

THE KISS OF HEAVEN

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 12:13-27
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A friend of mine who served as a groomsman in a wedding had the nerve to pose the following question to the groom just before the commencement of the ceremony: “If you could choose the timing of Christ’s return, and you had to pick between now and after your honeymoon, which would you choose?” The groom didn’t hesitate.

“Right now.”

The groom, I suspect, expected heaven to be awesome: greater than any of earth’s offerings. I also suspect that he had already tasted heaven and that he therefore believed it was worth sacrificing a honeymoon for. The New Testament teaches us not only that believers in Jesus will go to heaven but also that heaven has already come to them. If so, how might we experience heaven? Jesus’ response to two groups of opponents helps us with the answer.

A question about taxes

Mark 12:13-17:

Then they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Him in order to trap Him in a statement. They came and said to Him, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to pay a poll-tax to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay or shall we not pay?” But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, “Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at.”⁶They brought one. And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” And they said to Him, Caesar’s.” And Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they were amazed at Him.¹

Jewish leaders, having been confounded by Jesus’ response to their challenge in Mark 11:27-12:12, now send a delegation of Pharisees and Herodians to discredit him. Pharisees are by and large nationalists who favor the overthrow of Rome, which ruled the land of Israel. Herodians, on the other hand, support the partially Jewish family of Herod, which ruled under the aegis of Rome. Therefore, Herodians by and large supported the rule of Rome and opposed revolution. The two groups, hailing from different sides of the political fence, join forces to challenge a common enemy: an upstart from Galilee. Politics, as they say, makes strange bedfellows.

The Pharisees and Herodians feign deference to Jesus in

an attempt to force him to take a stand on a controversial issue, the poll tax. Jewish nationalists like the Pharisees resented having to pay the census-based tax to Rome, but those who collaborated with Rome, like the Herodians, favored the tax. When the tax was instituted, it precipitated a Jewish revolt in 6 A.D. led by Judas the Galilean. Rome quashed the rebellion and crucified thousands of rebels. If Jesus of Galilee publicly opposes the tax, like Judas of Galilee, then the Herodians can label him a threat to Rome. If he publicly favors the tax, then the Pharisees can label him unpatriotic.

Jesus’ opponents, in the interest of coaxing a politically divisive answer from him, say they “know” that he speaks the truth without fear, but Jesus, “knowing” their hypocrisy, sees through their ploy. In reality, Jesus is truthful and defers to no one, as his opponents suggest, but they are disingenuous. Jesus, in asking why they’re testing him, lets them know that he knows what they’re up to. In unmasking their hypocrisy with his question, Jesus shames them for asking him to show his true colors while they conceal their true motives.

Inasmuch as the Romans required their subjects to pay the poll tax with Roman coinage, Jesus asks the Pharisees and Herodians to produce a denarius, a Roman coin. The denarius bears the image of Tiberius Caesar and an inscription proclaiming him to be “Son of God” and “Son of the divine Augustus.” To God-fearing Jews like the Pharisees, the coin was both idolatrous and blasphemous. In asking his opponents about the image and the inscription, Jesus is playing with fire—and seemingly playing right into his opponents’ hands. They gladly bring him a denarius and identify it with Caesar. Jesus can’t ignore the question now without losing face.

Revolution of a different sort

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” Jesus tells them, “and to God the things that are God’s.” Huh? That Jesus escaped the trap is evident because he leaves his opponents dumbfounded; but how did he do it?

Jesus reworks a popular revolutionary slogan derived from the Maccabean revolt in the second century B.C.: “Pay back the Gentiles what they deserve, and give attention to the command of the Law.” (The reference comes from the non-canonical book of 1 Maccabees: 1 Maccabees 2:66-68.) For many Jews, the violent overthrow of pagan oppressors and allegiance to God went hand in hand. Jesus, however, advocates a different sort of revolution and sees allegiance to God in a different light.

The poll tax? Sure, pay it, Jesus says. Send the coins back to Caesar, if that's what he demands. And if you refuse to pay it in the interest of revolution against Caesar, don't deceive yourself: you don't enjoy God's favor. The tax is inconsequential in the kingdom of God, and both the Pharisees and the Herodians are mistaken to make an issue of it. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's: send the idolatrous coins back to where they came from, and don't make an issue of it one way or the other.

However, Jesus adds, make sure to give God his due. Jesus is saying that Caesar, despite the claims of the denarius, is not divine and that he will have to answer to God. The human answer to Caesar's blasphemy, however, is not to take up arms against him. What are the things of God? They pertain to worship. Knowledgeable Jews like the Pharisees might be reminded of Psalm 96:7-10, where the psalmist admonishes all peoples to ascribe, or give, to the Lord glory and strength, to worship him and tremble before him.

