

Series: Mark

Title: Bible Study Tips from Jesus

Text: Mark 12:18-24 and 26-27

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## Verse 18

Mark 12:18 introduces another confrontation by the religious leaders of Jesus' day. It says, "Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and questioned him." The verse is situated within a series of passages in Mark that described the way in which Jesus' opponents aimed to trap Him in His words, attempting to get Him to say something incriminating. Back in Mark 11:18, the chief priests and the scribes started looking for a way to kill Jesus. As a result of their plotting, several groups confronted Jesus with hot-topic religious questions. In 11:27-28, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders questioned Him about His authority. In 12:13, the Pharisees and the Herodians tried to trap Him in regard to politics. Now the Sadducees attempt to trip Him up through a question about the Resurrection.

The Sadducees were a part of the wealthy upper class of Judea. They were of a liberal political persuasion, because they were known for their cooperation with the emperor's occupying forces.<sup>1</sup> As a result, they were often hostile to anyone who was perceived as a threat to Rome. Many believed they derived their name from Zadok, one of Aaron's descendants who lived during the time of David (2 Samuel 8:17 and 1 Chronicles 12:28).<sup>2</sup> During the first century, they were quite influential in Judaea, supplying a great number of high priests to rule.<sup>3</sup>

Though they were politically liberal, they were theologically conservative.<sup>4</sup> They were different from the Pharisees in that they based their beliefs on Scripture alone. They rejected the tradition of the Mishnah that was so important to the Pharisees.<sup>5</sup> Though they had a high regard of Scripture, they were skeptical of the miraculous. They were famously known for their rejection of a physical resurrection of the body. They were also known for their denial of the angelic realm. Acts 23:8 speaks of their beliefs concerning these matters.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks, 194.

<sup>2</sup> Schnabel, 295.

<sup>3</sup> Schnabel, 296.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks, 194.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks, 195.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, 195.

Mark likely included his remarks concerning the Sadducees' belief system in order to help his audience. Remember his intended audience was mostly gentile. Many of them knew very little about the inner-workings of Judaism<sup>7</sup> In addition, the Resurrection seemed to be a silly doctrine to most Gentiles. The Hellenistic world believed the human body was evil. As a result, most scoffed at the idea of the human body being resurrected for an afterlife.<sup>8</sup> Because of these realities, Mark gave a brief word of explanation so his audience would understand the controversy at hand.

If the Sadducees didn't believe in the Resurrection, what did they believe in? Some report that they proposed the world would simply continue in its current state at the end of time.<sup>9</sup> The group had a rather simple and non-miraculous approach to end-time issues. Dismissing any cataclysmic change at the end of time, they denied both the prospect of a resurrection and a final judgement.<sup>10</sup>

Other Jewish groups had a strong belief in a future resurrection. Their convictions were grounded in portions of Hebrew Scripture that clearly spoke of the event. Most of such passages were found in the Prophets. Consider Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2-13. The Sadducees were not impacted by such passages, since they regarded the Pentateuch alone as being authoritative. Their most famous religious opponent – the Pharisees – maintained that the physical bodies of the faithful would indeed be resurrected at the end of time; however, their doctrine discounted the work of the spiritual. They believed bodies would be resurrected without much change. Features of the original body would continue into the afterlife, even if the body was marred by defects and injuries.<sup>11</sup>

While the Sadducees emphasized the spiritual alone and the Pharisees emphasized the physical alone, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection teaches both. It maintains that physical bodies will be spiritually raised at the end of time, undergoing a radical transformation by the power of God. Paul outlined the Christian position on this issue in one of his letters to the church at Corinth:

Listen, I am telling you a mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. For this corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, 196..

<sup>8</sup> Brooks, 194.

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Schnabel, 296.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, 195.

this mortal body must be clothed with immortality. When this corruptible body is clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal body is clothed with immortality, then the saying that is written will take place: Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, death, is your victory? Where, death, is your sting? (1 Corinthians 15:51-55).

