

“Jesus and the Secularists”
Matthew 22:23-33
September 8, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

After our series this summer on 1 Corinthians 13, we are picking up our study of Matthew where we left off last spring. Our text opens with a time stamp, revealing this as “the same day.” The same as what? It is the same day as when the Pharisees came to Jesus in an attempt to get him into trouble by wading into the political arena with their question about paying taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees were the conservatives of this day, holding to strict interpretations of the Scriptures and their requirements. After Jesus silenced the Pharisees, the Sadducees come forward to take their crack at getting him in trouble. They were the liberals of the day, denying that there was any afterlife at all. Jesus was being attacked from all sides. The conservatives thought he was too liberal and the liberals thought he was too conservative. As a general rule, we can know that we are on the right track of following Jesus when both conservatives and liberals find fault with us.

So we want to look today at the opposition brought by the Sadducees. They were comparable to the secularists of our day, which makes this a very relevant topic for us. Matthew tells us that they didn’t believe in the resurrection. They actually didn’t believe in any afterlife. Since they believed that this life is all there is, they made the most of it. Frederick Bruner describes the Sadducees as being “in love with Greek culture, in collaboration with Roman power, thoroughly Hellenized, pleasure-loving, wealthy, aristocratic, and with family connections to religious power.” Similar to religious liberals today, who receive the teachings of Jesus but reject Paul, they received the first five books of the Old Testament as the sure word of God, while rejecting the rest.

So this passage is quite relevant to our own day, a day in which secularization has such power. For example, when a young person decides to renounce the faith of his or her upbringing and embrace some form of unbelief, it is applauded as a courageous act. Five-hundred years ago, such an act would have been seen as lunacy, if not worse. Such renunciations of religious faith are sharply rising. Church membership in America has plummeted over the last twenty years, going from 70% of the population in 1999 to 50% today. Many have written about the growth of the “Nones,” describing those who check the “None” box under the religious affiliation question. In 1957, 1% of the population claimed no religious affiliation. Today, it is 20%.

There is a powerful wave of secularization washing over our culture today. Will your faith be able to stand up in the face of this threat? Will your

children's faith be able to withstand its assault? Jesus' answer to the Sadducees will help us stand.

I. Secular Opposition

Ironically, the Sadducees, who don't believe in a resurrection, ask Jesus a question about the resurrection. This is a tipoff to us that the motive behind their question is not that of the honest inquirer, but something more sinister. They want to reduce Jesus' popularity with the people by making him look foolish. Their question is based on a provision from Deuteronomy 25, where Moses commanded a practice known as "levirate marriage." It was actually a practice that pre-dated Moses, but Moses here seeks to regulate it. The name "levirate marriage" comes from the Latin word "levir," which means "husband's brother." It was a practice that required a brother to marry the widow of his deceased brother if this woman had not any children from her first husband. Any offspring arising from this new marriage would be considered the child of the deceased husband.

Levirate marriage served two important purposes in Israel. First, it provided for the financial needs of the widow. In the days before Social Security, life insurance or retirement accounts, the normal way that widows were provided for was by their children caring for them. Levirate marriage was designed to provide a woman with such care. Second, it was also designed in Israel to preserve family land, which was passed down to the next generation through sons. The preservation of family land was an essential part of economic provision, since this was an agrarian society where land was the chief form of capital.

The Sadducees present Jesus with a nightmare scenario of levirate marriage. A woman loses not just a first husband while remaining childless, but also a second brother and five other brothers, with every marriage being childless. She goes through seven brothers all together, with not a single child from any of the seven. It is likely that this never happened. There was a story from Genesis 38 in which Judah's second son, Onan, married the widow of his brother, Er, in order to fulfill the levirate marriage obligation. This second husband, Onan, also died childless after being judged by God for his wickedness. But Judah's third son, Shelah, was not given to her. There was a nightmarish tale from the apocryphal book of Tobit, which tells the bizarre story of a woman who married seven times only to have each husband strangled by a demon in the bed chamber on the wedding night. After presenting Jesus with this scenario, the Sadducees then bring their question, one they were convinced would stump Jesus and make him look like an unsophisticated rube. **"In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her"** (v. 28).

