God of the Living

Mark 12:13-27

Key Verse: 12:27 “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!”

In these two weeks, three families from our church caught COVID and are currently recovering. It has been for more than two years since the pandemic broke out around the world, but still, we must be careful from this virus. Today’s passage seems to be appropriate to study during the season of tax reports or Easter because it is about tax and resurrection. Still, the teaching of Jesus applies for all seasons and for all generations. There are two separate stories, but one message about the God of the living.

First, Give to God what is God’s (dual citizenships) Previously the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders challenged Jesus with a question about authority, but they were greatly humiliated by Jesus’ wisdom. (27-33) In the Parable of the Tenants Jesus compared them to the evil and ungrateful tenants who had killed the son of the owner to take possession of the vineyard. (12:1-12) The religious leaders came to realize that they could not beat Jesus with their wisdom. So, they sent other groups to challenge Jesus, which were the Pharisees and Herodians. It was the second round. In fact, the Pharisees and Herodians were not a good combination because the Pharisees were the religious group and the Herodians were the political group. Still, they became one in accusing Jesus by catching him in his words. Look at verses 14-15a. “***They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, 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 the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we***?” Now we know why these two different groups came to Jesus with this controversial question. At that time Rome ruled the world. Israel was one of her colonies. Caesar levied imperial tax on all his colonies in the name of Pax Romana, which means Peace from Rome. Roman citizens were exempted from this tax, but all foreigners must pay this imperial tax. Not to mention the Jews including the Pharisees hated paying this tax. Herodians, the political group, who worked for King Herod, also didn’t favor this tax. Their question was a trap. If Jesus said, “Yes, you have to pay.”, they would accuse Jesus as the traitor of the Jews. If Jesus said, “No, you don’t have to, “they would accuse Jesus as the traitor of Caesar. It was a trap for Jesus from either answer.

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. Jesus knew that they asked a question not to learn from him, but to catch him in his words. Jesus said, “***Why are you trying to trap me? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.***” (15) A denarius was the coin of Jesus’ day which had the image of Caesar on one side and the inscription on the other. When they brought the coin to Jesus, he asked them, “***Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied.*** (16) How did Jesus answer them? Look at verse 17. “***Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him.***” What a wise answer from Jesus! In his answer Jesus teaches us that we must fulfill our duties responsibly as the people of a nation on this earth and as the people of God in heaven. So, the Israelites had to pay taxes to Caesar who protected them and kept order for their nation in the name of Pax Romana. They also had to offer to God as the people of God. Jesus taught them not to neglect any of them. Likewise, we Christians also have a dual citizenship as an American citizen (or other nationality) and as a heavenly citizen. We must fulfill both of our duties. No one is exempt from either duty. Some are not willing to pay taxes because they feel like they are losing their money. But the government uses our taxes to protect us, provide us, and for many different purposes. We also offer to God as expression of our gratitude and faith as the people of God. As a student he or she must study hard to fulfill their academic duty. As a worker he or she must work hard to make profits for their company or store. As the people of God, we must keep the Sabbath holy by worshiping God on Sunday. God honors those who are responsible for their duty.

Here we also learn how Jesus turns crisis into opportunity. The word crisis in Chinese character contains two meanings, “danger’ and ‘opportunity.’ Jesus was in danger when they tried to trap him with a difficult question. But Jesus used this crisis as an opportunity to teach them the truth of God. In chapter 10 the religious leaders challenged Jesus with a question about divorce, but Jesus answered them with the beautiful marriage and family. We are challenged every day from all aspects of our lives. Some are in danger and crisis. But we have to learn how to turn these crises to opportunity to glorify God and to experience the power of God. The life of Jesus was the repetition of this cycle: from crisis to opportunity, from cross to crown. Amen!