The Herodians are in danger of putting allegiance to Caesar ahead of allegiance to God; the Pharisees are in danger of putting allegiance to revolution ahead of allegiance to God. Neither party, in feigning deference to Jesus and making an issue of a non-issue to discredit him, is giving God his due. Render to God the things that are God's: worship him alone, and neither collaborate with the pagans to curry their favor nor take up arms to overthrow them.

Does Jesus oppose the tax and favor the revolution, or does he favor the tax and oppose the revolution? Both and neither. He favors the tax, but not in the way that the Herodians favor it. He favors the revolution, but not in the way the Pharisees favor it. They can't pin him down as against revolution, for he favors revolution of a sort, nor can they pin him down as a threat to Rome, for Jesus takes up no sword. Jesus nuances his retort to rebuke both parties, with the hope that they will repent, while simultaneously avoiding their trap. No wonder he amazes them.

If Jesus favors revolution while disavowing the sword, how does he expect revolution to come about? The Pharisees and Herodians, in order to ingratiate themselves to Jesus, say that he teaches "the way" of God. They speak more than they know, for "the way" has featured prominently in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus teaches the way of the Lord, which is the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love. Anyone who wishes to follow him must take up his cross (Mark 8:34).

The cross is a symbol of Roman domination. Take issue with Rome's right to rule, and Rome will put you on one of its crosses. The revolutionaries wanted to uproot both Rome and its bloody crosses. Instead of ridding the land of crosses, as many would have expected of the Messiah, Jesus, in obedience to God, will die on one of them himself. Thus he will give Caesar the blood he demands while at the same time giving God the obedience he demands. He will render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Jesus leads a quiet revolution. He

defeats evil not by killing enemies but by dying for them.

Therefore, if Rome wants your taxes, give it your taxes, even if it uses your money to kill the faithful. If it wants your blood for believing in God, not Caesar, then give it that, too. Join the quiet revolution and participate in the victory of God by taking up your cross and following Jesus in the way of self-giving love. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

Worship first

The things of God pertain to worship. We render to God worship. Our causes proceed from worship; worship doesn't proceed from our causes. We abandon ourselves not to our causes but to God. For if you abandon yourself to your cause, you are worshiping your cause, not God. The world doesn't need any more right-wing zealots. It doesn't need any more left-wing zealots. It doesn't need any more centrist zealots. It needs worshipers of God who are filled with heaven and carry the presence of God with them into the world.

Worshipers of God purify their hearts—and their world-views, and their theologies—by abandoning themselves to him. Sure, they have causes—righteous causes—but they know that, apart from worshiping God, they are always susceptible to worshiping their causes and thereby evacuating them of righteousness. They know that if they worship their causes, they will, like the Pharisees and Herodians, make issues of non-issues. They swear allegiance to God, not their causes.

Worshipers of God understand that all earthly power is derivative. Therefore, they don't need power, like the Herodians, nor do they need to destroy power, like the Pharisees.

Worshipers of God employ the methods of God. They speak the truth, both courageously and sensitively. More importantly, they live the truth. They pray—for many things, yes, but especially for the advance of the gospel, the good news concerning the in-breaking of God's healing, loving rule. They love. The arrows of this world pierce them, but they cleanse their wounds with the pierced love of the Savior so that they raise not a fist in anger against the world but instead take up a cross in love. They will, if they must, die for their enemies. They know that truth, prayer, and love will overwhelm evil and win the revolution.

Worshipers of God are worshipers first and revolutionaries second. Everyone has causes. Only the church can worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Worship both inspires and purifies the revolution.

My daughter and I were talking the other day about how Sunday is both the first day of the week and part of the weekend, the end of the week. Sunday, what the New Testament calls "the Lord's day" because of the resurrection of Christ, is both the day we proceed from and the day we arrive at. Worship is the beginning and the end—and the center of everything. As worshipers of God, we must

walk through the mine field of this world. Bombs are positioned to blow up every cause. Worship, which orients us toward God, helps us walk in the way of the Lord and thereby avoid missteps in the mine field. It helps us serve heaven, not earth.

The Pharisees and Herodians failed to trap Jesus. Next up: the Sadducees.

A question about resurrection

Mark 12:18-27:

Some Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection) came to Jesus, and began questioning Him, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that IF A MAN’S BROTHER DIES and leaves behind a wife AND LEAVES NO CHILD, HIS BROTHER SHOULD MARRY THE WIFE AND RAISE UP CHILDREN TO HIS BROTHER. There were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died leaving no children. The second one married her, and died leaving behind no children; and the third likewise; and so all seven left no children. Last of all the woman died also. In the resurrection, when they rise again, which one’s wife will she be? For all seven had married her.” Jesus said to them, “Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the fact that the dead rise again, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; you are greatly mistaken.”

