




The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



The Gospel of Mark
Part 30
Mark 11:27-12:17

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Mark 11:27- 12:17 (NIV)

INTRODUCTION

Jesus has just entered into the temple in Jerusalem.

He has entered as King of Israel.

He is in David's city, the city of the King.

The temple has historically, always, been under the special control of Israel's kings.

Jesus' action in the temple points to the likelihood of its destruction.

The fig tree story also symbolized this.

All of the teaching that takes place from this point on, from 11:27 through chapter 13, takes place IN the temple.

Jesus teaches, with authority, as Israel's king!

Mark 11:27 (NIV)

They arrived in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him.

The scene that begins with this verse is in direct response to Jesus' actions in the temple: Who gave Jesus the authority to act this way?

“arrived again in Jerusalem”

This continues the travel begun in 11:20, when Peter noticed the withered fig tree.

“walking in the temple courts”

Jesus returns directly to the temple, again.

“chief priests, teachers of the law and elders”

The CHIEF Jewish authority, the Sanhedrin, is comprised of members of these various groups.

From those opponents first mentioned in 11:18, the “elders” have now been added.

It is the same group from Jesus' passion prediction in 8:31.

Mark 11:28 (NIV)

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked.

“And who gave you authority to do this?”

“By what authority ...”

They are asking about Jesus’ right – legally OR politically – to usurp their OWN rights with regard to temple practices.

“Authority” here means “authorization” or “right” or “permission”.

Their question has no acceptable answer! It is an attempt to incriminate Jesus.

THEY had the ONLY right to extend this kind of authority.

Jesus’ options were:

Admit his conduct was unauthorized

Claim a right superseding theirs.

Either one could form a basis for formal religious charges against him.

Mark 11:28 (NIV)

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked.

“And who gave you authority to do this?”

“and who gave you this authority”

This is really just a restatement of the same question.

Again, Jesus must either say, “No one, I did it on my own,” or “God,” implying a prophetic or messianic claim.

It seems the leaders may be seeking for Jesus to make this outright claim.

Keep in mind that “authority” has been a major element of Jesus’ ministry throughout the Gospel (1:22; 1:27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7)

Also, remember the strong influence of Daniel 7:14 in Jesus’ self-identity:

Daniel 7:14 – “He was given AUTHORITY, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

Jesus’ AUTHORITY is the ultimate source of conflict.

Mark 11:29 (NIV)

Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

“Jesus replied”

We saw the same type of reply with a counter-question from Jesus in 10:2.

“I will ask you one question”

Notice how subtly this implies a level of authority in and of itself!

Jesus assumes an authority to question these religious leaders.

Jesus takes control of the session.

The same will happen in subsequent confrontations.

“Answer me, and I will tell you”

Jesus makes his own answer contingent on THEIR answering first!

Again demonstrating authority that challenges the Sanhedrin – which was the ultimate authority for Judaism!

“by what authority I am doing these things”

The reader, of course, knows that it is by GOD’S authority.

Mark 11:30 (NIV)

“John’s baptism – was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!”

“John’s baptism”

The counter-question is: where did JOHN get his authority?

If John’s traced to God, so could Jesus’.

By going to John for baptism, Jesus HAD recognized John’s baptism as being from God.

And, that his message of repentance and the coming of the kingdom was ALSO from God.

“Tell me!”

The emphatic insistence borders on disrespect, and underscores Jesus’ authority.

He has turned the tables on the authorities, and they are now on the defensive.

Mark 11:31 (NIV)

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’”

“They discussed it”

They have to deliberate to determine how to answer!

Note, though, that the content of deliberation **MUST** be inference on the part of Jesus’ disciples, as all they will verbalize is “We don’t know” – the discussion itself is portrayed as private among themselves.

“why didn’t you believe him”

John preached repentance and a coming Greater One.

If they say “from heaven”, then they should have gone to him for baptism ... but they didn’t, because they **DID NOT** believe him.

So they can’t say, “from heaven”.

