LESSON *ten*

THE PROBLEM WITH PHARISEES

Mark 12:1–44

Getting Started

What is the most meaningful gift you've ever received? What made it so significant?

Setting the Stage

The last act of Jesus' public ministry was not a sermon or a miracle but a day spent at the treasury in Herod's temple, watching people put money in a treasury box. It was Tuesday of Passion Week. In Herod's temple, there

were thirteen different treasuries in the center of the Court of the Women, where all the Jewish people could go. Each treasury was unique.

The treasury box was a tall container with a huge trumpet proceeding from it. When people came to give, they would cast their money into the trumpet. The coins would go around and down, into the treasury box below. Some people learned how to throw their money into the treasury box so it could be heard all over the temple. They would bring all the copper coins they could find and toss them forcefully into the trumpet. The clatter they made announced to the other temple-goers that someone had just made a conspicuous gift to the temple. In other words, some people gave so they could be noticed.

Jesus likely saw plenty of givers like that, but they didn't interest Him much. What did interest Him was an elderly widow who quietly made her way to the temple box. In her frail hand, she held two small coins, an amount that would have seemed insignificant to anyone but her. They were, however, significant to Jesus. In fact, the woman's offering meant more to Jesus than other gifts worth a thousand times its value.

The reason, Jesus explained, is that while others gave out of their wealth, the widow gave out of her poverty. Those two coins were all she had. So she entrusted them to God.

Exploring the Text

The Parable of the Tenants (Mark 12:1–12)

1 Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a
vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and
built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far
country. 2 Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers,
that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the
vinedressers. 3 And they took him and beat him and sent him away
empty-handed. 4 Again he sent them another servant, and at him
they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away

shamefully treated. [5] And again he sent another, and him they killed;
and many others, beating some and killing some. [6] Therefore still
having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying,
'They will respect my son.' [7] But those vinedressers said among
themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance
will be ours.' [8] So they took him and killed him and cast him out of
the vineyard.

[9] "Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will
come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.
[10] Have you not even read this Scripture:

'The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone.
[11] This was the Lord's doing,
And it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

[12] And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude,
for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left
Him and went away.

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1. In this parable, the vineyard owner represents God, the vineyard represents His kingdom, the tenants represent Israel's religious leaders, the servants represent God's prophets, and the beloved son represents Jesus. Based on these insights, what point was Jesus making in His parable?

2. The plan to kill Jesus was already in motion. In His parable, Jesus predicted His death and warned the religious leaders about what would happen if they killed Him (see verses 9–11). What do you think the leaders thought and felt when they realized that Jesus knew their plans?

The Pharisees and Sadducees Test Jesus (Mark 12:13–27)

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."

3. Taxes were the lifeblood of the Roman Empire, and the punishment for not paying them was severe. However, the Jewish people absolutely *despised* paying taxes to Rome. How was this question about paying taxes designed to put Jesus in an awkward position (see verses 13–15)?

4. In what ways did the Sadducees misunderstand the Scriptures and the power of God (see verses 24–27)?

The Greatest Commandment (Mark 12:28–34)

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.

5. According to Jesus, what are the two greatest commandments (see verses 29–31)?

6. Why do you think Jesus' reply kept people from asking Him additional questions (see verse 34)?

The Widow's Offering (Mark 12:38–44)

38 Then He said to them in His teaching, "Beware of the scribes, who
desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces,
39 the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts,
40 who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers.
These will receive greater condemnation."

41 Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people
put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much.
42 Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a
quadrans. 43 So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them,

"Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; [44] for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."

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7. What actions of the scribes received condemnation from Jesus (see verses 38–39)? What other words would you use to describe them?

8. What action from the widow received commendation from Jesus (see verses 42–44)? What does this say about the way God views the attitude of your heart in giving?

Reviewing the Story

The Jewish religious leaders hated Jesus' parables because many of the stories were directed at *them*. They knew His parable of the tenants implicated them and put them in a bad light, but they were powerless to do anything about it because they feared the reaction of His followers. So they tried to bait Jesus with a question about paying taxes to Rome, but He thwarted their efforts with a reply so wise it stunned them into silence. Jesus offered similarly wise responses to their questions about marriage in heaven and the greatest commandment. He also warned His followers not to be fooled by the religious leaders' showy self-importance.

9. The chief priests, scribes, and elders were the religious leaders of Israel. Why do you think they were afraid of the crowd (see Mark 12:12)?

10. Why would Jesus' listeners have been amazed by His reply to the question about paying taxes to Rome (see Mark 12:15–17)?

11. Practically speaking, how can a person express love for God with all of his or her heart, soul, mind, and strength (see Mark 12:30)?

12. How does giving express a person's priorities? What does a person's giving reveal about his or her trust in God (see Mark 12:43–44)?

Applying the Message

13. What do you think Jesus might say if He reviewed your giving? Why?

14. Which of your neighbors, the people in your life, especially need to be shown love right now? What can you do to show a tangible expression of love to them?

Reflecting on the Meaning

Alfred Nobel was a Swedish chemist who made his fortune by inventing dynamite and other powerful explosive materials that were bought by major governments to produce weapons. When Alfred Nobel's brother died, one newspaper accidentally printed Alfred's obituary instead. Alfred was described in the obituary as a man who had become rich by enabling people to kill each other in unprecedented quantities.

When someone sent Alfred a copy of his own obituary, he read it with amazement. He was so shaken with the assessment of his life that he resolved to use the fortune he had amassed to reward accomplishments that benefitted humanity instead of destroying it. He established what we now know as the Nobel Peace Prize.

Alfred Nobel had a rare opportunity to look at the assessment of his life while he was still alive . . . and while he was still able to do something about it. What would you do if you had the same opportunity? If you could read an unbiased assessment of your life up to this point, what would it say? What would be highlighted? What *wouldn't* it say? What goals do you have that are yet to be accomplished?

The more important question is this: What can you do to *change* your obituary—to bolster it and make it more meaningful? What can you do to make a difference in the lives of others? How can you show Christ's love to others? How can you realign your priorities to reflect God's will? How can

you spend more time building a spiritual legacy that will outlive you and less time doing things that ultimately don't matter?

Alfred Nobel made the most of his second chance to leave a lasting, positive impression. What will you learn from his example?

Journaling Your Response

In two or three sentences, how would you summarize the legacy you would like to leave?