this morning is that we'd be helped in a similar way. Perhaps most of us in this room have already been converted, repenting of our sins and trusting in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation, so I don't mean in precisely the same way. What I mean is that I want us to be helped by overhearing someone speaking to another. Specifically, I want us to be helped as we listen in to Jesus' conversations as he had repeated confrontations and interactions with those who question and/or challenge him in Mark 12:13-44.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin books, 1961), 177-78.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 178.

Last week we saw Jesus' confrontation the chief priests, scribes, and elders. Well, apparently that was just the beginning because in Mark 12:13-44 the confrontations and interactions continue, one after another. Jesus deals with the Pharisees and Herodians, the Sadducees, a scribe, and others in the temple. But as he does so—answering their questions and challenging them as well—I believe that it helps us enormously to listen in on these conversations because what we'll overhear is the kind of devotion that Jesus demands of his followers along with why this is necessary and why it is possible.

Therefore, what I want to do is walk through this text in five sections and draw a main point from each of these sections. Some of the main points, you'll see, will be quite similar, and that's because I think there is a main thread that traces itself through each of these interactions Jesus has. But, after we've walked through the five sections, I want to pull back and note how I think we can put together the main point of the entire passage. So, with that said, let's dive into the first section.

Our text begins in verses 13-17 with a confrontation between Jesus and two groups that you wouldn't think belong together—the Pharisees and Herodians. The reason I say you wouldn't think they belong together is because the Pharisees were supposedly zealous for God's law and hated Roman rule while the Herodians supported the reign of Herod and aligned themselves politically with Rome. But sometimes common opposition to something else can create strange bedfellows, and that seems to be what happened here as both groups equally despised Jesus and saw him as a threat.

Therefore, they figured out a way to trap him, Mark tells us. First, they attempt to flatter him by telling him how great he is, and then they ask him the question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (v. 14). Now, Jesus saw through their flattery and immediately question them as to why they're trying to trap him before he answers the question. But what Jesus saw so clearly, we might not. So, why was this a trap? I mean, it's a simple yes or no question that seems reasonable to ask. Well, the reason it is a trap is because these groups knew that Jesus would likely create enemies no matter how he answered. If he said it was lawful to pay taxes, then he'd upset those Jews who hated the idea of paying taxes as it reminded them that they were under oppressive Roman rule. But if he said that it wasn't lawful, then he could be charged as treasonous and perhaps have to answer to Rome for undermining their authority.

However, as we've come to anticipate by now, Jesus answers masterfully. He asks them for a denarius, and they bring him one. And he asks them, as he looks at it, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" And they answered, "Caesar's." So he said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (vv. 15-17).

But what does Jesus' answer mean? Well, on the one hand, Jesus answers, "Yes," they should pay taxes. After all, they're happy to use Caesar's coins for other uses—which they prove by being able to present one at Jesus' request. And Paul would later affirm the need for believers to

pay taxes, writing in Romans 13:7 that we should pay “taxes to whom taxes are owed.” But Jesus isn’t saying that we should bow the knee to Rome. In fact, he reminds them that their foremost devotion must be to God (though obviously these two answers aren’t exclusive).

Why do we know that Jesus is saying that their utmost devotion must be to God? Well, when Jesus asks them whose “likeness” is on the coin, he’s using that language intentionally. If you’ll remember, back in Genesis 1, when we see the creation of man, the Scripture clearly tells us that God created humanity in his own image and *likeness*. So, when Jesus uses this language, their minds should be going back to Genesis 1—the very place he wants to take them. The reason is because he’s saying to them, “If Caesar having his likeness on the coin means that he’s owed the coin, then the Lord putting his likeness on you means that he’s owed the totality of your life. You exist for him.” That is, all who are made in God’s likeness (which is all of us) owe our entire allegiance to our God. Our Lord demands the entirety of our lives in devotion to him. That’s the point of this first section—we must devote ourselves entirely to our Lord.

