

# Mark 12

by John Nelson Darby

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*John Nelson Darby's sermon on Mark 12 explores the rejection of God's messengers by Israel and highlights the importance of true devotion and understanding of God's will.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 5:1

**Topics:** "Rejection of Christ", "True Sacrifice"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Mark 12, illustrating the incompetence of the Jewish leaders who rejected God's messengers, culminating in the rejection of His Son. He emphasizes that Israel, as God's vineyard, failed to produce fruit despite the privileges granted to them, leading to their judgment and the transfer of God's favor to others. The sermon highlights the wisdom of Christ in addressing the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees, revealing their hypocrisy and misunderstanding of God's word. Darby concludes with the importance of true devotion, as exemplified by the widow who gave all she had, contrasting her genuine sacrifice with the empty offerings of the rich. Ultimately, the message calls for recognition of Christ's authority and the need for sincere faith and obedience.

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## Transcript

The incapacity and incompetency of the governors among the Jews is clearly shewn forth. They had pretended to judge the Lord, but the word of divine wisdom in His mouth had judged them and compelled them to confess their incompetency. Now the Lord begins in His turn to shew all the classes of the Jews the state in which they were, and first that of all the people. Israel had been Jehovah's vineyard; He had let it out to certain husbandmen in order to receive its fruit in due season. He had done all He could for His vineyard; it was impossible to do more than He had done. Israel enjoyed all the privileges which a nation could enjoy. At fruit-time, the Master sends His servant to receive the fruit of the husbandmen.

302 The prophets sought these fruits from the people on God's part, for He was Master of the vineyard; but the husbandmen took one servant and beat him, they killed another, and rejected all of them. Thus Israel treated all God's servants sent by Him to call them back to their duty. At last, having yet one Son, His well-beloved, He sent Him also to them, saying, "They will reverence my Son." But they took Him, killed Him, and cast Him out of the vineyard. They wanted to take possession of the vineyard by killing the rightful heir.

Let us look a little into this parable. With what dignity and calmness the Lord exposes the past conduct of the people of Israel, and also their conduct at that very moment! He was ready to suffer, He had come to

die; but His enemies' acts must be clearly shewn forth; they filled up the measure of their iniquity with their eyes open. Poor Jews! God in His sovereign grace will have compassion upon them, and will restore His people (by a new covenant) to its place of the people of God owned by Him. Mark always narrates everything rapidly. The consequence of Israel's sin is shewn; but we know from the other Gospels that the Jews in their answer were obliged to pronounce their own sentence; and that they understood well what the parable meant. Here the simple fact of their ruin is told, and that of the rejection of the Christ, the Son of God. The Master of the vineyard, the Lord of Hosts, would come and destroy the wicked husbandmen and would give His vineyard to others.

Then He quotes once more Psalm 118, and asks the chief of the people (a question which applied directly to Himself), "Have ye not read this scripture? - The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner: this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." What a plain prophetic declaration of the position of Israel and its consequences! All Israel's history, presented in brief, perfectly described in a few verses: all their conduct from Moses' time till the cross set forth in a few words; their sin towards Jehovah, towards Christ, towards the prophets, and the fearful consequences for the nation, and God's ways towards it. God takes away all its privileges, and gives over His vineyard (where He would seek for fruit) to others. Thus with this great fact of man's sin and Jewish unbelief - that is, with the rejection and crucifixion of the Lord - He would be exalted to the right hand of God, and would become the head of the corner. Here also we have the key of Old Testament scripture by prophecy; for with a single glance we see all God's ways communicated to spiritual intelligence. It is only divine wisdom and divine revelation which can reveal to us God's thoughts and man's deeds, and which can announce them to us.

303 We have seen that all classes of the Jews come, one after the other, to judge the Lord; but in fact to be judged. The Pharisees and Herodians present themselves first to catch Him in His words. They did not dare to lay hands upon Him, although they would willingly have done so, because they had fully understood that the parable of the vineyard and husbandmen had been spoken against them; but the people were still under the influence of His words and His works. The rulers feared the people, slaves not merely to their own passions and unbelief but to the people itself; and they feared still more to do anything against the Lord, believing that the people would favour Him, since they had neither the power of faith, nor the freedom which is the result of uprightness; but they were dependent on the favour of the people.

