

LUKE

Part 75: “Jesus Versus Bad Theology”

Luke 20:27-44

By David A. Ritchie

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Scripture Reading

“There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.’ Then some of the scribes answered, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’ For they no longer dared to ask him any question. But he said to them, ‘How can they say that the Christ is David’s son? For David himself says in the Book of Psalms, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?’” (Luke 20:27–44, ESV).

Introduction

There are certain things you would never want to do.

You would never want to get into a fistfight with Mike Tyson. You would never want to try to score a touchdown against an NFL Linebacker. You would never want to publicly heckle a comedian when that comedian has a microphone and a quick wit at his disposal. And, most importantly, you would never want to get into a theological argument with God.

Yet, that is exactly what has happened all throughout Luke, chapter 20. We are in a portion of the gospel, according to Luke, where Jesus has arrived in the city of

Jerusalem. Ever since his arrival, the religious leaders have been trying to argue with him and humiliate him.

There is tremendous irony at play. Most of these religious leaders have been longing for the kingdom of heaven to come on earth. They have been longing for the promised Messiah to appear. They have been longing for God to speak to his people.

Now, there is one who stands before them, who is the embodiment of the kingdom of heaven. He is the Messiah. He is God-in-human-flesh, speaking to them.

But the theological preconceptions of these religious leaders prevent them from seeing Jesus for who he really is. Their theology – which literally means *knowledge of God* – prevents them from knowing God.

This provokes an important question: it is possible for theological speculation itself to be the thing that stands between God and us?

I ask this question as a pastor who is very much pro-theology. In fact, I love theology, and I've given thousands of hours of my life to studying theology.

Just so we are clear on terminology, here is a simple definition of theology. Theology is simply *what we believe to be true about God*.

And I believe that the American church needs more theology, not less theology. But I want to be clear on what I mean by that. What we need is *good* theology, not *bad* theology.

Good theology leads to a greater devotion to God. But bad theology can lead to distraction from God.

Good theology leads to trusting faith, loving worship, and heartfelt obedience. But bad theology can puff us up with pride and foster division in the body of Christ.

We will see in this passage that Jesus refuses to be bound by our preconceptions and categories of bad theology. He will not entertain man-made theological speculations or play our theological games.

But, more importantly, what I hope to show you is that Jesus is better than we could ever imagine. He is better than what man-made, bad theology could ever conceive.

In unpacking this passage of Scripture, we are going to look at *1.) The Sadducees' question for Jesus, and 2.) Jesus' question for the Sadducees.*

Exposition

1. The Sadducees' Question for Jesus

During Jesus' lifetime, there were multiple religious factions among the Jewish people. These factions would have all considered themselves to be Jewish, but they differed in their what they believed and how they practiced their religion. This is somewhat similar to the Christian denominations we have today.

Up until this point in the gospel of Luke, we have mostly seen Jesus argue with the Pharisees. But in this passage, a new set of challengers approach – they are the *Sadducees*.

The Sadducees were made up of the upper-class of Jewish society. They were aristocratic and highly-educated. They felt they had a more sophisticated and intellectually respectable version of the Jewish faith.¹

As verse 27 states, the Sadducees did not believe in “the resurrection.” Now, according to old school Judaism, “the resurrection” was short-hand for a future hope in which God would judge all wickedness, he would establish his kingdom on earth, and all of his people would rise again from the dead.

But the Sadducees did not believe any of this. They pretty much-denied anything that seemed supernatural. They didn't believe that people had souls or that angels existed (cf. Acts 23:8). And they certainly didn't believe in heaven or any version of the afterlife. That's why the Sadducees were so *sad, you see*.

Up until this point in Luke, the scribes and Pharisees have been put to shame by the brilliant wisdom of Jesus. Now, the Sadducees want a turn.

They have a theological question that they think will stump everyone, including Jesus. It should be noted that this is not in any way a serious or practical question. Rather, their question is purely speculative. It's not intended to help anyone or anything. It is the hypothetical scenario of “one bride for seven brothers.”

Let's go back to the text, beginning in verse 28: “*and they asked him a question, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife’*” (Lk 20:28–33).