### **We must devote ourselves entirely to our Lord**

You and I belong to God and must render ourselves to God above all else. In other words, we must make our greatest aim of our lives to live in a way that is pleasing and honoring to God. And there’s no circumstance in which we find ourselves that keeps that from happening—whether being forced to pay taxes we don’t like or anything else. And so, we must live our lives aiming to please and honor God above all else. And, again, if we always make this our aim and keep it in the forefront of our minds, there is nothing that can frustrate that aside from our own sin. Oftentimes when we find ourselves frustrated about life and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. But if we’re constantly frustrated, it’s probably because we find ourselves aiming at something other than living to please the Lord. So, this morning, let’s repent of idolatrous aims and say to the Lord, “Help me make the aim of my life to live in a way that’s pleasing to you, knowing that no circumstance can keep me from doing that.” And so this text calls us to devote ourselves entirely to our Lord. That’s the first truth. The second ends up being a very comforting truth for us. We see it in the second section, verses 18-27.

The second encounter we see involves the Sadducees. Mark reminds us that the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection, which is to say they didn’t think that on the final day our bodies will be raised from the dead. And so, they come to Jesus with a question that I imagine they’d used often to poke fun at those who hold to the resurrection. They probably felt like they had an absurd scenario that no one who holds to the resurrection could answer.

Their scenario is built off the idea of levirate marriage that God commanded in the OT. The idea of levirate marriage meant that if your brother took a wife and died before bearing children, then you (as his brother) would be obligated to marry his wife and bear children who would, in essence, be his offspring so that his name might continue. Well, in the Sadducees’ scenario this kept happening, with each brother marrying but dying before producing any offspring, and the next brother marrying his widow until the woman had been married to all seven brothers. And

so their question is, “Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?” And my guess is that they might have been laughing as they asked it.

But, interestingly, Jesus doesn’t beat around the bush. He starts his answer, saying, “Is this not the reason you are wrong” and ends saying, “You are quite wrong” (vv. 24, 27). But it’s not just that Jesus tells them that they’re wrong to deny the resurrection, he tells them why they’re wrong. They don’t know the Scripture or the power of God. Specifically, he tells them that they don’t understand that marriage will not continue in the resurrection. This makes their entire question which they think is so clever, completely obsolete. Nobody will be married or given in marriage in heaven. In that way, we’ll be like the angels (who do not marry). And, second, Jesus reminds them that in Exodus 3, when Moses was at the burning bush, the Lord spoke to him multiple times, saying, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?” with Jesus adding, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” But how does that support the truth that we’ll be raised in the end?

Well, first, recognize that when God says he’s the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, these men are already off the scene. They’ve died. But God still says he’s their God. And Jesus notes that God is the God of the living. So, we might think that Jesus is stressing that their souls are still alive, though their bodies are decaying in the ground. And that’s true, but I think he’s saying more than that. When he brings up that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this is the language of the covenant. Remember when God makes a covenant with these men, it is to be their God. And Jesus’ point is that God’s faithfulness to his covenant and covenant promises to be God to these men and bless them with particular promises didn’t end just because they died. He is still God to them and in order to be faithful to his promises to them, he will raise them from the dead. In other words, the resurrection is a requirement because our God is faithful to his covenant to be God to his people—a faithfulness that doesn’t end at our death. And I think that’s the point of this section—our God is eternally faithful to his people and his promises.

### **God is eternally faithful to his people and his promises**

You see, though they might not have recognized it, the essence of the Sadducees’ denial of the resurrection was a belief that God’s faithfulness to his people would stop at death. But if that were the case, then Abraham would never be an heir of the world, as God promised him (Rom 4:13). And nothing will stop God’s faithfulness to his people. Nothing will stop him from raising us up on the last day to inherit a new heavens and a new earth and reign with him forever. And so we see the faithfulness of our God.

In the third section (vv. 28-34) Jesus’ interaction is with a scribe who seems to ask a sincere question rather than simply challenge Jesus. We’re told that a lone scribe comes to Jesus and asks him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” (v. 28). Jesus answers, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ adding, ‘There is no commandment greater than these’” (vv. 29-31). Then, we’re told that the man agrees with Jesus, even

recognizing that loving God and one's neighbor is more important than giving whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. Therefore, Jesus says to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (v. 34).

Now, this answer should be both encouraging and discouraging to the scribe. On the one hand, the man is seeing more clearly than any of these previous groups who have been challenging Jesus. But on the other hand, not being far from the kingdom mean he's still not in the kingdom. But why? The answer is that being in the kingdom means bowing the knee to Jesus Christ as Lord. Therefore, though the man recognizes Jesus as a really insightful teacher, he's not yet recognizing that Jesus is the Lord. In other words, he doesn't recognize that he needs to love Jesus with his heart, soul, mind, and strength and obey Jesus' command to love his neighbor. And so we're reminded in this third section of the next truth I want us to see—we must love Jesus with our whole being and above all else.