Knowing Jesus held to a different view of the Resurrection, the Sadducees confronted Him. Mark said they “came and questioned him.” Their actions were filled with malevolent intentions. They wanted to ensnare Jesus. One has said, “The question is not intended to clarify a theological matter but to discredit Jesus before the crowd and make him look a fool.”<sup>12</sup>

The Sadducees were also known for their intelligence. They were men of learning and academic credentials.<sup>13</sup> Their intellectual achievements let them too often times have a condescending attitude towards other religious sects. It is not too strange to see them approaching Jesus with an air of superiority in our text. They surely looked down on the supposedly unlearned, son of a carpenter from Galilee.

The Sadducees placed their confidence in their own intellect. They did not give much credence to the prophets. They diluted Scripture by regarding only the first five books of the Old testament as being authoritative.<sup>14</sup> As a result, they had a system of belief that de-emphasized the miraculous. Their approach to religion was an attempt to make them more respectable in the eyes of the world.

Jesus’ confrontation with the Sadducees reminds us of an important principle of Scripture. In one of his letters to the church at Corinth, Paul commented on the way in which “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Corinthians 3:19). God’s people should always remember that God’s truth supersedes all earthly wisdom. Even the most heightened human intellect is nothing when compared to the wisdom of God. To spiritually excel, we must look to the Lord as the fountain of true knowledge and truth. His Word must occupy a place of high priority in our hearts and minds. May we ever be on guard against the temptation to dilute the Scriptures, to pick and choose which parts are authoritative and which parts aren’t. May we be careful that we don’t give lip service to the Bible while preferring man-made constructs of knowledge as the true authority for our lives.

## Verse 19

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<sup>12</sup> Schnabel, 295.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, 367.

<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, 196.

In verse 19, the Sadducees framed their question, saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife behind but no child, that man should take the wife and raise up offspring for his brother” (Mark 12:19). The Sadducees probably used the words “raise up” in a sort of tongue-in-cheek gesture.<sup>15</sup> The same terminology was often used in a technical sense to speak of a last days resurrection of the dead. Jesus’ opponents borrowed the term to display their scorn towards the doctrine.

Their words referenced Deuteronomy 25:5–10, a passage of Scripture that outlined concessions for a situation in which a husband died and left his wife childless. Such regulations were important in the ancient world, as widowed women hardly had any way of earning an income, and they were often regarded as leftover goods. The Lord, in his grace, provided a way for such women to be redeemed and to have a heritage. We have an example of the outworking of this mosaic instruction in a book of the Bible we know as Ruth. If you remember, Ruth was left destitute, but she was redeemed by her nearest kin — Boaz (Ruth 4:1-17). Even before the Mosaic Law was issued, there was precedent of such a practice during the time of Jacob (Genesis 38).<sup>16</sup>

The Sadducees attempted to ensnare Jesus were guilty of a common exegetical fallacy. Many like to study the Bible and cherry pick verses to support their way of thinking. As the old saying goes, “You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say.” Be careful in all of your Bible study that you do not approach God’s Word in such a way. To be faithful to Scripture, you must compare individual passages of the Bible with the entire canon of the Bible. If you don’t, you might commit the same fallacy as the Sadducees. You may have doctrines that are not in alignment with the entirety of God’s Word.

### Verses 20-23

Verses 20-23 contain the question the Sadducees used to challenge Jesus: “There were seven brothers. The first married a woman, and dying, left no offspring. The second also took her, and he died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. None of the seven left offspring. Last of all, the woman died too. In the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be, since the seven had married her?” Quite likely, the Sadducees assumed Jesus held to a belief in the doctrine of the Resurrection. Because He was known to teach from the prophets (Mark 7:6-7), and since His ministry was associated with John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-11), it would have seemed likely that Jesus believed in an end-time resurrection of the dead. In addition, the Sadducees may have personally heard Jesus speak on the

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<sup>15</sup> Schnabel, 297.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks, 195.

subject, or they had heard reports that He did, since our Lord was known to speak on themes related to eternal life (Mark 9:43; 10:21 and 29-30).