As was already mentioned, it is clear that their question is insincere, indicated by the fact that they didn't believe in the resurrection. Their insincerity is made doubly clear by the mention of seven husbands when only two would have been adequate if their purpose were to satisfy a real question in their minds. The mention of seven husbands reveals that their real motive is to mock Jesus' conservative views, particularly his belief in the resurrection. One gets the feeling that this was an argument the Sadducees had used frequently against their more conservative opponents, the Pharisees. Undoubtedly, until they met Jesus anyway, it had proved to be an effective one.

As I read this account, I wondered what the modern day equivalent of this objection might be. That is, what is the best argument presented by today's secularists? I think it is the problem of suffering. It argues that, in light of the presence of evil and suffering in this world, God can be either good or all powerful, but not both. If he is able to stop suffering and evil but doesn't, then he is not good. Or if he wants to stop it, and clearly it is not stopped, then he is not all powerful. And if God lacks either infinite power or goodness, then he's not really God. This argument has led many astray. Before answering it explicitly, let's notice how Jesus answered his secularist opponents.

II. The Answer to Secular Opposition

Jesus' first words to the Sadducees let them know clearly that they are off track. The ESV translation, **"You are wrong,"** is not ideal. That phrase translates one word in the original that is a passive verb with the idea, "You are being led astray." Their problem wasn't that they had the wrong answer in their minds, but the wrong values and motive of the heart. But a passive verb indicates that someone or something else is in the role of an active power. Something is leading them astray. What is it? Jesus said it was the fact that they **"know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God."** In other words, they were being led astray by the soul-deadening denial of the supernatural, something they should have known from the Scriptures. To turn this in a positive direction, then, we can learn from Jesus that the two things we need if we and our children are to withstand the assault of secularism is a confidence in the power of God that comes from knowing the Scriptures.

Jesus addresses first their ignorance of God's power. **"For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven"** (v. 30). If you are in a good marriage, this may sound like bad news to you. Your marriage to your spouse will not continue in the next life. The Sadducees' error, and the error many today also make, is thinking of heaven as largely like this life but just improved. So people have questions like, "Will my dog be in heaven?" or "Will there be sex in heaven?" and many other such questions. The Bible doesn't answer these questions explicitly. But we can give an answer. If God wants it to be in heaven, it will be there. If it's not in

heaven, we won't miss it, because the Lord will give something better. So the Sadducees were underestimating the transformation we will experience in heaven.

This is what is meant by Jesus' words that we will be like the angels in heaven. He doesn't say that we will become angels, but that we will be *like* the angels. Angels don't die, and neither will we. So procreation won't be necessary. The angels in heaven reflect the glory of God, and so will we. Have you ever read in the Bible the response of humans when an angelic visitor is received? Sometimes the angel assumes a purely human form in order not to frighten the human. But at other times, their glory is not veiled, with the result that those encountering them become so frightened that they can't even stand. Do you remember that famous C. S. Lewis quote? "Remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship." We err not by overestimating, but by underestimating the glories of heaven.

Not only were the Sadducees ignorant of the power of God, but also of the Scriptures. As was mentioned earlier, they received only the first five books of the Old Testament. So Jesus takes them to the part they did receive to show that they have misread it. Not only does he take them to the books of Moses, in order to prove the resurrection, he takes them to a passage the Jews regarded as one of its most significant ones. Exodus 3 is the passage where Moses asks for the name of God. **"I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."**

How does this verse prove the resurrection? It does so in two ways. First, these three patriarchs had been dead for centuries by the time of Moses. Yet God says he is their God even now. Since God is the God of the living and not the dead, that must mean that these three were still living, though they had been dead for centuries. Second, these words are important words of God's covenant faithfulness. He made promises to these three patriarchs that he would be their God forever, and that requires that they live forever. Jesus didn't believe in a metaphorical resurrection. Woody Allen once said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying." That's the kind of immortality Jesus believes in too, and he will bring it about.