The Lord's hour was not yet come. They sent certain spies to catch Him in His words. The Pharisees, filled with pride as to the privileges of the people, and ever ready to stir up it against the Romans, flattered its passions. They were subjected to the Gentile yoke on account of their sins, and were no longer recognised as God's people. The promised Messiah had been sent in the person of the Lord, and they had not been willing to receive Him, because He manifested God upon earth, and their hardened heart did not wish for God; they wished to possess the glory of being God's people, but not to receive God and submit themselves to Him. The rebellion of their heart against God was united to the rebellion of their national pride against the Gentiles.

The Herodians, on the contrary, accepted the Roman authority, and did not trouble themselves about Israel's privileges: but they were ready at all costs to seek the good favour of that powerful people, who held the people Israel under its heavy yoke by God's judgment. Now if the Lord had said that they ought not to pay tribute, He would shew Himself hostile to the Romans sway, and the Herodians would be ready to accuse Him; if He said that they ought to pay, He was not the Messiah who should free His people from the hated Roman yoke. They did not think of any other deliverance: and hence He would have lost the favour of the people. The Herodians and Pharisees were reconciled for the purpose of getting rid of the

Lord: but divine wisdom answers to every difficulty.

304 The Jews ought to have submitted to the yoke which God Himself had placed upon their neck until the time when grace should free them, and they should receive the Deliverer who should come according to God's promises; and until these should be fulfilled they must humbly render to God His due, always accepting their chastisement at His hands. But they did neither the one thing nor the other; they were hypocrites before God, and rebellious towards men. The Lord asks them to give Him a coin with the Emperor's head upon it, and asks, "Whose image and superscription is this?" The Jews reply, "Caesar's": and Jesus says, "Render to Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and to God the things which be God's." And the Jews go away astonished. A just reply, which not only answered their accusation, but which recognised at the same time Israel's true state and the judgment of God.

Next come the Sadducees, another sect of the Jews, which did not believe in the invisible world, nor in angels, nor in the resurrection: God had given a law to His people Israel, that was all. Accustomed to the arguments of men, they did not expect to meet with divine wisdom, nor the irresistible force of the word of God. They present a case which (supposing that to be true which their folly imagined) rendered the resurrection ridiculous and impossible: for they suppose that the relationships and state of this world continue in the other. This is what men do: they mix up their thoughts with God's word, and since these thoughts do not agree with it, they think it unintelligible and reject it. But in this case a vital and fundamental truth is in question: and the Lord not only reduces His enemies to silence by the wisdom of His answer, discovering their hypocrisy, but clearly reveals the truth itself which is taught in a hidden manner in the Old Testament, and furnishes it with His own authority.

305 Everything depends upon this truth; it is the evidence that Jesus is the Son of God, and that God has accepted His sacrifice. It is the victory over death: all that belongs to man's wretched condition is left behind; it is the entry into man's new estate according to God's counsels; the introduction into the eternal state of glory and full conformity of Christ. It is true that the wicked will be raised for judgment, but the Lord looks upon His own and their state, as also does 1 Corinthians 15. The Lord means to say that the Old Testament contains the revelation of this truth. As to His person it is clearly taught in Psalm 16; but it is said that the Sadducees only received the law of Moses; now this law first of all has to do with that which God had established upon earth for His earthly people: and life and incorruptibility have been brought to light by the gospel and by the resurrection of the Lord Himself. And although this light was clouded in Old Testament times, nevertheless it was not wanting to those who, pilgrims and strangers upon earth, sought a better country and a heavenly city. The immediate teaching referred to God's government upon earth, but by faith the hearts of the faithful could amply find in it that which they needed to point them towards an eternal and heavenly country.