In attempt to ensnare Him, Jesus' opponents presented an unlikely hypothetical situation. The case study they presented was surely a fictional one.<sup>17</sup> Doing what many debaters do, the Sadducees used an extreme example in an attempt to validate their standpoint. In the world of logic and debate, their form of argumentation is known as a *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>18</sup>

Aristotle spoke of the tactic in his "Prior Analytics." Throughout history, opponents have often used absurd scenarios to argue against one another. The use of extreme examples can help prove a point at times; however, the Sadducees' method was fallacious. It wasn't grounded in reality and it overlooked the spirit of Scripture. Their hypothetical story was of human invention, and it was designed to support their own beliefs. They weren't interested in knowing truth, they were only interested in winning an argument. Tradition and human logic was their main focus, not the authority of God's Word.

#### Verse 24

In presenting their supposed air-tight case study to Jesus, the Sadducees likely believed they had Jesus cornered. He was in a proverbial catch-22. Anything He said would injure His reputation. They thought He would be unable to give a reasonable response. The Sadducees had likely used the same hypothetical case study in debates against their opponents on a regular basis, much in the same way contemporary Christians use cliché arguments against other Christians who are of different doctrinal persuasions. They may have expected Jesus to give the typical response that the Pharisees would have given.

Jesus confounded their wisdom through an otherworldly response. He began by rebuking their ignorance of Scripture in verse 24, saying, "Isn't this the reason why you're mistaken: you don't know the Scriptures or the power of God?" In the first century, rabbis were known to use a series of questions in debates. Because of cultural convention, Jesus followed the Sadducees' question with a question. He engaged in a similar technique back in 10:29-30. On this occasion, His interrogative was intended to expose the lack of scriptural knowledge amongst His opponents. In the original language of the text, the syntax of Jesus' question demanded an affirmative reply.<sup>19</sup> Jesus meant to unequivocally denounce the Sadducees' error.

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<sup>17</sup> Ryle, 202.

<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, 196.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson, 367.

In His response, Jesus flatly accused His opponents of being “mistaken.” The Greek word is one that meant “to lead astray,” “to cause to wander,” or “to be deceived.”<sup>20</sup> It is a word from which we get our English word “planet.”<sup>21</sup> Jude used it to speak of “wandering stars” when speaking of false teachers (Jude 1:13). Those who follow false Christian doctrine and debased human philosophies are detached from reality. They are easily dragged along by shifting ideas and hollow conceptions.

After accusing the Sadducees of being mistaken, Jesus accused them of not knowing “the Scriptures.” Their entire system of religion was flawed because it wasn’t built on the wisdom of the Lord. It was of human origin. Jesus’ reply served as reminder that the ways of human thinking, even common ways of religious thinking, are severely inferior to the thoughts of God. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways.’ This is the Lord’s declaration. ‘For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Because the Sadducees limited their Bible study to the first five books of the Bible, they failed to understand the entirety of Scripture. They were ignorant of the fact that the doctrine of the resurrection was a biblical one. Historical and scriptural accounts of the life of Elijah provided a well-known documentation of the Lord’s power to raise the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 13:21). Ezekiel’s prophecy did as well (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

Nothing is new under the sun. Some professing Christians today may fall into the same trap of the Sadducees, denying the possibility of the miraculous. It is important for us to hear Jesus’ rebuke. May we avoid falling into a condition in which we are ignorant of Scripture, a condition in which we promote teachings and philosophies that are contrary to “thus saith the Lord.”

The Resurrection is indeed a scriptural doctrine. We have ample New Testament revelation that informs us on this matter. Consider 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 and 21-22. According to the Bible, at the end of time, every man, woman, boy, and girl who has ever lived will be raised. Both sinners and saints will be given a resurrection body. The work of Jesus has guaranteed this will take place. He has said that the righteous will be raised for “the resurrection of life” and the unrighteous will be raised for “the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:29). Paul said, “For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). All means all. Christ has purchased resurrection for all of humanity. Some will be raised to be thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation

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<sup>20</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Robertson, 367.