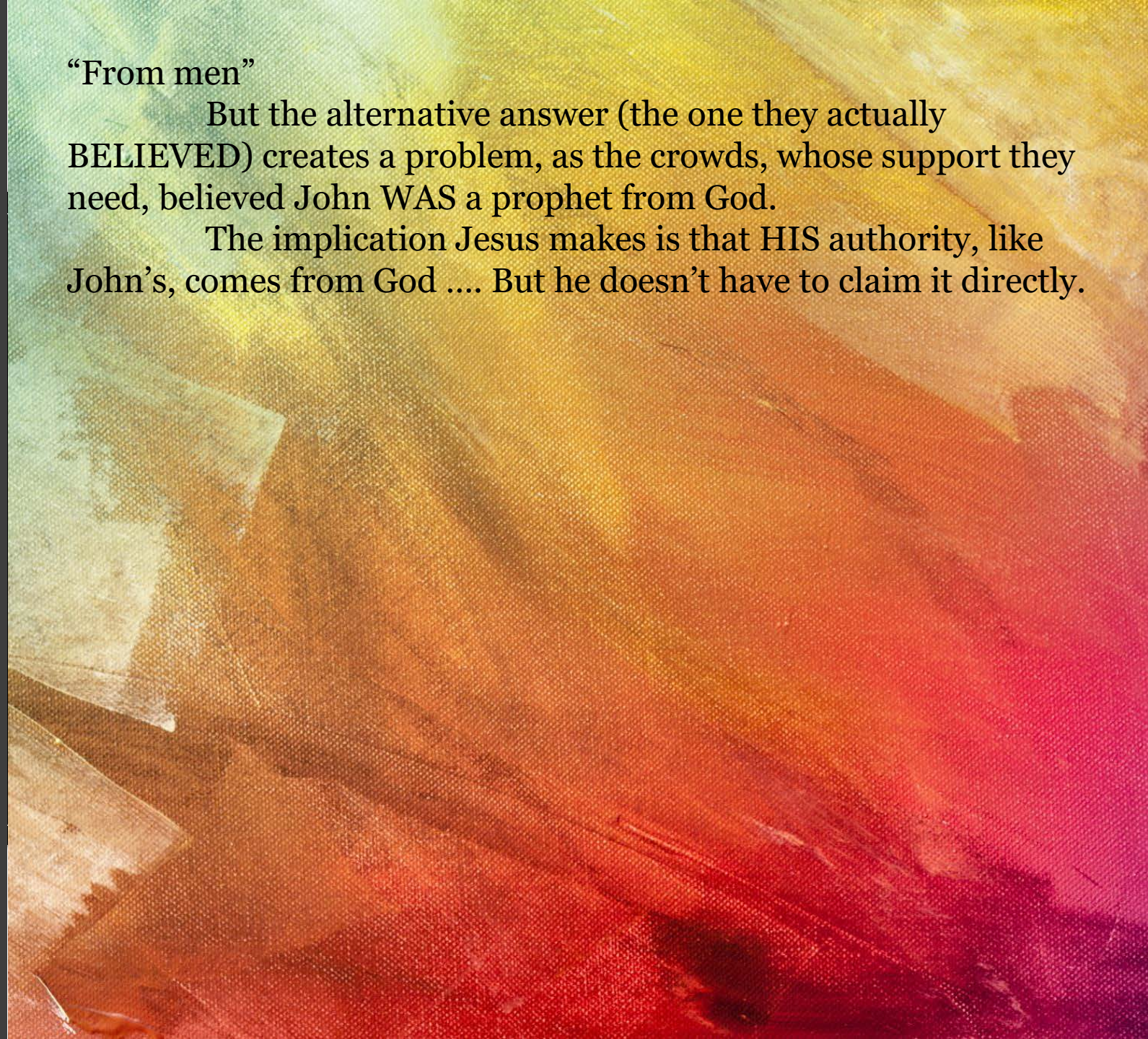
Mark 11:32 (NIV)

“But if we say, ‘From men’ ...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

“From men”

But the alternative answer (the one they actually BELIEVED) creates a problem, as the crowds, whose support they need, believed John WAS a prophet from God.

The implication Jesus makes is that HIS authority, like John's, comes from God But he doesn't have to claim it directly.



Mark 11:33 (NIV)

So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

“We don’t know”

They thereby sacrifice their opportunity to force Jesus to incriminate himself.

But don’t miss the cowardice behind this answer!

Even if they believe Jesus acted illegally in the temple, they have now abandoned their responsibility to defend the temple!

They choose to protect their own status, instead.

Perhaps, now, they have informed the crowd, without intending to, that they did NOT accept John, or his ministry, as coming from God.

Rejecting the one preparing the way for the Lord now leads directly into rejecting the One to come as well.

“Neither will I tell you”

This was JESUS’ deal, not theirs – again demonstrating the very authority they are questioning!

What’s interesting is that Jesus will NOW tell a parable that actually DOES address the question of not only his own authority and true identity, but that of the authorities as well – thereby exposing their desire to kill him.

It is this scene that sets in motion the process leading to their handing Jesus over to Pilate.

Mark 12:1 (NIV)

He then began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.”

“speak to them”

The “them” here is still the leaders from 11:27.

