Mark Lesson 43 (2023)

**JESUS CHALLENGES JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

Mark 12:35-40

Key Verse: 12:37

“David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”

In the previous passage, we witnessed the Jewish religious leaders questioning Jesus about his stance on complex and controversial issues of their time. The Pharisees inquired about the legality of paying imperial taxes to Caesar (12:13-17), and the Sadducees raised questions about marriage in the context of resurrection (12:18-27). Through their cunning questions, they sought to entrap Jesus in his words. Yet, Jesus’ ingenious responses astonished them, leaving them speechless.

In today’s passage, Jesus turned the table, challenging them. He particularly confronted their flawed interpretation of Scripture regarding the Messiah. In today’s passage, we will delve into a profound revelation about the Messiah’s identity as the Son of David and the Lord of David. This provides us with a glimpse into the dual nature of Christ Jesus – fully divine and yet fully human. Furthermore, Jesus cautioned against the hypocritical conduct of religious leaders, which is also challenging to us. Let us open our minds and hearts this morning to discern the significance of Jesus’ words and their relevance for us today.

Look at verse 35. “While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, ‘Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David?’” This event occurred during Passion Week, most likely on a Tuesday. While teaching in the temple courts, Jesus initiated a thought-provoking dialogue by asking, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David?”

The teachers of the law and other Jewish leaders believed that the Messiah was a descendant of King David, as clearly stated in the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament (2 Sam. 7:8-16; Psalm 28:3-4; Isaiah 11:1-9; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23-24; Hosea 3:5). For instance, in 2 Samuel 7:12 and 13, God spoke to King David through Nathan, “When your days are over, and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” Isaiah 11:1 also prophesies, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots, a Branch will bear fruit.” Jesse is the father of King David.

The Pharisees and the Jews anticipated a Messiah based on these Scriptures. But their interpretation of the Bible was not accurate. They envisioned the Messiah solely as a human ruler who would ascend to King David’s throne. They anticipated the Messiah’s role in liberating them from foreign oppression, establishing God’s reign on earth, and restoring Israel’s glory, reminiscent of David and Solomon’s era. Even though their perception contained elements of truth, it was incomplete. Although they were devout followers of the Scriptures, some of their interpretations were misleading.

Misusing and misinterpreting the Scripture for personal and ideological purposes is dangerous and a complex issue throughout history. Avoiding such mistakes and ensuring a more accurate and responsible interpretation of Scripture takes hard work and is always challenging. One of the most essential principles is being open-minded and humble. When Jesus questioned them, he was challenging them to reevaluate their understanding of the Messiah’s identity. “Is the Messiah mere David’s son?”

How did they respond? Most likely, the teachers of the law couldn’t provide a satisfactory response to Jesus’ inquiry. Consequently, Jesus proceeded to further his teaching to drive his point home. Look at verse 36. “David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’” By quoting Psalm 110, Jesus challenged the Jew’s misconceptions about the Messiah’s identity. The phrase “speaking by the Holy Spirit” means that David's words in Psalm 110 were not merely his thoughts or opinions; The Holy Spirit inspired him. In other words, the Holy Spirit guided and influenced David’s writing, allowing him to convey God’s truth and message.

David said, “The Lord said to my Lord.” The first “Lord” here signifies *Yahweh,* the Hebrew term for God the Father. The second “Lord” is *Adonai,* meaning “Lord” or “Master.” So, David was saying, *“Yahweh says to my Adoni.”*

The phrase, “Sit at my right hand,” indicates the Messiah occupying the right side of God’s throne, the position of ultimate honor and authority within God’s coming kingdom. The phrase “Until I put your enemies under your feet” symbolizes the ultimate triumph over sin and death.

So, to whom did Jesus refer the second “Lord”? Of course, Jesus identified the second “Lord” as the Messiah, which the Pharisees could hardly dispute. However, Jesus highlighted their significant misunderstanding of the Messiah by revealing that David proclaimed the Messiah as his Lord, not just his descendants. In essence, the Messiah would be God himself in human form, surpassing the stature of a human descendant of David. In short, Psalm 110 unveils the Messiah's mysterious nature, embodying humanity and divinity. Most Jews thought it was improbable for God to assume human form, but the Messiah David envisioned was both his descendant and Lord, implying the dual nature of the Messiah.

Jesus highlighted his notion by posing another question. Look at verse 37. “David himself calls him ‘Lord.” How then can he be his son?” Jesus indicated that the divine Messiah would manifest himself in human form without clearly stating it. It was a remarkable revelation that God became a man and stood right before them.

This recalls John 1:14, which declares, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” In Jesus, we witness a perfect union of the divine and the human, with neither aspect diminishing the other. Jesus walked with his disciples, ate, and talked with them. He healed so many people from sickness, even incurable diseases, and performed miracles that were possible only for God, changing water into wine, calming the storm, walking on water, and raising the dead. While Judaism and Islam reject Christ Jesus' divinity, the Scripture testifies that the Messiah is fully divine and human. This essential truth regarding Jesus’ dual nature is a cornerstone of our faith.

