

Stump the Chumps
Mark 12:13-34
First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
April 25, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver

If I get the chance on Saturday mornings, I'll listen to a radio show called *Car Talk*. It's hosted by a couple of mechanics in Boston named Tom and Ray Magliozzi. Listeners call in and describe the problems that they're having with their cars, and Tom and Ray (also known as Click and Clack) will attempt to diagnose their problems – usually with a lot of laughter. My favorite part of the show is a bit called “Stump the Chumps”, where Tom and Ray play an excerpt from a previous show, and then they call the listener to see if their hunch was correct.

The thing about that show is that the questions are so off the wall. I mean, if you really want to know how to change your oil or check your battery level, you can ask a local mechanic. But when your car smells like dead animals or you have smoke coming out your defroster vent, sometimes you think you need to call an expert.

I thought about those guys this week as I listened to the exchanges that Jesus had in the Temple as recorded in Mark 12. Here are the various groups of religious leaders lining up to get a chance to ask their question – not because they are so eager to learn, but because they want to trip Jesus up and get him in trouble.

As we look at the scriptures, let's consider the cast of characters. In the first scene, we read about Pharisees and Herodians. I know I said that this is taking place in the Temple, but the atmosphere here is about as politically charged as if it were a Tea Party rally – this is a question about taxation and right relationship to the governing authorities.

The Pharisees are a party within Judaism who were noted for their strict observance of the written law. The name means “separated ones”. They were intensely nationalistic and chafed under the Roman rule, and they, like some current politicians, grew their own popularity by fanning the flames of the people's hatred for the government. How odd it was to see them standing with the Herodians, who, as their name implied, were strong backers of Herod's government and who owed any power they might have had to the Roman regime. It would be like seeing someone from, say, Moveon.org at a “tea party” rally in our own day.

They think that they've got him, one way or another. If Jesus sides with the Pharisees and says “the tax is evil”, then the Herodians would denounce him and he would be arrested as a rebel against the Roman empire. If, however, he

said that the tax was valid, then his own popularity would evaporate because the Messiah would not ever be expected to make peace with the Roman occupiers.

The Poll Tax that is described here was, for some, *the* burning issue in first-century Jerusalem. Individuals were required by the Romans to pay into the imperial treasury once per year, and this was particularly offensive to patriotic Jews because it was a reminder of the fact that they were under foreign rule. The coin mentioned here would have had an image of the head of Tiberias on one side, along with the inscription, “Emperor Tiberias, august son of the august god.” On the other side was a picture of his mother carrying symbols that indicated that through her, the gods would bless all humanity with peace.

Now, remember that they are in the Temple. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago when we read about the moneychangers in the Temple? About how people were only allowed to have temple money in the Temple? Quick – what’s the second commandment? “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

So here they are, in the Temple – the one spot on earth where people could worship the Lord, a spot so sacred that you had to use special money, and these guys are asking Jesus a question about politics. Before he gives his answer, he asks them to show him a coin – and the religious leaders pull out a Roman coin. One with a graven image carved right onto it. One that said that the Emperor was divine. In a flash, Jesus exposes these men of both parties – they are not interested in his views on a current political or religious issue – they are looking to get him killed and disguising it as a religious question. The Pharisees and the Herodians care neither for Jesus nor his answer – they are simply trying to trap him. His answer exposes that and shuts them up in a hurry.

Next up are the Saducees. Now these fellows were more conservative than the other two – they only believed in the first five books of the Old Testament – the Torah. They were an aristocratic group who had strong connections to the status quo. Listen for their question – they are not trying to “trick” Jesus, like the other two; they are essentially belittling him and his beliefs by coming up with an absurd example:

Read Mark 12:18-27

Even though they are literally scoffing at Jesus while they ask this question, Jesus honors their tradition by giving them an answer that comes straight from the Torah itself. And then he winks at them and says that in the resurrection life (which the Saducees deny), we’ll be just like the angels – in whom the Saducees did not believe! And ultimately, he points out that rather than looking like an overcrowded bedroom, the new heavens and the new earth will be a place where our intimacies with each other are simply unimaginable given our current limitations.

There's one more question hovering in the wings – and this time it comes from someone who is identified as a "Scribe". Listen, because there is something unique in this exchange:

Read Mark 12:28-34

This scribe is the only teacher of the Law to be commended by Jesus in Mark's gospel. The one who asked it was evidently someone who was really interested in the exchange that Jesus had had with these men who had been trying to stump him – and so he asks Jesus a respectful question. "Of all of the 613 commands in the Law, which is the most important?"