“in parables”

Jesus last taught in parables in Mark’s Gospel back in chapter 4 (although subsequent shorter sayings are somewhat parabolic as well).

“vineyard ... wall ... winepress ... watchtower”

The imagery comes from Isaiah 5:1-7

Isaiah 5:1-2 – “I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.”

A vineyard symbolizes Israel elsewhere in the Old Testament prophets, as well:

Jeremiah 12:10 – “Many shepherds will ruin my vineyard and trample down my field; they will turn my pleasant field into a desolate wasteland.”

Ezekiel 19:10-12 – “Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard planted by the water; it was fruitful and full of branches because of abundant water ... But it was uprooted in fury and thrown to the ground.”

Mark 12:1 (NIV)

He then began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.”

“a man planted”

In the allegory, this is God.

“rented ... and went away”

The imagery is of wealthy commercial farmers who supervised large, profitable farms.

The Greek for “went away” implies an extended period of time.

But no allegorical meaning should be assigned to “God departing the vineyard”.

Mark 12:2-4 (NIV)

“At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully.”

“sent a servant”

This was typical behavior in such lease agreements.

“fruit of the vineyard”

This often referred to the money from the sale of produce, as well as to the produce itself.

“beat him and sent him away”

Interestingly, a well-known story from 250 BC that was still circulating in the time of Jesus reported an episode of this exact kind of behavior!

“struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully”

In antiquity, to disturb or to take the turban, or to forcefully shave a beard, was considered a way to shame a man.

Mark 12:5 (NIV)

“He sent still another,
and that one they killed.
He sent many others;
some of them they beat,
others they killed.”

“another ... they killed”

This brings the treatment of the servants to a terrible climax.

“many others”

Demonstrating that their behavior is deeply engrained.

The parable evokes 1 Kings 19:10 and 2 Chronicles

36:15-16

1 Kings 19:10 – “Elijah replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’”

2 Chronicles 36:15-16 – “The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.”

Note well that the first, second, and third responses of the owner are NOT punishment!

The parable communicates God’s patience as well – the “vineyard owner” still has hopes that the “tenant farmers” will do as he asks!

Mark 12:6 (NIV)

“He had one left to send,
a son, whom he loved.
He sent him last of all,
saying, ‘They will
respect my son.’”

“one left ... a son, whom he loved”

This is probably an allusion to Abraham in Genesis 22.

Genesis 22:2 – “Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.’”

But also, the language is a reminder of God’s voice to Jesus at both his baptism and his Transfiguration.

Mark 1:11 – “And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

Mark 9:7 – “Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’”

“they will respect my son”

In the parable, the assumption is that the tenant farmers will obey someone of higher rank than the servants sent before.

The original listeners would have questioned the judgment of the owner here.

But the intent is likely to increase the outrage against the tenant farmers even more.

And even MORE so, in the parallel to God!

Mark 12:7-8 (NIV)

“But the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.”

“Come, let’s kill him”

This language is identical to the language of Genesis 37:20, where Joseph’s brothers considered killing Joseph before selling him into slavery.

Genesis 37:20 – “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.”

“the inheritance will be ours”

There is also biblical precedent for such behavior in the story of King Ahab with Naboth’s vineyard, as well.

1 Kings 21:2-3, 13 - “Ahab said to Naboth, ‘Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. I exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.’ But Naboth replied, ‘The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers.’ ... Then two scoundrels came and brought charges against Naboth before the people saying, ‘Naboth has cursed both God and king.’ So they too him outside the city and stoned him to death.”

“killed him and threw him out of the vineyard”

This implies leaving him unburied – a further disgrace.

Mark 12:9 (NIV)

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give they vineyard to others.”

“What then will the owner of the vineyard do”

This is a rhetorical question, which echoes Isaiah 5:5

Isaiah 5:5 – “Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.”

“kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others”

This conveys a specific threat to the ruling priests Jesus is speaking to.

In verse 12 ahead, they will perceive that the parable is spoken against THEM.

Jesus expected God to appoint new, righteous leaders for Israel – probably from among his own disciples. Matthew makes this more explicit than Mark:

Matthew 19:28 – “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”

These new leaders would replace the current, exploitative leaders.

The “others” spoken of in the parable are NOT Gentiles, but new RULERS for Israel.

It is a prophetic pronouncement, criticizing Israel’s leadership, in the vein of the Old Testament prophets – NOT a criticism of Judaism itself.

Mark 12:10-11

(NIV)

“Haven’t you read this scripture: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

“Haven’t you read this scripture”

Again, a rhetorical question, as the ruling priests had of COURSE read Psalm 118, which is quoted.

