

***The King-The Cross - Part 9***  
Sermon Series on the Gospel of Mark  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
July 29, 2018

**TEXT: Mark 12:13-34**



Good morning, beloved. We continue this morning in our summer series on the Gospel of Mark as we look at our great King and the cross of Christ, which is the victory of God. Last week we looked at Jesus' engaging people in conversations along the way, and these conversations, for the most part, were happening in private or in smaller groups. This morning, we have the opportunity and privilege to look at the Lord Jesus engaged in a press conference. Now, I don't know if you have ever been the subject of a press conference, but press conferences are unnerving situations. Most of our life experiences are spent asking questions or listening to questions from those who are asking. It's a rare moment to be in the seat where the questions are coming, and yet, that is where we will find Christ this morning. The scene is a very public scene; it is a set of interactions that are profoundly instructive for us, because even though we may not find ourselves in an official press conference in our life experience, the reality is that the world is interviewing us all the time. You are ambassadors of Christ. You represent Him where you go, and you never know what you're going to be asked.

We have been reading the Gospel of Mark with the lens of *Christianity Explored*. We have been using these really simple but key questions: "Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus come? and What does it mean for us?" These are critical questions for all of us to answer. We have seen from the

Gospel of Mark that Jesus is the King. We have seen from the Gospel of Mark that Jesus came to be rejected, to be killed, and to rise again, and that His coming into the world absorbs the sin of the world. His death is a death for us, and His resurrection is the promise of new life that is offered for each of us. What does it mean for us?

This third question means that Jesus is coming to the world. It has an impact on everyone. It has a significance for every human life, and it means that Jesus is inviting people into His kingdom daily and that this happens predominantly through you and me. So, we do sit in the seat of the press conference, and so we should pay close attention to our Lord to learn about how we should respond. Our passage this morning picks up the narrative where Jesus has come into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Our text takes place in the temple courts. The temple courts were the largest public square in the ancient world. Two hundred thousand people could be accommodated on the Herodian platform, and as we begin, our first interaction comes in Mark 12:13. There will be three interactions. The first one begins here, so let's look at these together. In Mark 12:13, we read:

*“And they sent to [Jesus] some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap Him in His talk.”*

This first interaction is a confusion between Christianity and politics, as we will discover. Philip Yancey writes this in *Christians and Politics Uneasy Partners*:

*“Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe.”*

That is a challenging set of assumptions, isn't it? I think there is some truth in what he is saying, that there is an assumption of what Christianity means, and often when we engage people in conversation, I find, as I am sure many of you do, that people sometimes try to avoid talking about Jesus by saying: “You know, I'd rather talk about politics. I'd rather see if you agree with my politics or not, because I know what Christian politics are.” But, they may not. This is actually a first century pattern of behavior, not just a twenty-first century one. So the Pharisees and some of the Herodians come, and Mark tells us that they wanted to trap Him or, literally, catch Him with His speech. It is an unusual word. It's the only time this word occurs in the New Testament. It is in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament a few times, in passages like Job 10:16 where Job says: “I am hunted like a lion for slaughter.” They are hunting for you. Proverbs 5:22 says:

*“Iniquities ensnare a man, and every one is bound in the chains of his own sins.”*

This is a press conference where the first question is designed to entrap or catch or snare Jesus.

It's a first century expression of "Gotcha journalism." It is where a question is put out with an attempt to serve catch someone in their speech so that it could be reported, or partially quoted, in another setting to make you look bad. They come to Jesus. The Pharisees we are familiar with; the Herodians are the proportion of political leadership descended from Herod the Great, those who have compromised with Roman power and who hold a degree of power in the society. They come to Jesus in Mark 12:14, and they begin with a number of compliments. Don't you like this? I really like this. Look at these compliments:

*"Teacher, we know that You are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For You are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God."*

That's a high set of compliments, and then the question is sprung:

*"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?"*

This question is designed to entrap Christ. If Jesus answers, "Yes, we should pay taxes," then He will upset the populace. If He answers, "No," then He will upset those who hold power. If He says, "Yes, we should pay taxes," then He runs the risk of decreasing His popularity. If He says: "No," then He runs the risk of putting His life in danger. Jesus sees through this question. Knowing their hypocrisy, He says in Mark 12:15:

*"Why put Me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let Me look at it."*

They bring Him this denarius, a common coin, and he asks in Mark 12:16: *"Whose likeness and inscription is this?"* They said to Him, *"Caesar's."* The coin that they brought was probably one



that looked like this. This is a denarius, a silver coin from the time of Jesus' public ministry. The face of Emperor Tiberius is on the obverse with the inscription around the edge. It's abbreviated, but it begins with very hazy letters right opposite Tiberius' neck. It reads: *"Ti[berius] Caesar Divi Aug[usti] F[ilius]*

*Augustus."* (Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.), and there's his image. On the reverse of the coin, you see the image of the goddess Nike, or victory. If you look closely, she is holding a palm branch in her hand, and around the outside edge it says: *Pontif[ex] Maxim[us]* ("High Priest"). This is one of the titles of Caesar, the high priest. So he is the ruler and he is high priest, and there is this image linked with victory, and Jesus holds this coin that's given to Him.

As Jesus listens to those who are pressing the question, Jesus' answer Mark 12:17 is:

*"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's (as He is holding the coin), and to God the things that are God's."*

Jesus' reply causes those who hear Him to marvel. Does he take a stand on the political question? He says: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." This phrase will always be etched in my memory for one dramatic encounter I had coming down Kenwood Road, and I apologize if you have heard this story before. It was early Sunday morning. I was leading the call to worship. This was before we had 8:00 a.m. prayer for the staff. I was on my way to church. I was leading the call to worship and I had been running late. I know what to do if I am running a little late. You make up time along the way, right? I know you do this. I've driven past you, or maybe you've driven past me at other times. I was making up some of that time coming south on Kenwood Road, and all the sudden, the Christmas tree lights came up behind me. It was in the middle of the summer, and it wasn't a holiday celebration. I thought: "Oh, no!" I was directed to pull off into Sycamore Avenue, just short of the church. I was looking at my watch really closely—call to worship, it's me starting the service, and I thought: "I've just got to risk it all." I got out of the car, which you're not supposed to do. I had a suit on; I didn't look very threatening. I moved towards the sheriff's car with my hands open in a gesture of petition, and as I moved towards the car, the sheriff got out of the car, looked at me like: "What are you doing getting out of your car? This isn't what you should do." I am trying to be as nonthreatening as I can be, and I finally tried my last card. I said: "I know I was speeding, but I've got to open the worship service at Kenwood Baptist Church, just 30 seconds down the street." I stood there, and he looked me right in the eye, and he said: "Young man, you are going to have to render to Caesar what is Caesar's." I just thought: "That's it. I mean, it's over. They'll have to go right into the first praise song." Then he smiled, and he said: "Okay, go start the worship service, but if I ever see you speeding down here again, I will give you a ticket." I have yet to get a ticket. It's been years, and I've come down with humility towards Kenwood now every time.

That line, "Render to Caesar," means, according to our Lord, to give to Caesar what rightly belongs to him. Here's the coin. Here's the poll tax. Give what belongs to Caesar, but the line that is actually the most striking is the real challenge in His response to give to God the things that are God's. It's actually easy to pay taxes, but the real issue that is underneath the issue of "I'd rather talk politics than talk Jesus" is in the avoiding of the real question: "What is it that belongs to God?" God is worthy of our worship. I love to look around the sanctuary and see you and hear you offering your worship to God. It's beautiful. It's much more costly than any taxes we pay. What do we owe to God? We also owe to God our tithes and offerings. I am really enjoying watching our children start to earn real money. They are growing up, and I love to teach them about how pleasing it is to God to give to God 10% of whatever you make, and then you live with radical contentment on the 90% with God's blessing. You are going to receive a letter this week for our finance team urging you to give generously as we finish our fiscal year. This is always the time of year for us when we are finishing the fiscal year and we are dreaming

about next year. Kenwood runs its fiscal year from September to August, and this is the time of year when people are on vacation, away. That's the time when we are all dreaming about what we will do next year. We always have this question about this time: "Will we finished this year strongly? Will God fund these dreams that we have?" So, when you get that letter, give generously so that all God desires to do in and through us might take place.