Note here the high view Jesus had of the Scriptures. He believed that the smallest part of the Bible's words are inspired, extending even to the tense of a verb. God said, "I *am* the God of Abraham," not "I *was* the God of Abraham." He also believed in the living, ongoing relevancy of God's word. Notice what he says in verse 31: **"Have you not read what was said to you by God."** Words written 1500 years before Jesus lived are said here to be the words of God to these Sadducees these many years later.

Let's apply this to ourselves. Jesus said that the error of these secularist Sadducees was their failure to know either the Scriptures or the power of God. Don't those two go together? They are related as cause and effect. How are you going to know the power of God apart from knowing the Scriptures? It is in the Bible that we read of the mighty acts of God. To know and believe the Bible, with its many stories of God's power at work, in ways both subtle and brazen, arms us to withstand the errors of secularism. Another C. S. Lewis quote comes to mind here. "Like a good chess player, Satan is always trying to maneuver you into a position where you can save your castle only by losing your bishop." Don't give up your bishop, by which I am referring to the gift of God's word to you in the Scriptures.

How can we possibly withstand the powerful assault of secularism today? Jesus tells us how, and it is through the word of God. We have the Holy Spirit and we have the word of God and we have the Church of God, and that will be enough. So let me mention two specific applications. First, bring your children to Sunday School and come yourself. There is something about learning in community with others that is very powerful and effective. Second, teach your children the word of God at home. As valuable as resources like Sunday School and Christian school might be, they are no substitute for teaching the Bible in the home. That is the method commanded over and over in the Bible. Read through the book of Proverbs and note how often this is commanded.

CONCLUSION:

How does the Bible help us answer the best argument of today's secularists, the problem of evil and suffering that I mentioned earlier? The Bible teaches us that the power of God is so great that he can take the most evil act ever done, the crucifixion of the Son of God, and turn it into the one act that saves sinful, rebellious humanity and the entire creation. Just because we may not be able to see the purposes of suffering in our lives or in the lives of others doesn't mean that God doesn't have purposes. And we know because of his willingness to give his Son that God's purposes toward us are loving. The problem of evil is a stumbling block only if our God is a small God. But our God is a big God, able to secure a future for each one of his children that is so good that the Bible says human language is incapable of describing it. The apostle Paul told of a time when he was taken up to heaven. Of course, everyone would want him to describe his experience. He wrote that he **"heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter"** (2 Corinthians 12:4). In another place, he writes, **"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"** (1 Corinthians 2:9). The power of God will bring it about. Let us put our trust in him.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 22:23-33

1. If we define secularization as the worldview that makes religious unbelief and atheism more plausible, where in our nation do you see secularization gaining in power?
2. What effect does the growing influence of secularism have on you? What effect should it have?
3. It was noted that Sadducees' question to Jesus about marriage in the resurrection was not an honest question. That is, their real goal was not to have Jesus explain something they were confused about, but to trip him up and make his conservative position look silly. Do you think the same might be true of those who claim to be bothered by the problem of suffering? Why or why not?
4. Jesus' response to the Sadducees shows us how the church should respond to the growing influence of secularization. How would you summarize the appropriate response of the church today to secularization?
5. What is your response to Jesus' statement about no marriage in the resurrection? How does this statement illustrate his point about the power of God?
6. Jesus proves the resurrection by reference to a passage from Exodus 3. Review his argument and make sure you understand it. (You may need to refer to the sermon notes for this.)
7. Do you believe there is a cause and effect connection between knowing the Scriptures and the power of God? If so, how do the Scriptures help us know the power of God?
8. What have you found to be most helpful in your practices of reading and meditating upon the Scriptures?
9. Are there any changes that you want to make in your practices related to Bible reading/meditation? If you have children still at home, are there any changes needed in the area of teaching the Bible to them?