But do they understand its implications?

“rejected ... capstone”

What has been tossed aside as unnecessary is now crucial.

While this refers directly to Jesus, it also refers to the fact that God often takes what is rejected and devalued and restores it to true beauty.

“marvelous”

This word implies something unexpected, against all odds, unachievable without God’s assistance.

Through Jesus and twelve unimpressive disciples, God will transform Israel and the world.

Mark 12:12 (NIV)

Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away.

“a way to arrest him”

This is the first mention of this desire FROM THE NARRATOR in Mark’s Gospel.

“parable against them”

They get the point clearer than anyone.

“afraid of the crowd”

They are faced with a dilemma.

If they ignore Jesus, they run the risk of him inciting an open rebellion, with things getting more out of hand.

But if they arrest him now, they might ignite the very rebellion they fear.

So they withdraw, for now.

Notice the irony – ultimately, they DO live up to their characterization as murderers in the parable.

Mark 12:13 (NIV)

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.

“they”

The same group of leaders from 11:27 and 12:12.

“Pharisees and Herodians”

They hold very different views on the subject of taxation that Jesus is about to be confronted with.

The chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders are trying to set up a no-win situation for Jesus.

Herodians: YES, pay taxes! They were political supporters of King Herod, and Herod was appointed over the region by the Roman government.

Pharisees: NO, do NOT pay taxes! They believed it was idolatry, placing Rome above God.

“catch him in his words”

Because of the no-win situation – one group or another will not like the only answers he appears to be able to give.

His followers themselves would NOT like an answer of “yes”.

To say “no” would easily lead to charges of sedition.

They are trying to do to Jesus what he did to them back in 11:27-33, with the question about John the Baptist.

Mark 12:14 (NIV)

They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

“a man of integrity ... the truth”

All of these words are pure flattery.

They are intended to cajole, or pressure, Jesus into being candid.

“Is it right to pay taxes”

Jesus is now confronted with the dilemma via a direct question.

Again, most Jews believed paying the tax implied support for everything Caesar stood for, including his divinity.

Declaring it wrong would have won him acclaim from the crowds, but put him in a precarious position with the political authorities.

Given Jesus’ Palm Sunday actions, the crowd probably expected him to say “No!”

BUT, if he said “yes”, he would have alienated the crowds who followed him, leading them to discredit him, and the work of the authorities would be done. They could ignore him without any following.

Mark 12:14 (NIV)

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Here is some important historical context for the issue of paying taxes:

In 6 AD, not that long before this, a man named Judas the Galilean had incited a revolt against Rome by urging Jews to stop paying Roman taxes.

The passion around this event was still strong.

The historian Josephus says that this Judas created a “fourth sect” (in addition to Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) that was centered on active resistance to Roman rule, because God alone was Israel’s ruler.

They encouraged Jews not to register for the census which was used for taxation purposes, and terrorized Jews who did.

Josephus says their movement essentially led to the first Jewish-Roman War in 66-73 AD – when the temple was destroyed.

Mark 12:15-16

(NIV)

“Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied.

“knew their hypocrisy”

Jesus sees through all this, and knows exactly what is going on.

“Why are you trying to trap me”

Jesus lets them KNOW he sees through it.

“a denarius”

A silver Roman coin, equal to about a typical day’s wages.

“portrait ... inscription”

Tiberius was emperor at this time.

Coins from the era read: “Tiberius Caesar, Son of Divine Augustus”.

Mark 12:17 (NIV)

Then Jesus said to them,
“Give to Caesar what is
Caesar’s and to God
what is God’s.” And
they were amazed at
him.

“Give to Caesar ... and to God”

This is an ingenious response, which leaves the issue open to the interpretation of the hearer!

To a Jewish zealot, what belonged to Caesar was NOTHING – and what belonged to God was EVERYTHING.

To a Jewish moderate, what belonged to Caesar was tribute and/or taxes for the work of secular government, and what belonged to God was worship and covenant loyalty.

To a Roman, what belonged to Caesar was TOTAL loyalty. Romans demanded it from their subjects.

But the Old Testament is clear – GOD expects total loyalty as well.

Exodus 20:3 – “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 – “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

By saying “Give God what is God’s”, Caesar’s demands, from an Old Testament perspective, must become subordinate – we are to give God ALL our heart, soul, and strength.

Governing authorities serve UNDER the authority of God. All human authority derives from, and is answerable to, God.

God alone must have our full and total loyalty – all other loyalties must be set beneath God’s supreme authority.