Why is Jesus’ dual nature so vital to us? His dual nature assures us we can approach God despite our human frailties. Having experienced human challenges, Jesus comprehends our struggles. He also possesses the divine power and authority to deliver us from sin through his complete divinity. Through Jesus, we have an authentic humanity restored to its intended state – harmonious with God’s perfect will. Therefore, Christ Jesus exemplifies our transformation and sanctification.

While our finite minds may grapple with the profound union of Jesus’ divinity and humanity, we are invited to embrace the mystery. This mystery highlights that God’s ways surpass our comprehension, yet his love remains within our reach. As we wrestle with this profound truth, a mystery, we are drawn into deeper worship and adoration for our Lord Jesus, who gave up his glory in heaven, took on human a flesh, and humbly served us. What a splendid example for us to emulate. Apostle Paul confessed in Philippians 3:10 and 11, “I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

How did the crowd respond to Jesus’ teaching? Look at verse 37b. “The large crowd listened to him with delight.” The author Mark draws a contrast between ordinary people and religious leaders. Unlike the hardened hearts of the Jewish leaders, the regular folks listened to Jesus joyfully. It does not necessarily mean they fully comprehended his message, but their open-mindedness paved the path to God’s kingdom.

In the following verses, Jesus cautioned his audience against the hypocrisy of religious leaders. As we read and think about Jesus' incisive assessment of the teachers of the law, we ought to introspect our own conduct. Look at verses 38 and 39. “As he taught, Jesus said, ‘Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.” It was not the first time Jesus cautioned his audience against the hypocrisy of religious leaders.

Some religious leaders liked to walk around in robes. Their robes, long and reaching down the feet, were white, symbolizing spiritual purity. These robes were designed to be worn mainly for religious services. Yet, they had worn them in public, even in marketplaces, crowded with many people. Why? Primarily for recognition. These white robes singled them out, prompting people to identify them as authorities and greet them respectfully.

“The most important seats in the synagogue” referred to the seats reserved for the dignitaries, positioned in front of the scroll box, facing the general congregation. And “The places of honor at the banquets” were typically designated seats close to the host, enjoying the special treatment during the meal. These religious leaders wanted to be the center of attention in the synagogue, marketplace, banquet and everywhere.

We all struggle with the desire for recognition and admiration, but Jesus does not condemn our human tendencies. Yet, we should be careful not to become like these hypocritical leaders. Jesus rebuked the religious leaders not because of their human tendency but because of their distorted priorities. These religious leaders were supposed to deny themselves and serve others. But they lost sight of their duty as teachers, and their inner motive was to show off. It was pure vanity and hypocrisy. They were irresponsible and a bad influence, like yeast or mildew.

In verse 40, Jesus proceeds to emphasize the exploitation by these teachers of the law. Look at verse 40. “They devour widows’ houses and, for a show, make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.” These religious leaders not only sought praise and honor but also misused their positions. The phrase “Devouring the widows’ houses” vividly illustrates their exploitation of their roles, taking advantage of naïve individuals.

Some manipulated their positions to take temple donations for personal gain unethically. They exploited their position to cheat the vulnerable, including poor widows. Even their prayers and religious acts were performed merely for appearance and reputation. Jesus condemns their hypocritical conduct, declaring they will face severe consequences.

It was not the first time Jesus cautioned people against hypocritical leaders. Why would Jesus repeatedly warn them? It’s because Jesus was aware of conscientious people in the crowd who were tired of hypocrisy and the power plays of the religious elite. Jesus knew that the common people were naïve and gullible. This message undoubtedly urged them to differentiate authentic spiritual leadership from mere façade. Ultimately, Jesus’ words regarding hypocrisy call them for self-examination and integrity in their relationship with God.

Jesus’ warning echoes a universal truth found in Romans 2:6-10. “God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who, by persistence in doing good, seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.”

Our common tendency, even as Christians, is to be swayed by self-centered ambitions and carnal desires. Yet, the outcome of such pursuits is detrimental because we eventually reap what we sow. Most of all, hypocrisy can easily creep in when we value appearance more than cultivating a sincere and authentic relationship with God our Lord. Therefore, we must watch and examine ourselves. It’s better to detect the sign of hypocrisy earlier and remove it before it’s fully grown. That’s why Jesus repeatedly warned his followers against the sin of hypocrisy.

The best way to overcome hypocrisy is to come to Jesus just as we are. 1 John 1:5-7 states, “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” Remaining in darkness means remaining in secrecy. There is a difference between secrecy and privacy. Secrecy raises suspicion and is unhealthy, while privacy remains to share information only with those who need to know. Privacy is healthy but secrecy is unhealthy.

Let me close the sermon today. In today’s passage, Jesus challenged the Jewish religious leaders for their flawed understanding of the Messiah’s identity and revealed the dual nature of the Messiah, fully divine and fully human. He also cautioned his followers against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. It happened just a few days before his execution on the cross. His divinity and humanity are fully manifested through his death and resurrection. He is the Lord of all. He is everything, my life, joy, peace, love, refuge, and greatest reward. In Christ Jesus, we can be authentic and genuine. In Christ, we can be safe and secure, no matter what happens. Following Jesus, however, requires self-examination, and we should grow in faith in him by following his footsteps, as he said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” (8:34) May we constantly examine our motives, cultivate authentic faith in Christ, and practice genuine servant leadership, without showing off.