Jesus answers the man by quoting from Deuteronomy 6 – a text that faithful Jews said every morning and every evening – and had been doing for hundreds of years. By reminding the hearers in the Temple of the power of these words: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself" Jesus is summarizing the entire message of the Old Testament.

Are you catching what Jesus is doing here? They try to trip him up with a question about politics, and he says, "If it came from the government, why not give it back to the government – but whatever came from God, you need to give back to God. They bring him a mocking question about the afterlife, and he responds by stretching their definition of reality and relationship. And he ends it with a teaching – in the Temple – about appropriate worship of God and service to others.

The thing is, Jesus isn't simply *saying* something here. He is *doing* what he says. He is offering himself to God in worship in the Temple. He has refused to participate in the idolatry and will not limit the power of God. He has given himself – body, mind, and spirit, back to the One who has sent him into the world. And he is loving his neighbor.

I want you to note that nowhere in this passage do you find Jesus doing anything less than loving God with the totality of his self and loving his neighbor as himself. It is what Jesus does. It is who Jesus is.

What has happened in the last two thousand years? Ask Jesus – who are you? And He will say, "I am loving God and neighbor." Ask the world today – "what do you think of Jesus' followers?" and the number top three answers in America are that Christians are judgmental, hypocritical, and anti-gay.¹ How did we get here? How did we, who claim to be followers of Jesus, become known as fakes, bigots, and haters?

¹ Shane Claiborne, "What if Jesus Meant all That Stuff?" *Esquire Magazine* Dec. 2009.

Jesus said that our relationship with God was about what we were *for*: Love. Love God. Love the neighbor. That's what matters. I do not want to be known for what I'm against.

You say, "Well, Dave, aren't you splitting hairs here? I mean, if you are for something, that means you are against its opposite."

I'm not so sure about that. Think about the things that we've heard Jesus say to the people with whom he disagreed. He called them snakes. Whitewashed tombs. Open graves. He told them that they were flat out wrong. And yet nowhere in the New Testament do we read that when people were compiling lists of all the things that they didn't like about Jesus that they included, "Yeah, and he really hated the Pharisees" or "and he smote the Saducees." Jesus wasn't killed for the stands he took against sin; he was killed because of the love he poured out on sinners. Jesus was reckless with his love. He kept giving it away. He loved the honest questioners enough to tell them the truth. He loved the people who were trying to kill him enough to tell them the truth. And he refused to stop loving the prostitutes and the tax collectors just because the Temple police didn't want that kind of riff-raff around.

Jesus didn't die to spite the people who were super holy; he died to show his love for the ones who weren't.

So what? What do these stories mean to me?

I love the way that Mark ends the last conversation. Jesus looks at the scribe and he says, "You are not far from the kingdom". And everybody shut up.

What do you think happened next? When Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is right here!" back in chapter one, people like Peter and Andrew and James and John followed Jesus. When he brought the kingdom near to Bartimaeus back in chapter ten, the blind beggar followed Jesus.

What about this scribe? What did he do? Did he say, "Ooooh, good answer..." and then go home? Or did he follow Jesus?

More importantly, what about me? Am I more eager to follow Jesus down the road of unconditional worship of God and sacrificial love for my neighbor? Or is it easier or safer for me to stand with the crowd of those who just want to point out how everyone else is breaking the rules?

You see, beloved, at the end of the day, when we look into the eyes of the One who has come to bring the Kingdom close to us – he wants to know – will we follow him? Will we allow our love for God to shape the way that we respect our neighbors?

I'm not saying that we have to agree with or approve of every choice our neighbors make. Lord knows that I don't. But simply thinking that you are wrong

does not give me the right to set myself over you as any kind of a judge. On my best day, I want to honor the rules as I understand them - and love you enough so that you'll be interested in at least hearing why I understand those rules the way that I do. And more importantly than that – my hope is that if I can somehow live in the love of Jesus, and worship the Lord with all that I am, then you will encounter God for yourself.

Lord Jesus, keep me close to you this day in the temple. I know that I carry around the idols of Caesar with me every day. I know that I don't have a good understanding of what the Kingdom is truly like. But I know that I want to be with you, and I want to be like you. Give me grace to love God as wholeheartedly as you do, and to love my neighbor the way that you love me. Amen.