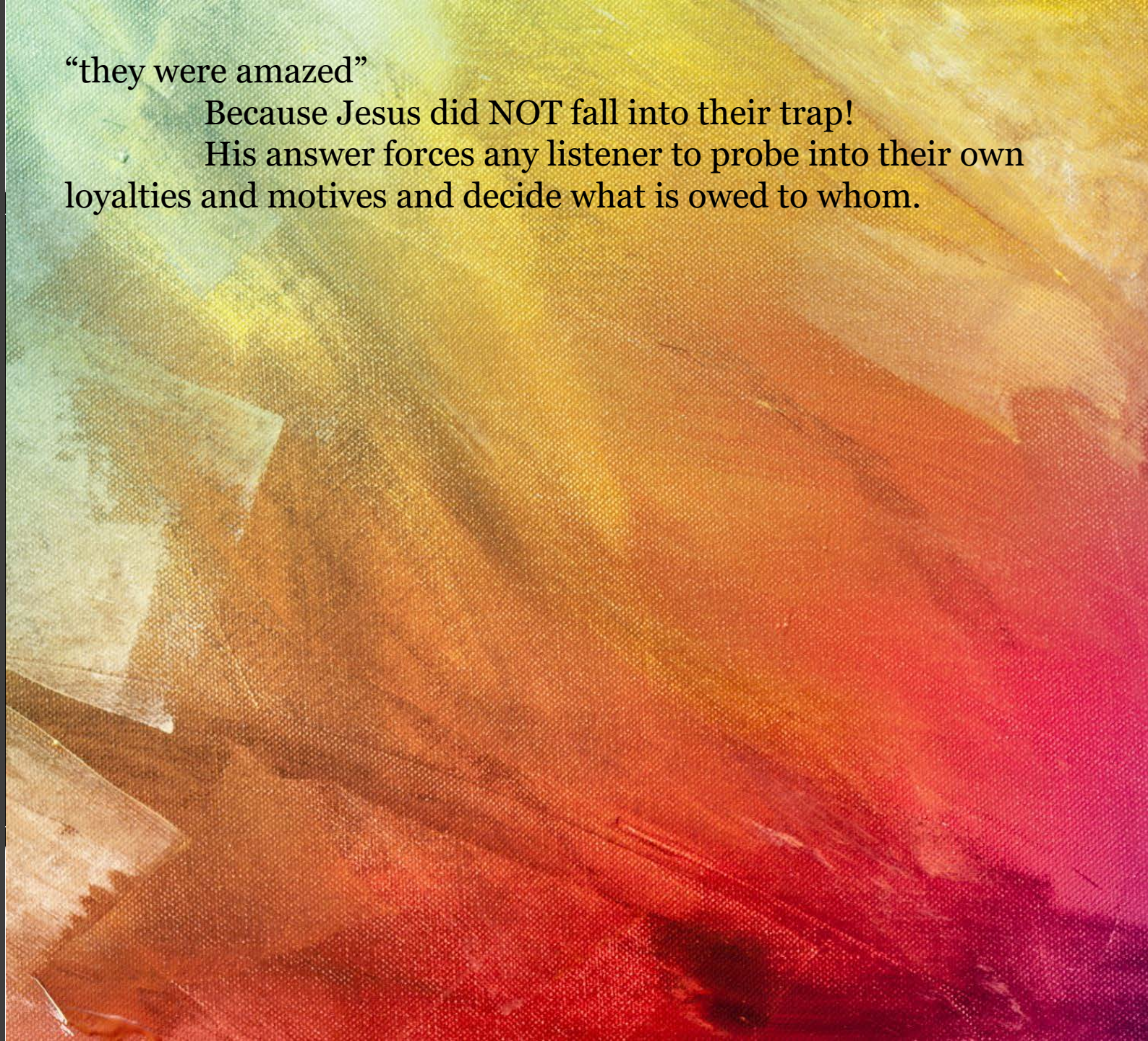
Mark 12:17 (NIV)

Then Jesus said to them,
“Give to Caesar what is
Caesar’s and to God
what is God’s.” And
they were amazed at
him.

“they were amazed”

Because Jesus did NOT fall into their trap!

His answer forces any listener to probe into their own loyalties and motives and decide what is owed to whom.



Mark 11:27- 12:17 (NIV)

SUMMARY

Jesus has now taught in the temple precincts, with the same authority he showed by his actions in the temple courts.

He has been confronted by two specific questions:

The source of his authority

By the chief priests and scribes

Regarding payment of taxes

By Pharisees and Herodians

In the next session, he will be confronted by yet another group – the Sadducees – about the doctrine of resurrection.



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