The Pharisees believed in the resurrection, and, as to this, they had the understanding of the truth; but the Lord wished to shew that if the Sadducees only received the law, the law itself, God had at all times given that which was enough to lead the spiritual understanding to expect better things than the earthly, and by faith to bring it into closer relationship with God than could be enjoyed in His government either of the world or of His people, however real this government might be. The Lord then condemns the Sadducees entirely; they were quite ignorant of the scriptures and of the power of God. The Lord first reveals the truth; as soon as a person is raised from the dead, he is like the angels and it is no longer a question of marrying or giving in marriage. Then he shews that in its first elements the first expression of the relationships of God with men (when God spoke to Moses) contained a life beyond death, and consequently the resurrection; since man consists of body and soul, according to God's counsels. Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob, had been dead a long time, but God was always their God; and yet they were still alive; and they would not consequently remain always under the power of death, but would rise again.

306 The Sadducees, who only believed in the law, needed a clear proof of the truth taken from the law itself. And whatever may be the truth as to the Sadducees, it is important for us to understand that from the beginning, when God enters into relationship with man, sin and death having entered, God always takes resurrection ground. There is no other true foundation of blessing. The very promises made to Israel are founded upon this truth; at least the fulfilment of them (Acts 13:34). Thus the first thing which the gospel reveals is rooted in the first distinct manifestation of God in relationship with men, a relationship founded upon redemption (an external thing in Israel, it is true, but eternally accomplished in Christ). But as the great truth of Christianity, the new state of man, is established by the Lord's word, so also the perfection of the law, as the standard of man's duty, is brought into light.

One of the scribes, who had heard the Lord's reasoning with the Sadducees and perceived that He had answered with true and divine wisdom, drew near and asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" The scribes believed that the commandments differed in value, and that some were worth more than others to make up the sum of righteousness to which a man ought to attain. The Lord answers again in this instance without turning back the question upon those who asked it to their confusion, but He establishes the two great pillars of man's responsibility: the unity of God, and man's duty towards Him and towards his neighbour. This was Israel's faith, and his duty towards all. The Lord does not quote the ten commandments, but the great principles of the law as to the whole duty of man. The Lord knew how to bring them out, divinely hidden as they are in the books of Moses; Deut. 6:4, 5; 10:12; Lev. 19:18.

The sense of duty was perfect in Him, as also grace and divine love; One greater than these. It is beautiful to see this perfection in the Lord: the grace and the love of God were manifested in all His life; we have seen them. But here we find also the perfect rule of walk and of the duty of man upon earth according to the law; not that which was evident to all men (that is, the ten commandments, which are the first thing to come to mind), but principles scattered here and there throughout the books of the Old Testament, which shone out everywhere for Him - for a heart which understood and possessed the perfection of manhood before God; for He shewed forth divine perfection before men. His heart saw the one, and understood it, whilst the expression of the other sprang naturally from the same heart. The conscience and heart of the scribe are touched; he gives testimony to the perfection of the Lord's reply, adding that to do thus was worth more than sacrifices and burnt-offerings. He was not far from the kingdom of God. A heart which understands God's thoughts about man loves that which God loves; the moral difference of that which is good is far removed from the capacity of receiving that which God reveals for the blessing of His people. Now from this time forth they durst ask Him no question. The Lord's wisdom was too great for their hearts.

307 But the Lord in His turn asks them a question, and all the truth relating to His and to their own position depended upon its answer: "Whose son is Christ?" The Jews said, "David's." It was true, but then the Lord said, "How then doth David call him his Lord if he is his son?" Jesus was the Son of David, but He must sit upon the right hand of God as Lord in man's nature. This was the key to the situation. But the Lord's relationships with the Jews were at an end; each class had presented itself before Him and had been judged.

Verses 31-40. Here the Lord denounces the scribes who corrupted the word of God which they pretended to explain; they took the form of godliness, and sought their own glory and other people's money, even that of widows, to whom they obtained access under the pretext of piety. For this cause their judgment

would be all the more terrible; but God does not forget His own in the midst of the hypocrisy of the seeming religious. They may make mistakes: perhaps the widow's mite helped to pay Judas; but it was given to the Lord, and the widow's heart which was occupied about the mite did not escape the Lord's eyes, nor the notice of His love. The rich had given much, but the widow offered herself as a living sacrifice to the Lord; she gave all her substance. Perhaps she might have employed better means, but she gave her mite from the bottom of her heart to the Lord, and it was received on His part: we should think of this.

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