

## "When Engaging in a Battle of Wits ..." - Mark 12:13-34

There's an old saying that goes, "Never, ever, enter a battle of wits if you're only half-armed." Another way of putting it is, "If you think you are quite a wit, be careful, because you might be only half right."

Are you calling me a half-wit?

This principle certainly applies to anyone who would foolishly challenge the authority of the Son of God. Anyone who engages Jesus in a battle of wits enters that battle hopelessly under-gunned. You will never outwit Jesus. Ever! He not only speaks the truth, He is the truth. He is the very Word of God. The only reasonable, logical response is to submit to His Lordship.

That is certainly not what the religious leaders of the Jews did as Jesus completed His earthly ministry. Understand that they were absolutely livid with rage against Him. That rage had been building since the earliest days of His ministry, as Jesus cleansed the Temple, driving out the merchants with a whip of cords. It has been whipped into a fever pitch as He cleansed the Temple again the day after His triumphal entry. And after Jesus clearly condemned their hypocrisy by proclaiming the parable of the Tenants against them, they couldn't wait to put Him to death.

*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. (Mark 12:12)*

You see, they had a problem. The crowds were convinced that Jesus was Messiah. He was enormously popular. If they were to act against Him, the people would certainly turn on them. That's why they feared the multitude.

So, before they could kill Jesus, they had to discredit Him. They had to come up with some way to convince the crowds that He wasn't who He said He was and so, they decided to engage in a battle of wits. They would come at Him in three waves. First, the Pharisees, then the Sadducees and finally, a representative from the Scribes. But these guys, the intellectual giants of their day, were hopelessly out of their league. Compared to Jesus, they were pretty-much witless, not a good condition in which to engage in a battle of wits.

*Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words. 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? (Mark 12:13-14)*

The first thing to notice is that false religion often makes for very strange bedfellows. The Pharisees and the Herodians were two parties in First Century Palestine. Pharisees were the religious conservatives of their day. They believed in the divine inspiration of scripture. They believed in miracles. They believed in angels. They believed in the resurrection. They were absolutely fastidious about keeping the Mosaic Law and the rabbinic tradition. They absolutely hated the fact that they were under the yoke of Rome.

The Herodians, on the other hand, were followers of Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas officially ruled Galilee and Perea as a client state of the Roman Empire. While the Pharisees were loyal to the Law of God, the Herodians were loyal to the law of Rome. So, in contrast to the Pharisees, they were absolutely devoted to Roman rule.

Pharisees hated the Herodians. Yet here they were, conspiring together to try to catch Jesus in His words. What they were looking for was Jesus to say something that would make Him guilty of sedition against Rome. They wanted to prove He was a rebel. If He said what they expected Him to say, the Herodians would take it directly to Pilate and the Romans would take care of Jesus themselves.

They start with a good bit of flattery. They address Him as teacher, *didaskalos* (*διδάσκαλος*), in the Greek. It is a title of honor, of distinction which could be and often is translated “Master”. Then they tell Him they know He is true, that He always speaks the truth, that He is not interested in the opinions of men, but only the truth of God. By the way, they were absolutely right. But they didn’t really believe it. They had no interest at all in truth.

Finally, they hit Him with the question: Should we be paying the poll tax to Caesar? The anticipated answer was “NO!” Caesar was a pagan, after all. Caesar was a heretic who actually claimed to be a god! His image was on Roman coins, and didn’t God specifically prohibit graven images? Sure, we pay the tax, but only because we are being forced to pay. It can’t be legal in God’s sight!

And if Jesus answered “no”, then the Romans would arrest Him, and the people would realize that He wasn’t really Messiah, because Messiah was supposed to throw off the yoke of Rome, not get arrested.

*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." So they brought it. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." 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. (Mark 12:15-17)*

Well, they didn’t see that coming! Jesus said, “Pay the tax!” In fact, he strongly implied that this tax is a debt you owe to the government.

Scripture is unmistakably clear on this issue, especially in the New Testament. Governing authorities are appointed by God. (Romans 13:1) You may have voted for the President, but it is Almighty God who placed him in authority. Government is part of God’s common grace to protect us from one another.

*Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. (1 Peter 2:13-14)*

And listen, it doesn’t matter whether or not your civil authorities submit to Christ. It is your duty to submit to government up to the point that government demands you to do something God forbids. God does not forbid you to pay your taxes.

The Pharisees hated the fact that Rome ruled over them, but they actually received great benefit from the Roman Government. They got to travel on Roman roads. They crossed rivers on Roman bridges. They drank water brought in with Roman aqueducts. The Romans provided protection from outlaws and ushered in the *Pax Romana* that kept the whole Mediterranean basin at peace for many, many years. Sure, Rome ruled with a heavy hand, but these Pharisees enjoyed many, many benefits from Roman rule.

I'd rather not pay taxes. But I enjoy being able to travel on paved roads and I enjoy being able to walk to worship without fear of being robbed. Pay your taxes. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

But also, render to God what is God's.

*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1-2)*

You owe the government your taxes. You owe Jesus your life! Without Jesus, you would spend eternity in the throes of death! Render to God what is God's.

So, the Pharisees and Herodians were defeated in their battle of wits, so the religious elite sends in the second wave. The Sadducees were sort of like the religious liberals of their day. They were really pragmatic. They denied miracles and the resurrection. They denied the existence of spirits. They denied the existence of angels. They only considered the first five Books of Scripture to be binding. And they controlled the priesthood, so they were very influential. They tried to attack Jesus by means of twisting scripture, showing that His teaching was illogical and inconsistent. That's what liberal scholars try to do today, too. But Jesus' teaching is eminently logical and consistent, so they will never succeed.

