

“God of the Living”

Mark 12:18-27

February 18, 2007

Introduction: Where we are in Mark

Context is important again this morning. You need to know the players in order to understand why this encounter was important and why Mark would have chosen to include it – as opposed to other things – when he was writing to early believers.

First, we are in a section of the gospel that recounts a series of confrontations that took place after Jesus’ parade and triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The religious authorities are challenging Jesus, trying to lead him into an error that will diffuse the movement that has brought him into the temple. From the authorities’ perspective, they do not really know what they have on their hands, other than this un-schooled, un-credentialed, non-conformist wandering preacher has come to Jerusalem at the height of the Passover season with some messianic imagery, language and expectations. The climate is highly politicized. From the authorities’ perspective, the result of this kind of messianic hopeful was never good. Rome was lenient about allowing religious festivals, but not to the point of giving room for insurrection and violent revolution. Where the expectation of the messiah was he would throw out the Romans and re-establish the throne of David – and with it, a world-wide empire – there was danger in the cheering crowds.

Second, when we talk about the religious authorities, we sometimes think of them as being of one mind. That was not the case. Yes, they all opposed Jesus; but that was about the extent of their agreement. Mark actually provides a little bit of explanation for his readers – some Jews, some Gentiles – figuring the Jewish readers could help flesh out the details for those unfamiliar with Temple dynamics. For us, it takes a little longer explanation because we are so far removed from it.

Who were the Sadducees?

They were a group different than the Pharisees and the Herodians. It might help to think of these three groups as political parties because, in many senses, that is exactly what they were. Each were vying for power within the temple structure and each had different perspectives on what was best.

This next analogy is not exact and I am only using it to try to illustrate how to understand the competition among the authorities rather than make any comment on the current situation in American politics: think of the House of Representatives and their affiliation with presidential candidates. The Pharisees would be like the Republican party, the Herodians were like the Clinton Democrats. the Sadducees were like the Obama Democrats. Again, this is not exact – but play along and it will help set the stage.

The Pharisees were like the Republican party in the House of Representatives. They were anti-Rome, and anti-authority that Rome had instituted. They looked for a cataclysmic messianic kingdom to remove the rule of the Romans and Herod. They believed in the resurrection.

The Herodians did not fight the Roman rule. They would be like the Clinton Democrats in the House of Representatives; affiliated with the in-power political leaders. They may not like being under a Republican President (or, in this case, a Roman emperor), but they were faring rather well. Herod was king because of the Romans.

There was all sorts of palace intrigue; threats internally and externally. You might remember that this Herod's father was the one whom the Wise Men had consulted when Jesus was born; the same one who had all the children two years and younger slaughtered because he was threatened by the announcement of a new born king. This was not the only such attempt to de-throne the Herod and the competition and backstabbing rivaled what we know about the Caesars in Rome.

The Herodians believed in some sort of resurrection, though it seems to have been more along the lines of reincarnation. In Mark 6, Herod thought that Jesus was a reincarnated version of John the Baptist.

The Sadducees were like the Obama Democrats. Again, they were not particularly pleased with having the Roman empire ruling over them, but here, they liked the Herods less. We do not know exactly who they are because so very little has been discovered about them, but there is the impression that they were descendants of the Hasmonean dynasty – the Jewish rulers prior to the establishment of the Herodian dynasty. In other words, they were Herod before Herod was Herod. They did not want to upset the Romans and risk destruction of the existing power structure, they wanted to replace Herod with their own. They did *not* believe in any resurrection.

Looking now at how Mark describes the confrontations between Jesus and the religious authorities after Palm Sunday, note how he describes each one. The chief priests, the scribes and the elders were the ones who asked, "By what authority and who gave you this authority?" Then, the Pharisees and Herodians come – together – to ask Jesus the question that will put him up against the Romans, "Do we pay tribute to Rome, or not?" Jesus' answer confounds them.

Finally, we get to our text this morning. Here, the Sadducees take their shot.

Mark 12:18-27

We err when we try to use God for political purposes.

In the question of resurrection, the Sadducees were not looking for answer, so much as a refutation of resurrection and political positioning with the crowd.

As a challenge, this posed no particular threat to Jesus; rather, it was a rather bald attempt to make him choose sides or to look bad. Jesus had foiled the Pharisees and the Herodians, so perhaps a shot at their belief in the resurrection might win the Sadducees favor with the crowd and gain them some points in the polls.

The problem is the Sadducees were trying to use Jesus – and by implication God – for their own political purposes and were not particularly interested in the truth. They were clever, picking marriage as the subject by which they were going to challenge the resurrection; they would have been aware of Jesus’ previous discussions of marriage with the Pharisees (Mark 10). Thus, they could score a huge political win by trapping Jesus with his own words about the importance of marriage and trying to make the resurrection look absurd. Either Jesus would deny the resurrection and they would be justified, or Jesus would try to explain away how one woman could legitimately be married to seven men simultaneously – any such explanation of how marriage worked that way in heaven would look silly.

Or, so they thought.

It always is a mistake to try to put God in a box – political or otherwise.

Jesus’ opening and closing statements are about as severe a put-down as we see in Scripture. “Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you neither know neither the Scripture nor the power of God?” These are folks who prided themselves on their knowledge of the Law, on their understanding of Scripture. Jesus rebukes them with “you are wrong.” Jesus makes it clear, when we work to fit God into our objectives, our purposes, or priorities, we are wrong. When we try to use God as a weapon against others, we are wrong.