The Sadducees, who constituted the ruling class in Israel, dominated the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council. The high priest, who presided over the temple, was drawn from their number. The Sadducees tended to arrange comfortable lives for themselves, deftly positioning themselves between the Roman rulers and the Jewish populace.

For political reasons as well as theological, the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead. They deemed the first five books of the Bible authoritative but regarded the others, especially those that espoused the resurrection of the dead, as dubious additions (Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2). Belief in the resurrection stoked revolutionary fervor among nationalists who were inspired to risk their lives because they expected God to raise them from the dead. The Sadducees, with a vested interest in the status quo, therefore discouraged belief in the resurrection.

Jesus has disrupted the ministry of the temple, dramatiz-

ing its destruction, and stirred up the masses. Therefore, the Sadducees fret about Jesus and want to discredit him.

The Sadducees, assuming that Jesus believes in the resurrection of the dead, attempt to make him look absurd for his belief. They posit a scenario based on the Mosaic Law, outlined in Deuteronomy 25:5-6, which calls for a man to marry his brother’s wife in the event of his brother’s death. The Sadducees, assuming that belief in the resurrection presupposes the continuation of marriage, posit a scenario that involves multiple deaths and seven marriages. They assume their scenario debunks the resurrection, which, quite obviously in their view, would make a shambles of the Mosaic Law if it were true. Well, they ask Jesus, which of the brothers gets the woman in the resurrection?

The God of the living

The Sadducees assume they have demonstrated, from the Scriptures, Jesus’ belief in the resurrection of the dead to be mistaken. On the contrary, Jesus responds, they are mistaken, and he tells them why they’re mistaken: they understand neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

First, Jesus challenges their presuppositions about belief in the resurrection. When the dead are raised, they will enjoy a new kind of life that transcends marriage. Men and women will be like angels in that they won’t marry. The resurrection therefore doesn’t make a shambles of the Mosaic Law; at a certain point, it makes marriage laws, and the entire Mosaic Law, irrelevant.

Second, having challenged the Sadducees’ presuppositions about belief in the resurrection, Jesus challenges their disbelief in the resurrection itself. To do so, he employs not Isaiah or Daniel, books that clearly articulate the resurrection of the dead but which the Sadducees dismissed. Instead, he turns to the book of Moses (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible), which the Sadducees consider authoritative—specifically, the book of Exodus. The Lord identified himself to Moses as the God of the patriarchs (Exodus 3:6). On the surface, the text from Exodus doesn’t argue for the resurrection of the dead. One has to understand the Scriptures, not just one verse, to understand one verse in light of the Scriptures. God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That he identified with the patriarchs, even after they had died, indicates at the least that they aren’t dead forever. If God made an everlasting covenant with them, he will raise them from the dead so that they may see the fulfillment of the promises he made to them. He is not the God of the dead but the God of the living.²

The Sadducees aren’t just mistaken, they are also “greatly mistaken”—or doubly mistaken. First, they are mistaken in their understanding of what the resurrection of the dead entails, and, second, they are mistaken to not believe in the resurrection. They understand neither the Scriptures, which espouse the resurrection of the dead, nor the power of God, who can and will raise the dead.

The centrality of the resurrection

Many today, even some who profess to follow Jesus, don't believe in the resurrection from the dead because they don't believe in miracles. Their worldview rules out the possibility of supernatural intervention. Their argument, essentially, goes like this: humans don't rise from the dead because humans don't rise from the dead.

Well, how do you know humans don't rise from the dead? All rational people must make room in their worldview for at least one miracle. If you believe in materialism, where did the material come from? Scientist Carl Sagan used to say, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." How does he know? Anyway, it doesn't make sense. Nothing outside of supernatural intervention can explain the presence of the cosmos. Once you make room in your worldview for the historic reality of at least one supernatural act, then belief in the resurrection of the dead is perfectly reasonable. If the cosmos are real, the dead can be raised. Nothing is impossible with God.

If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true, then we all have to do business with God, which is strong incentive, for some, not to believe in it. Furthermore, the resurrection of the dead—both the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of his followers—is central to the gospel and to the human story. Take away the resurrection of Christ, says the apostle Paul, and you don't have a gospel (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). You don't have victory over Satan, sin, and death. Take away the future resurrection of the dead, and you don't have humanity, for humans have bodies: bodies made to be animated by the Spirit of God. At the consummation, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, the dead will be raised imperishable," and victory will swallow up death for all time (1 Corinthians 15:50-54). We will be raised from the dead to see the fulfillment of God's promises.

A thousand suns

We will be raised to a new kind of life that transcends marriage. Marriage—even the best sex in the best marriage—simply illustrates for us the new world that is coming, which will feature "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9). It won't be one woman with seven husbands. It will be one expectant groom, Christ, with one radiant bride comprising myriads and myriads and myriads of those who love him.