20:14-15), and others will be raised to enjoy the New Heaven and a New Earth (Revelation 21:1-2). We can count on these things happening, because God has said they will happen. His Word is true and it should be the authority for our beliefs and behavior.

In verse 24, Jesus also called the Sadducees out for being unacquainted with “the power of God.” Their problem wasn’t just a scriptural one; it was a spiritual one as well. We can think of their ignorance of God’s power in two ways. First, their denial of the miraculous was ultimately a denial of God’s omnipotence. They didn’t have faith that the same God who spoke the world into being (Genesis 1:3) had the power to raise the dead. Such a denial of God’s miracle-working power still persist to this day. There are many who profess Christ, but doubt the miracles recorded in the Bible. Often times, such skepticism is grounded in a supposed enlightened intellectualism. In reality, it is inconsistent and illogical when one considers the claims of the Christian worldview. If the Lord indeed created all things, He can do anything He desires. The power required to raise bodies from the dead, turn water into wine, and part great bodies of water is relatively insignificant when compared to the power required to speak the sun, moon, and, stars into existence. Those who doubt miracles doubt the power of God.

Second, Jesus’ reference to “power” demonstrates that one needs the power of God to appropriately understand Scripture. This is something the Sadducees lacked. For one to see God’s truth clearly, the Holy Spirit must enlighten their thinking. Jesus here rebuked the Sadducees in this regard. Their religious system wasn’t built upon Scripture, nor was it enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament often warns believers regarding these realities. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he spoke of the way in which “the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power” (1 Corinthians 4:20). In addressing his young preacher protégé, Paul warned about religious professors who hold “to the form of godliness” while “denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5). When John encouraged first-century believers in Asia minor who were under the threat of false teaching, he assured them they had something the false teachers didn’t have. On more than one occasion, he spoke of the way in which the true believers have the Spirit of God to enlighten them (1 John 2:20 and 27).

The Sadducees of Jesus’ day erred in that they neither knew the Scriptures nor the power of the Holy Spirit. There is great application in Jesus’ words for modern believers. We must make ourselves well acquainted with the principles, paradigms, and precepts of the Bible. At the same time, we must seek the enabling power of the Holy Spirit so we might understand what we read and study. Without His illumination, we are merely vain religionists studying a book for

simple factual information. We must be careful we don't end up in the same sad spiritual state of the Sadducees, undervaluing the Bible and doubting its authority. To bask in the full revelation of God's truth, we need the Scriptures, and we need to rely on the Spirit of God to make their meaning clear to us.

### Verse 26

In verse 26, Jesus quoted Scripture to further His rebuttal. He said, "And as for the dead being raised—haven't you read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God said to him: I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob?" (Mark 12:26). Jesus was strategic in quoting from the Pentateuch. He did so for two reasons. First, He knew His opponents regarded the books of Moses as the only authority for faith and practice. Second, He wanted to expose their ignorance of the very portions of Scripture to which they professed allegiance. Earlier in their debate with Jesus they quoted Moses (Mark 12:19), but they weren't even aware of what Moses really taught.

Once again, Jesus revealed the real problem with the Sadducees — they were untethered from the anchor of God's Word. Because they denied the authority of Scripture, they were deceived by hollow doctrines. A warning is found for all generations. When we become more enamored with the ways of the world than the Word of the Lord, we place ourselves on a spiritual slippery slope. May we have the conviction of the Psalmist who sang, "Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105).