We give to God our offerings, but what is the greatest thing that we give to God that belongs rightly to Him? Isn't it our love and obedience? Give to God what is God's. You are made in the image and likeness of God, so will you honor Him with your body; honor Him with your resources; and be used to reflect and extend His glory in all the earth? So, when someone tries to snare you or to discredit Christ by wanting to talk politics, gently guide the question towards weightier things. Give to Caesar what belongs to him. It's right to give honor to those who hold public office; it's right to pay taxes for the services that we enjoy. It's really a good deal to live in this country, but give to God what belongs to Him.

The second interaction we find in this press conference begins in Mark 12:18, and it's with a group of Sadducees. The Sadducees were aristocratic, upper class, members of priestly families, and included those who ran the temple service. They were the upper class register in the society. The Sadducees came to Jesus. Mark tells us accurately that the Sadducees deny the bodily resurrection. *Mishnah Sanhedrin* chapter 10 says it like this: "These are those who have no portion in the world to come, those who say the resurrection of the dead is a teaching not derived from the Torah." The Sadducees are not interested in a bodily resurrection and a reversal of the status quo, a new heavens and new earth, because they sit at the top of the society now. Revolution never emerges from the upper class. When you ask those who hold power how things are going, they say things are going really well. Well, they come to Jesus and they ask a question. They say in Mark 12:19:

*"Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother."*

The Sadducees, who accept only the authority of the Pentateuch, cite a law from Deuteronomy 25. It's a customary law provision of God and His Word that may strike us as strange to modern ears. Deuteronomy 25 describes what is called the levirate marriage. *Levir* in Latin means the husband's brother, and the scenario is that if your brother has no children, if there is no one to inherit his estate, his portion of the land of promise, if he has no descendants, then his brother is obligated by covenant law to raise up descendants for his brother with none. Provision is made for this in Deuteronomy 25. If the brother refuses to do so, and persists in refusing to do so, then the brother's wife will go up to him in the presence of the elders and remove his sandal and spit in his face. This is the only time in the Bible where you are commanded to spit in

someone's face. Why is that? You are commanded to spit in his face because he has refused to raise up descendants for his brother. Why would someone refuse to do that? It's not that there is a clash of personality or of no romance between me and my brother's wife. That is not the issue. The issue is that this law commands an individual to act against their economic self-interest, because if my brother has no descendants, then his property will go to me. So the motivation for refusing to act in this way is to increase my own goods, especially if my brother is older, because he will get a double portion, or if he is the firstborn. God's Word commands us to act against our economic self-interest at times for the sake of our brother. A more modern parallel might be to say to a brother with no one to inherit his estate that you are going to legally allow the adoption of one of your own children. You are going to give one of your children, in a sense, to him so that his property, his line, can continue. That's the kindness of the law in its original setting.

The Sadducees come and they use this example and for an almost unbelievable scenario. Let's talk Bible again. Let's talk theology, and really, their question is a question *ad absurdum*. It's almost ridiculous to even imagine. Here's a woman with no children, and her husband dies. There were seven brothers. The second took her and he died, no offspring. The third, likewise, and the brothers four, five, six, and seven all tried levirate marriage, no descendants, and there it is. Have you ever seen anything like this? I can conclude there is no one among us with seven brothers and no one among us has felt compelled to try seven levirate marriages and struck out. Then they say, last of all the woman died, and so here comes the question in Mark 12:23:

*"In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife."*

They do not even believe in the resurrection! You can hear the sarcasm in the question. Whose wife will she be? The seven had her. This question is insincere. It's like being asked by a skeptic: "Is the God of the Bible so powerful that He can build a wall that He cannot jump over?" That's not really that powerful a question. It's like when the church father from North Africa, Tertullian, was asked with skepticism: "If a cannibal eats a man and then becomes a Christian, in the resurrection, which body goes to which part?" Tertullian said: "That's a bad question." Jesus says to them: "You're wrong!" and I want you to be equipped this morning to not get trapped in bad questions. Jesus says in Mark 12:24-:

*"Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor 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. "*

Jesus goes on to say in Mark 12:26:

*"And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the passage about the 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. It is so poignant of Jesus to quote a passage from the Pentateuch in addressing the Sadducees, and it's really quite striking to speak to the highest religious functionaries of the day and tell them: "Haven't you read that in the Bible?" Sometimes we get these absurd questions that posture a level of learning that really isn't there, and Jesus is wise enough, courageous enough, honest enough, truthful enough, to look them in the eye and say: "You're wrong!" The ESV says: "You're quite wrong." Other translations struggle to bring this expression out. The verb he uses here is where we get the noun planet, a planet that seems to be wandering around in the night sky, as opposed to the fixed stars. You've lost your way is what He is saying. The NRSV says it like this: "You are quite wrong." The NIV says: "You are badly mistaken." The New American Standard says: "You are greatly mistaken." Or maybe you might want to draw on the venerable King James Version: "Ye therefore do greatly err." I had the chance to interact with a university student, a young woman who grew up actually in this church. She went to a state university and learned all the truth that could be conveyed there. She came back having walked away from the Christian faith. She had some charismatic professors who wanted to make her a disciple of themselves. She sat in my office, and she said: "You know, I finally realized that the only reason people were really listening to Jesus was because there was really nothing else going on." I knew her, and I said to her: "I can't think of a really nice way to say this, so I'll just say it: You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about." The first century was one of the most amazing time periods in human history, and there was actually a lot going on. People were walking hundreds of miles to hear what Jesus was saying and doing. Let's not get trapped in an insincere question.

Let's look at the third interaction. In Mark 12:28, in the third interaction in this press conference, we see one of the scribes coming up, and hearing them disputing with one another, he says that Jesus answered them well. That's an important clue to this man's sincerity. He was smiling at the answers he heard, and so he had the courage to ask in Mark 12:28: "*Which commandment is the most important of all?*" This is a question often discussed in the first century, and he asks it of Jesus. Jesus answers the question in Mark 12:29-30:

*"The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'"*

In other words, if you want to know what the will of God is, what God requires of you, this is it. This is a great test of the soul. This is a great light to shine on yourself and on those around you to ask the question: "Do I love God with everything I have?" That's the question. What is the most important thing? Oh, how beautiful the God of the Bible is to say that the thing I want most of all from you is your love. You won't find that in any other religion. What does God want

from you, from me? He wants your love, not just a piece of it. He wants your love with all of your heart, all your soul, all of your thinking, with all of your might, and you know, He wants that for your good. He wants that because when we love God with everything that we are, God loves us in return and gives us a life that's meaningful, a life that is secure, a life that is free from anxiety, a life that has purpose and direction, and a life in covenant bond with our Creator that can never be broken. Jesus seems to volunteer a second command. He says in Mark 12:31:

*“The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

The love we have for God then flows out toward our neighbor. As Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6, now he quotes Leviticus 19. Leviticus 19 is a beautiful chapter in God's Word that describes our relationships towards each other, that we do not defraud our neighbor or steal or repress them. It is the earliest attestation of laws that protect those with disabilities that we have in the history of the world. Leviticus 19:14 protects the deaf and the blind. The following verses command us to do no injustice and show no favoritism and also command us not to slander people or speak ill of them. They command us not to hate our brother or take vengeance or bear a grudge, and then the last phrase, underneath all of these commands, is stated positively: “You shall love your neighbor, for I am the Lord.” The scribe was delighted with Jesus' answer. He says in Mark 12:32-33:

*“You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that He is one, and there is no other besides Him. And to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. ”*

Loving God isn't something you check off the list. It's not something that you place anything else in front of. When Jesus saw that the scribe had answered wisely or with good understanding, Jesus says to him in Mark 12:34:

*“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”*

I love that line. It is my favorite line in this passage. “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” So at this press conference, when Jesus is interviewed, Jesus answers the questions of the day with great skill and wisdom and teaches us how to interact in the public space. Don't get trapped in the political questions; don't bury Christianity underneath political conversation. Instead, guide people to give to Caesar what belongs to him, but give to God the things that belong to Him. Jesus encourages us and stirs us to not be trapped or caught or blocked from talking about things that really matter when questions are given to us that are really absurd.

Nicky Gumbel, who helped to create the *Alpha Course*, which is been used all over the world for people to come to faith in Christ, has a legal background. He was trying to share Christ with a friend in England, and this friend just kept asking him question after question after question.

Finally, Nicky stopped and said: "Look, if I answer every single one of these questions, will you become a Christian?" The man looked at him and said: "No." Nicky said, "Well, then, I'm not going to continue." Those questions weren't sincere. They were dodging the real question. Don't be afraid to say: "Ye, therefore, greatly err." You can say that in a nice way.

What is the most important thing of all in God's Word? That's a hard question: "What is the greatest commandment?" Yet Jesus teaches us this morning that we have to realize that some difficult questions are easy openings for the kingdom. Sometimes just one difficult question is all that's holding someone back, and they are actually not far from the kingdom of God.

What does this mean for us? It means Jesus is inviting people all over the world and all over your neighborhood into His kingdom, and that He is going to use you and that some of the conversations you will have will be in private, but some of them will be in public, in the view or hearing of others. Let Jesus teach us this way. We've used in previous sermon series that little acronym that I find very helpful. Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" SALT is that acronym: S is for *start* the conversation. Just start it. Initiate. A is for *ask* questions. We see our Lord asking questions. L is for *listen*. T is for *tell* the gospel story. This week at Kenwood we have an opportunity for you to engage your neighbors. One very concrete way to do that is by inviting your neighbors or friends to Soccer Camp. Now, you may not be a star athlete; you may not be skilled at soccer drills, but I know that all of us can pick up a water bottle and hand it to a child. I have total confidence that every single one of us can do that. We have more than 100 kids coming to Soccer Camp, and about 85% of the kids signed up so far are from the community. My favorite part about Soccer Camp is to have these kinds of conversations in the bleachers, on the sidelines, and get to know our neighbors and see what God will do.

Brothers and sisters, we serve a great and awesome God. Jesus Christ is the Cornerstone. He is the Stone upon which if you build your life, you will be blessed. He is a Stone, though, of stumbling and offense. There is a Stone of stumbling in the Christian faith, but it's not your political views; it's not your views on absurd theological questions. The stumbling Stone in Christianity is Jesus Christ. That's it, and it's to Him we must come, and it is about Him that we must guide conversation, gently with respect, prayerfully that God would use us in a mighty way. Let's pray.

O Lord, we praise You and thank You this morning for Your power in our lives. Lord, we thank You that You have been faithful to us. We thank You for the safe return of our students and leaders from Thailand and how You used them in a myriad of ways. Lord, we thank You for the camp this week. We praise You for bringing star athletes to the fields to speak of Christ and teach kids, and thank You for calling us to be there. Lord, we pray that You would help us to

engage our neighbors, and that as we engage them, the conversation, Lord, would be about You. Lord, I pray that You would help us to love You with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Lord, we ask for Your forgiveness where we have not done this. Lord, You want our love this morning, and You have great love to give us. Lord Jesus, I thank you that You are lovely and that You are the Cornerstone of our lives. Build us up in faith and love and action this week.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.