

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 22:34-46

You can almost imagine yourself in the warmth of the sun that dusty day in Jerusalem, part of the milling crowd, some stopping to listen and others just glancing at a group of men who were in some sort of debate—before moving on, unaware that this was one of the last afternoons before Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

The questions asked Jesus by the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes were not designed to determine if He was who His words and actions claimed. They were designed to force an answer from Jesus unacceptable either to the Romans or to the Jews. Either way, the Troublemaker would be out of the way and out of power.

Who were these questioners? The groups were not ordinarily allies. The Pharisees, for instance, believed in a resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees did not. The Herodians, mentioned in 22:16, and the Sadducees, believed the only way for Jews to survive was to cooperate with Roman authority and adopt Roman customs. The Pharisees rejected this path. On this day, however, all of these groups joined in attempting to defeat Jesus.

As each “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?” question failed, another enemy stepped up to give his question a try. Jesus could not be caught off guard and He silenced His enemies with His authoritative and wise replies which at times had a ring of sarcasm.

The Pharisees (the sect most respected by the people) especially hated Jesus. They believed that absolute obedience of the Law and its hundreds of man-created sub-laws was the way to guarantee a place in heaven. The Pharisees, however, did not see the Law as something to be lived in the heart. They did not understand Grace and Forgiveness. They were protective of their high standing among the people. Jesus threatened that status and their whole belief system, a system that could lead the people only to Hell.

How do you answer the difficult questions asked of you by unbelievers? Bible study helps prepare us for those moments, but we also have an assurance from Jesus—“...do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 13:11)

Have you invited a friend to attend Bible study with you?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

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1. The dialog with the Pharisees and other enemies of Jesus continues in this text. Who were some of the groups that frequently challenged Jesus during His earthly ministry? Why was He a threat to them?
2. What is the “greatest commandment”? Which commandment is next?
3. How was Jesus the “son of David” (vs. 42)?
4. What about Jesus silenced His critics (vs. 46)? What about Jesus and His message can silence critics today?

For Family Reflection

5. How are you doing with keeping the “greatest commandment”? How are you doing with keeping the “second” commandment? Who has kept all the commandments for us?
6. If Jesus were to ask you (as He did the Pharisees) “What do you think about the Christ” (vs. 42), what would you say?

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Mark 3:1-13

Just how blind and rebellious were the religious leaders of Jesus' time? They watch Jesus to see if He will heal a man on the Sabbath. Then they could accuse Him of the crime of working on the Sabbath.

This was a topic of much debate at the time. Was it work to set a broken bone on the Sabbath; rescue a donkey from a well; could a tailor slip a needle into the hem of his sleeve?

These laws that were supposed to guarantee God's acceptance had become so overpowering that the shocking truth to this story is that those watching Jesus did not question whether He was able to miraculously heal. They did not seek to prove that He was a charlatan, only that He had broken one of their hundreds of religious laws. When Jesus did heal the withered arm, the Pharisees and Herodians—usually at odds—plotted together to kill Him.

The religious leaders had already decided what was right and what was wrong in practicing their faith. God's word was not enough—they had added to it and enhanced its commands to fit their own understanding. Jesus faced opposition at every turn, except from those who knew their need for God and their need for answers that worked.

Some Christians today are stuck in "old wine skins" as Jesus once described stubborn minds (Mark 2:22). If Jesus walked into a worship service today and took the hand of a disabled person, lifting them up onto suddenly strong legs, I wonder how many Christians would shout, "Charlatan!" It does seem at times that we place what we have come to think about God and what He can do in our lives only in terms of what is "logical" or "possible." Many have come to believe that our own judgment trumps Jesus' teachings.

When Jesus took part in the lives of His people, many rejected Him because they believed that what He offered was just not possible. May we remember one of Jesus' statements to His disciples, "With God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

Ask your pastor about starting a new Bible Study in your church.

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Mark 3:1-13

1. Why was the withered hand of the man more than a physical issue? How did Jesus respond?
2. Jesus "looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (vs. 5). What was Jesus angry at? Why was he grieved?
3. How did the Pharisees respond to Jesus? How did the crowds respond?
4. Why did Jesus order the crowds not to make Him known? When would those directions to His followers change?

For Family Reflection

5. Does our heart sometimes get "hard"? Who softens our heart? How?
6. Jesus retreats with His disciples. Where and when do we physically and spiritually retreat personally and as a family? Why is it necessary to retreat?