In the twenty-first century world in which we live, churches and Christians need a renewal of confidence in God's book. Preaching in the nineteenth century, J.C. Ryle said, "The churches which are most flourishing at this day are churches which honor the Bible...the godliest families are Bible reading families. The holiest men and women are Bible reading people. These are simple fact which cannot be denied."<sup>22</sup> The preacher's words still hold true. Speaking on his devotion to Scripture, Luther once said, "I have covenanted with my Lord that he should not send me visions, or dreams, or even angels. I am content with this one gift of Scriptures, which abundantly teaches and supplies all that is necessary both for this life and that which is to come."<sup>23</sup>

In referencing Moses' writings, Jesus referred to a certain "passage." His use of the term was peculiar to the first century and the early church. Notice He did not reference a chapter and verse as we do nowadays. Such conventions for Scripture referencing weren't invented until years later. In Jesus' day, people did

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<sup>22</sup> Ryle, 203.

<sup>23</sup> Spurgeon, Charles H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume X*. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1976), 536.

not have personal copies of God's Word. To hear the Bible, they normally had to travel to hear it read in a public place, perhaps a synagogue or a town square. Since people did not think of Scripture in terms of chapters and verses, most referred to Bible passages by speaking of the events recorded in a given passage. Paul used this device in Romans 11:2.<sup>24</sup> Jesus used it in our current passage.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, our Lord made reference to the events of Exodus 3.

Why did Jesus refer to the passage about Moses and the burning bush? First of all, He used it because it was a book the Sadducees regarded as having authority. Second, He used Exodus 3 because it contained an innuendo to resurrection truth. The passage was one that recorded the way in which the Lord began to fulfill land promises to the descendants of Abraham. He appeared in a burning bush to Moses in order to call the man to serve as a leader who would lead the Israelites into Canaan. In Exodus 3:6, the Lord introduced Himself as "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." His greeting was intended to show that Moses was ordained to fulfill all of the Lord's promises to the nation's forefathers.

Jesus placed emphasis on the way in which the Lord spoke about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the Lord's revelation of Himself to Moses, the men were depicted as being alive. In some other dimension they enjoyed living fellowship with Jehovah.<sup>26</sup> If God spoke of men who were deceased as if they were still alive, they must have been raised to eternal life. The Resurrection was true! It is for this reason Jesus cited Exodus 3:6 in dealing with the Sadducees.

Our Lord's method of argumentation provides us with lessons for modern apologetics and evangelism. We should be people who have God's Word stored in our heart so we are prepared to speak truth to those who may counteract the faith. The New Testament teaches us, "in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). Sharing Scripture is the best method for defending the faith and evangelizing. Our words have no power to change lives. God's Word, however, has intrinsic power that can change hearts (Roman 1:16). It has the ability to birth faith in the hearts of men, women, boys, and girls (Romans 10:17). Like Jesus, may we be faithful to sow the seed of God's Word in the minds of those who don't know Christ.

## Verse 27

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<sup>24</sup> Brooks, 196.

<sup>25</sup> Ferguson, 197.

<sup>26</sup> Schnabel, 299.

Jesus concluded His rebuttal of the Sadducees in verse 27 by saying, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living. You are badly mistaken” (Mark 12:27). Our Lord’s words in verse 27 can be seen as a response to the question He posed back in verse 24.<sup>27</sup> The Sadducees were mistaken because they didn’t view God as the God of the living. If God intended to fulfill promises to men who had already passed – – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – – those men must have been alive somehow. God is the God of the living. He will fulfill His promises. In the eternal state, He will not exist in mere solitude, all by Himself, with no one to experience the joy of His reward. No, for all of eternity He will shine his glory over those He has raised to eternal life.

Jesus concluded verse 27 with a strong, straightforward rebuke. He said, “You are badly mistaken.” Our Lord did not mince words. The Sadducees were deceived and they needed correcting. Earlier in verse 24, Jesus told the Sadducees they were “mistaken,” using the same word from our current verse. Now He doubles down on his accusation, and calls them “badly mistaken.” His point was to expose their grave spiritual and scriptural error.

God’s people should always be on guard to make sure they see things rightly. The temptation to skew God’s truth and to slide down the slippery-slope of erroneous doctrine is always present. God’s children must be faithful to make His Word the rule for their entire faith and practice. May we ever be on guard against being “badly mistaken” in the things of Christ.

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<sup>27</sup> Rogers, 95.