### **We must love Jesus with our whole being and above all else**

That was the key piece this man was missing, and I do indeed hope his eyes were eventually. And contemplating the greatest commandment also reminds us that love isn't merely external. Offering sacrifices wasn't enough just like putting some disciplines in our lives isn't enough. It's good. Don't get me wrong. But Jesus wants your whole heart. He demands to be utmost in our affections. We must love Jesus with our whole being and above all else.

The fourth section ends up being a question that isn't asked *of* Jesus but *by* Jesus. As he was teaching in the temple, Mark tells us that he said, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" (vv. 35-37).

Jesus is obviously helping them to see that the Messiah (the promised and eternal king from David's line) isn't simply descended from David but reigns over David. And he reigns over David because he is the eternal Son of God who took on flesh. And since we know that Jesus is the Christ, this is Jesus saying to us that *he* is Lord and God. That's the simple and straightforward point of this interaction—Jesus is Lord and God.

### **Jesus is Lord and God**

And, of course, the implications of that are that he must be obeyed, loved, worshiped, etc. Jesus is not merely one who can sympathize with us in our weaknesses—though he can certainly do that—but one who is our Lord and God. He reigns over us because he reigns over all.

Now, let's add one more truth. In verses 38-41 we have a contrast between the scribes and a poor widow. First, in verses 38-40, Jesus denounces the scribes. They want everyone to think of them as lofty, godly, and important. Jesus says that they like to walk around, adorning themselves in ways to draw attention, seeking the best seat in the synagogue and at feasts.

Again, they like everyone to think that they're serious about the law of God and those who should be exalted. Yet, despite appearances, they're not godly. They devour widows' houses and when they pray their long prayers, it's just so that they might look impressive. In other words, they're hypocrites. They like to present one thing for people to see while living an entirely different way in reality.

But then we see a contrast with a poor widow in verses 41-44. We're told that Jesus sat down and watched people putting money in the offering box. Some would come by and put in large amounts, standing there, pouring in the money, and allowing the coins to ring out for all to hear. But that doesn't move the needle for Jesus. What does is when a poor widow comes by and puts in two copper coins—a very small amount of money. To anyone listening, this is nothing. By all appearances, her giving is not impressive at all. In fact, if someone were to hear her two small coins ring in the offering box, they might be embarrassed for her. But not Jesus.

He calls his disciples to himself and says to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (v. 43-44).

Now, our first response might be that it's not technically true. The woman didn't put in more money than the others. She put in less. But obviously Jesus is talking in terms of percentage. The others likely put in a small percentage of what they had. She put in one hundred percent of what she had. And this honors Jesus. And it forms a contrast with the scribes. They looked good on the outside and wanted the praise they received. But inside they had no commitment to the Lord but only to themselves. This woman, on the other hand, might have looked as if she was doing very little for her Lord on the outside, but Jesus knew that she was willing to commit to him her all. And this brings us to our final truth—we must commit all we have to Jesus.

### **We must commit all we have to Jesus**

Now, by that, I'm not saying that you have to give every dollar you have in the offering box. I'm saying that we must commit all we have to Jesus to be used as he directs. And because we know he tells us that he loves generous givers, of course he'll direct us to be generous in giving. But the truth here is larger than that. We must commit everything we have to be used as Jesus directs. That's what honors the Lord.

And so, if we put these things together, we're reminded of these five truths:

1. Jesus demands that we live our lives unto him.
2. God is eternally faithful to his people and promises.
3. We must love Jesus with our whole being above all else.
4. Jesus is Lord and God
5. We must commit all we have to Jesus.

If we put this together, I think we can say this. *Because Jesus is our faithful Lord and God, we must love him and commit the whole of ourselves and all we have to him above all else.* I don't think anything less than that statement is a faithful representation of this section of Mark's gospel.

What this means is that in this moment, right before Jesus will commit himself to the point of death in order to obey his Father, he's showing us that he demands the same from all who would follow him. We must live our lives with the sole aim of pleasing and honoring our Lord with our all. After all he is our Lord, but he's more than that. He's our faithful Lord, who will fulfill every good promise to us. So, let's trust him, love him, and obey him as we wait for the day when he comes and takes us home. Amen.