Second, the God of the living, not the God of the dead (18-27) The first religious group was beaten by Jesus’ wisdom. The second group, the Pharisees and Herodians were also humiliated by Jesus. Now the third group challenged Jesus. They were the Sadducees, who said that there is no resurrection. They didn’t believe angels or any other spiritual beings, either. Such a legalistic group came to Jesus with a very weird question. Look at verses 19-23. “***Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her***?” What a weird story they made! How can a woman marry seven brothers? This assumption was driven from the Levirate law written in Deuteronomy 25:5-6. *Levir* in Latin means ‘brother-in-law.’ If a man dies without leaving any children, his brother must marry the widow to continue for his dead brother. This law was to protect the widow and to continue the family line. In the OT Judah did the same for Tamar, his daughter-in-law, whose first husband was Er, who had died leaving no children. (Ge 38:1-12) Onan, his brother, married Tamar to fulfill his duty as a brother-in-law. Anyway, it should be a sad story if a woman married seven brothers to continue their family line. This story reveals the darkness of the hearts of the Sadducees. As Jesus said, what stores up in their minds comes out from their mouth. (Mt 15:18)

How did Jesus answer them? Look at verses 24-25. “***Jesus replied, “Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.”*** The Sadducees did not believe the Scripture as the word of God except the five books of Moses called Torah. They didn’t acknowledge other scriptures and oral regulations whereas the Pharisees did all of these. Jesus taught the Sadducees that there is a resurrection after the dead rise. He also taught that we all will be changed like the angels. So, there will be no marriage or divorce or the sad story of the widow in heaven. Jesus’ teaching about resurrection continues. Look at verses 26-27. “***Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the Book of Moses, in account of the burning bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken.***” In order to help them to understand, Jesus quoted from Exodus 3 which tells the moment Moses met God in the burning bush at Mount Sinai. When God called Moses at the mountain, he introduced himself in this, “*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*” (Ex 3:6) God did not use the past tense, “*I was*”, but the present tense, “*I am*.” This means that all these fathers of Israel are still alive in heaven with God. They died, but they all were resurrected like angles and now they are living together in heaven.

What does ‘I am not the God of the dead, but of the living.’ mean? These words have deeper meaning than just the teachings about resurrection. Our God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. Who are the dead and who are the living? The dead are those who do not believe resurrection like the Sadducees. Those who do not believe resurrection live only for today because they have no hope for tomorrow. They become anxious and fearful about future because they don’t know what will happen to them after they die. Before I was born again, all my paintings were full of dark colors. All these paintings show the darkness of my life. On the contrary after I met Jesus and had faith in resurrection and hope of eternal life, the colors of my paintings were changed from dark to bright. The living are those who live with resurrection faith like Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Esther, and Paul. Abraham offered Isaac as a burnt offering because he believed that God would raise him from the dead. Moses stood in front of Pharaoh because he believed that God would raise the slave people into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Daniel went into the den of lions because he believed that God could shut the mouths of lions. Esther said, *“If I perish, I perish*” and stood before her king at risk of her life. Paul was almost stoned to death in Lystra during his mission journey. People thought that he was dead and threw him away outside of the city. But Paul got up and went to the city again to preach the gospel as if nothing happened to him. All these heroes of faith lived with resurrection faith. Last week missionary James Lee visited Wash U to pray and to preach the word despite his busy work schedule and with his sick body. He lived with resurrection faith. His spirit is living, not dead.

The living are also those who live with the living spirit, which is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the living God. Those who live with the Holy Spirit experience the power of God who changes crisis into opportunity. Their thoughts, ideas, attitudes are always creative and positive. In the book of Numbers Moses chose twelve spies from each tribe and sent them to explore the Promised Land. After returning from 40 days’ exploration, ten of the twelve gave them a bad report. Because of their unbelieving and negative report, the Israelites became a dead people, filled with fear of death. But Joshua and Caleb were different from them. They had the spirit of the living God. They reported that God would be with his people and give the land to their hands. They glorified God and encouraged his fearful people with their positive report. God stood side on Joshua and Caleb because he is the God of the living, not of the dead.

There are many people who live like the walking dead. They see this world with a negative viewpoint. They always say unbelieving, discouraging, and complaining words like the Sadducees. But our God is not of those who live like that. He is the living God. He is the God of the living. He is the God of those who live by faith and by the Holy Spirit. May God help us to live like a living people, not a dead people. Let us learn how to change crisis into opportunity, turn from suffering to blessing, from poverty to prosperity, from misery to glory! Amen!