*Then some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him; and they asked Him, saying: "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. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife; and dying, he left no offspring. And the second took her, and he died; nor did he leave any offspring. And the third likewise. So the seven had her and left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife." (Mark 12:18-23)*

Now, these guys thought the idea of a physical resurrection was absurd. So, to demonstrate it, they presented a scenario they thought would torpedo the whole idea. They referred to a procedure specified in the Law (Deuteronomy 25:5) called Levirate Marriage, which is a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry his brother's widow and raise up heirs in his name. But of course, as with the Pharisees, they were completely under-armed to engage Jesus in a battle of wits.

*Jesus answered and said to them, "Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God? (Mark 12:24)*

Major burn! Remember, these guys were intellectuals. These guys were the religious elite. And Jesus says they are wrong on two counts: 1) You don't know what your own scriptures mean. And 2) you have no clue as to how powerful God really is.

*For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. (Mark 12:25)*

Their question was completely meaningless. There is no need for procreation in the New Heaven and Earth because there is no death. So, when we rise from the dead, there will no need for husbands or wives, or children or families as we know them now.

Now I have to stop for a minute and put some fears to rest and I will use myself as an example. There is nobody on this earth that I am closer to than my beautiful bride. And the thought of losing the wonderful relationship I have with Kris would be pretty troubling. So, I suspect that there are some of you who look at this “neither marry nor are given in marriage” phrase and you might be thinking, “Wait, I don’t want to lose my marriage when I’m raised from the dead. I want to be with my spouse forever.” But when we are raised from the dead, I’m not going to lose anything, because I will know Kris at an even deeper, more intimate level than I know her now. Not only that, I’m going to know all of my brothers and sisters in Christ at a deeper, more fulfilling level than I can possibly imagine. Don’t worry for one second about losing your spouse in the resurrection.

But back to the text. That bit about angels? It doesn’t mean we become angels. It means we will be like angels in that there will be no need for procreation. Jesus threw that in just to needle his opponents. Remember, the Sadducees didn’t believe in angels.

And then, He hits them with one, final, doctrinal knock-out punch.

*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' ? He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken." (Mark 12:26-27)*

Jesus confronts their disbelief of resurrection by taking them to Scripture. There are many passages in the Old Testament that teach the reality of physical resurrection, but Jesus takes them to Exodus, because it is part of the Pentateuch. This is an example taken from one of the five books these Sadducees consider authoritative. As God was speaking to Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been long dead. But God speaks of them in the present tense. The conclusion is unmistakably clear. God is the God of the living, not the dead. So, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were alive and in the presence of Jesus when the Lord spoke through the burning bush. The Sadducees were not only mistaken, they were greatly mistaken.

Now, at this point, the religious leaders slink off to regroup. We don’t see that in Mark. But in Matthew, we read,

*But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. (Matthew 22:34)*

After conferring, they send a scribe into the game.

*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?" (Mark 12:28)*

From our perspective, this question probably doesn’t seem like much of a trap. But they were operating under the assumption that Jesus meant to supersede the Law of Moses. They thought Jesus was anti-Moses. They probably thought of Him as an antinomian, someone who was completely opposed to the Law. And scribes were the lawyers, the experts in the Law. So, they were looking to trap Jesus into saying something to disrespect Moses, to elevate Himself above Moses.

That wasn't going to happen. First of all, Moses got all his stuff from Jesus.

*For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, (1 Timothy 2:5)*

When God spoke from the burning bush, it was Jesus who was doing the speaking. He was the theophany – the appearance of God. Secondly, Jesus had already stated, very clearly, that He was not in opposition to the Law.

*"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)*

So, I don't know for sure what the scribe expected to hear, but he sure didn't expect what Jesus said:

*Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'HEAR, O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE. 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. And the second, like it, is this: 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)*

Jesus started out by reciting the Shemah, and then He stated the primacy of love. This is agape' love, by the way. The directive is to love God with everything you've got, with your intellect, with your will, with your emotion, and with all your physical strength. God's whole-hearted love for you is not to be returned in a half-hearted manner.

But then, you also need to love your neighbors the same way as you love yourself. You need to take care of others, not just your friends, but your enemies too. Because every human being is created in the image of God.

I have to admit, I sort of like this scribe guy. He might have been trying to trap Jesus, but at least he was intellectually honest.

*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. 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." (Mark 12:32-33)*

The scribe agreed with Jesus' statement. On one level, I think he was probably glad that Jesus answered so profoundly. But he also failed in his mission to discredit the Lord. This enemy who was sent to entrap Jesus, instead affirmed the truth of what the Lord said. And in turn, Jesus commended him.

*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. (Mark 12:34)*

This guy was close to saving faith, but close will not cut it. You can come to an intellectual affirmation of truth, yet still not accept it. You can come to Jesus believing He is Lord, yet still not accept His lordship over your life. He is the door, the only way to eternal life, but you have to walk through the door. You have to admit that you are incapable of loving God to the degree He deserves and accept His incredible love for you.

*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

If you confess Jesus as Lord and believe God raised Him from the dead, you get to enter the door to eternal life.

I don't know if this scribe ever came to saving faith, but he was close. He understood that he could never win a battle of wits with Jesus. The only logical alternative is to submit to His lordship. I really pray that he submitted, because I'd like to chat with him in heaven.

So, after that no one dared question Him. That's a good thing, although his opponents were still hell-bent on discrediting Him.

As for you, don't ever challenge Jesus' authority. You can't win. Just cry out to Him, "You are my Lord and my God. Thy will be done in my life."