Jesus’ soundly rejects being used or trapped. He is not there to engage in intra-Temple politics, he has a much different purpose. He has come to Jerusalem, well aware of how his presence will be negatively received. He has predicted rejection at the hands of the human authorities, so is neither frightened of them or seduced by the possibility of working an angle.

There is a humility missing in the Sadducees. God is bigger than our debates, God is bigger than our politics, God is bigger than our understanding. God neither desires nor allows himself to be put in a box to be used for our purposes. A god who is subject to our direction is no god at all.

The one true God remains a mystery – yes, a mystery revealed but not fully known. In our day and age, perhaps the most significant theological work is being done in science. Consider the scientific work on the macro scale: how uniquely positioned this planet is, within our solar system, within our galaxy, within the scale and scope of the universe. We are only now beginning to appreciate how marvelous is the beauty and simplicity of the laws of the universe that allow life to exist on this planet. Consider work on the micro scale: the smallest known building blocks of life have what is known as an “irreducible complexity.” In short, this means that at the basic level there are complex combinations of structures and purposes that are not reasonably explained by random chance; the most plausible explanation is there is a designer. We are continually discovering the tracings of the hand of God.

The point is: God is God and we are not. We are called to worship God, not to use God against others as a weapon.

Whenever we use theology as a vehicle for our own power rather than to glorify God, we will find ourselves being rebuked by the LORD. This is not to say we ought not to be discerning or encouraging one another by use of Scripture. Rather, it is to say we need to look at our own hearts first, to make sure we are pursuing our paths for God's glory rather than our own.

A Glimpse of Heaven and the Assurance of the Resurrection.

Jesus answers both the question the Sadducees asked and the one they did not. First, he gives a glimpse of heaven. Simply granting the premise of the hypothetical – that seven brothers had married the same woman – he declares that in the resurrection the issue of which one is married is moot. It does not matter. It is not the point. He gives us this little glimpse, “They will be like angels in heaven.”

Like angels in heaven? This is where we get the idea of wings and white robes.

However, the more important part of this is to consider the role of angels in Scripture: they exist in the presence of God, they worship God, they work together to do God's bidding. The angels in heaven do not die. Being like angels in heaven means we will be raised in God's presence, we will worship God face-to-face, and work together to do God's bidding. For humans, the resurrection means life. It will not be boring.

Jesus also took up the Sadducees unstated premise, that there is no resurrection. He takes on a passage with which they all would be familiar, the conversation between Moses and God in the burning bush. “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Jesus does not waffle or hedge on the conviction that the resurrection is real. He takes God's statement to Moses, where God referred to the patriarchs of the past, and Jesus then shows how they also apply to the future – that is, that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will see the covenant promises made to them fulfilled because they will be alive in the resurrection.

For Jesus, this is an example of how the Scripture and power of God go hand in hand. They are not divorced from each other; they are complimentary and both are necessary for a living faith.

Studying Scripture without experiencing the power of God is empty legalism. Scripture is not a dead document; it is the revelation of the living God (who is God of the living) for our benefit and growth. Studying Scripture is fruitful when we have eyes to see what is happening in us, through us, and around us.

I want to linger here for a moment because we often fail to live our daily lives with the conviction of serving a living God. I am going to put this in the first person because I know it is something I struggle with; perhaps you do, too. I read the Bible. I say my prayers. I come to church on Sunday. I do committees and potlucks. And there are days when I get home and wonder what it is that I have done; is there any meaning or significance in it? All our programs and ministries and missions; is there any meaning or significance in any of it?

The answer to those questions, by the way, is “yes.”

When I take time to remember God's faithfulness, when I take time to see what God is doing and how my prayers *have* been answered and *continue to be* answered, the answer is a resounding yes. Combine that with Scripture's promises of the kingdom of God, and my life has a purpose and a direction and significance. Living into that eternal life means taking steps every day, learning to be obedient every day, growing to know and love the living God more each day.

I have the best job around – every day, I get to hear and see how the living God is transforming lives. Here. Now. I see God provide comfort for those who are hurting, relief for those in need, hope for those who are lost, and a family to rejoice when blessings are realized. When I take time to remember the “great cloud of witnesses” as the writer of Hebrews says, I marvel at God's faithfulness through time.

There was a man by the name of George Muller. He began praying for five of his friends. After many months, one of them came to the Lord. Ten years later, two others were converted. It took 25 years before the fourth man was saved. Muller persevered in prayer until his death for the fifth friend, and throughout those 52 years he never gave up hoping that he would accept Christ! His faith was rewarded, for soon after Muller's funeral the last one was saved.

We worship and serve the living God who is God of the living. We worship and serve the God who created everything, who created us, redeemed us, sustains us, and who calls us his own. We worship and serve the God who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We worship and serve the God who defeated death for us, who has adopted us as his own children, who declares that we are co-heirs of the kingdom of God with Christ. We have our hope and our assurance of his promises, verified and validated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen?

Then as you walk out of here today, go with the assurance that you are living into the eternal life promised in the resurrection. If you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you walk in the hope of his resurrection. If you do not know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and the Holy Spirit is convicting your heart this morning, or if you would like to ask questions about what eternal life is all about, I invite you to come forward during the final hymn and pray with our Gardener ministers.

And Jesus said to them, “He is God not of the dead, but of the living.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.