Marriage isn't everything. Sex isn't everything. Christ is everything. Marriage is an illustration, but, as with any illustration that would portray transcendent realities, a pale one. Sex can't compare with being a member of the bride of Christ. Marriage, and the sex that goes with it, is like a single candle. The marriage supper of the Lamb? A thousand suns.

If you're married, your marriage is not your own. You are in some way connecting with and illustrating the divine love story: Christ's love for his people. Enjoy your marriage, work on it, and honor it in that light. Nevertheless,

don't expect too much from it. It will not meet the deepest desires of your heart. Marriage illustrates; it connects; it inspires. But it is *not* the marriage supper of the Lamb. It is the candle, not the suns.

If you're single, you're not missing out. Sex is for marriage, not for singleness, which means, if you're single, that the opportunities to know Christ are more intense as you seek him in the furnace of your desires. The opportunities to serve Christ, as Paul notes, are more plentiful (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). Most importantly, if you have Christ, you will enjoy the marriage supper of the Lamb. You might not see the candle before you sleep, but you'll rise to see the suns.

Believe in the Scriptures and the power of God: believe in the resurrection. And let that belief shape your life, especially your view of singleness and marriage, both of which, in different ways, connect us with Christ.

David Hansen, a pastor, writes of visiting a congregant in a nursing home who told him, out of the blue,

"I had a man friend once":

I stood silently, waiting for her next sentence.

"We were young, and he was beautiful—just beautiful." She paused.

Tilting her head up and cocking it just slightly, she peered into the sky, looking to the place that stored her memories. That was how she always remembered things. She didn't go inside to remember; she always looked up, as if her memories were recorded in another world. I swear it seemed as if she was reading her life off God's Book.

"He was strong, and oh, was he good-looking ... " She gasped and paused. *The picture startled her; her heart caught its beat. "I loved him with all my heart.*

"He kissed me once," she said. Now her eyes closed and she bowed her head. Her deep and honest modesty applied restraint, but she didn't give in. The reticence was part of the drama.

"When he kissed me—oh!" Again she gasped and paused.

"I will never forget it. Electricity passed through me, from his lips to mine, back and forth and through my body."

She became realistic and looked me in the eyes.

"We broke up. I went my way, he went his, and we never saw each other again, and that was that." She stopped, then continued.

"Heaven will be like that kiss," she mused.³

Experiencing heaven

Heaven will be *like* that kiss. Heaven, which will merge with the earth to form the new creation, will be better

than that kiss. What's more, the earth, even now, is better than that kiss, because heaven has invaded the earth. The bridegroom has risen from the dead and dwells with us through his Holy Spirit. If you believe in Jesus, you get heaven in you before you get to heaven.

How do you experience it? You experience it in worship. Worship transcends time and space. In worship, past and future collapse into the present, and you taste eternity. You worship on your own, in ways that help you sense the kiss of heaven, but also and especially as you gather with others as the bride of Christ. One person is not the bride of Christ. The people of God together are the bride of Christ. When you render to God the things that are God's, when you worship him, you are tasting heaven. Come, then, to taste his goodness. Why go to church? Robert Farrar Capon answers:

You go to do precisely what the church has always been smart enough—or lucky enough, or guided enough—to call it all along: you go to celebrate the Holy Mysteries. ... You go to taste and see how gracious the inveterately hospitable Lord is. To share still another bottle of the great old wine he's always kept your cellar full of. And to relish once again the old tall tale about how he came to his own party in disguise and served the devil a rubber duck. You go, in short, to have a ball—to keep company while you roll over your tongue the delectable things that have been yours all along but that get better every time you taste them.⁴

You go to lose yourself in the Scriptures and revel in the power of God. You go to render to the God the things that are God's. You go, in short, to taste the kiss of heaven.

Let the wedding feast begin.

NOTES

¹ Literary structure:

A They sent some Pharisees and Herodians (13)

B "Teacher": Introduction to question (14a)

C Opponents' question: "Is it lawful ... ?" (14b-15a)

D Jesus' questions: "Why are you testing me?" "Whose likeness ...?" (16)

E Answer: "Render unto Caesar ... " (17)

A' Some Sadducees began questioning him (18)

B' "Teacher": Introduction to question (19-22)

C' Sadducees' question: "... which one's wife will she be?" (23)

D' Jesus' questions: "Is this not ... ?" "... have you not read ... ?" (24-26)

E' Jesus' answer: "He is not the God of the dead ... " (27)

² Furthermore, when Jesus was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appeared on the mountain (Mark 9:4). Mark would have us believe, therefore, that the men and women of God who have died aren't dead and gone.

³ David Hansen, *A Little Handbook on Having a Soul* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 56-57.

⁴ Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 363.

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