¹ “The Sadducees originated as a priestly sect claiming descent from Zadok, the high priest under David (1 Kgs 1:26). In Jesus' day they were no longer exclusively priestly but were a party or circle of priestly and lay aristocrats, Hellenistic in orientation, who catered to the well-to-do. They were bitter opponents of the Pharisees, who were a lay party with whom most Jews were sympathetic. This hostility went back to the second century before Christ (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.5.9 [13.171–73]; 13.10.6 [13.293–98]). After Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70, the Sadducees disappeared from the scene.” Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 501.

This question is based on a fairly obscure law in the Old Testament, known as “levirate marriage.” Essentially, it was a law that was designed to protect widows, who, in the ancient world, were among the most vulnerable people in society. Remember, most marriages were arranged marriages. And a widow would have been a severe disadvantage in trying to find a new husband. But according to the law of levirate marriage, it would have been the deceased husband’s role and responsibly to marry and provide for his brother’s widow (cf. Dt 25:5).

Here’s the big idea: the context and intent of the Old Testament law in question was about protecting vulnerable women. It is not a verse about the afterlife. But the Sadducees are intentionally taking this verse out of context to argue for a theological hobby-horse issue. They want to use this law as a way to disprove the reality of a future resurrection and afterlife.

On this point, I want to give you a little bit of advice when you are discussing theology. *There are no correct answers to inherently wrong questions.*

The Sadducees’ question is absurd, and they know it. This really is along the same line of other absurd “defeater” questions we might hear today by an online troll in an internet forum, like, “Could God make a rock so big that he couldn’t lift it?” or “Could God microwave a burrito so hot that he couldn’t eat it?” The question is ridiculous.

Jesus’ response is brilliant. He tells the Sadducees that they are still thinking in terms of this age and this reality. In the age that is to come, God is going to make all things new, and it is going to be better than anything we can imagine.

For this reason, whenever the Old Testament prophets talk about eternity, they have to use metaphors that defy reality as we know it. Here is a great example from the Prophet Isaiah: *“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea”* (Isa 11:6–9).

For God’s people, the goodness of the age to come is beyond our capacity to describe or conceive.

So, what then about marriage? Does this passage suggest that marriage does not matter to God? Quite the contrary.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, we see that marriage is one of the ways that Christians are called to bear the image of Christ and his love for the church (Eph 5:31).

In Christianity, marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman that is designed to create an intimacy that comes only from deep commitment and sacrificial

love. The covenant of marriage at its best is a way in which people can experience being truly known and truly loved.

But even marriage, at its very best, it is still a shadow of an even greater, deeper, and more intimate union that is yet to come.

With this said, those who are married will not endure loss in eternity.² For all of God's people, heaven is only gain. And though we do not possess the capacities or categories to understand the age that is to come, we can trust the good character of the God who reigns overall.

Finally, Jesus concludes his response by illustrating how the Old Testament itself implies that God is not the God of the dead.³ Rather, he is the God of the living. He is forever the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Faith in God is not just a matter of cultural and moral fables. Rather, our faith is to be a living faith that entails all of our lives.

As a result, even the scribes are impressed with how well Jesus quickly and definitively demolishes the arguments of the Sadducees. Look at verses 39 and 40: *"Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.' For they no longer dared to ask him any question."*

2. Jesus' Question for the Sadducees

Jesus then turns the tables on the Sadducees and religious leaders who have been testing him for the last chapter. He asks a question no one can solve.

In Jewish religious culture, it's not about having the right answer; it's about having the right questions. A great question is more important than a great answer.

So, Jesus asks a question about the Messiah that comes from Psalm 110. Let's take a look at his question: *"But he said to them, 'How can they say that the Christ is David's son? For David himself says in the Book of Psalms, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?' (Lk 20:41–44).*

² "Granted that marriage is "until death do us part," will the intimacy, love, fellowship, and partnership between married Christians end at death? The NT does not give a complete answer to this question. It assumes that the need for love, fellowship, and whatever is necessary for joy and blessedness will be provided in the age to come. The believer in that age will lack nothing. Some things, however, will end. Like faith and hope, some "lesser" things will come to an end in order that the "greater" blessings of the kingdom may be even more intensified. So too will the sexual experience as we now know it (cf. Gen 1:28). Yet the believer, in faith, believes that if anything good in this age is not carried over in the age to come, it is because it will be replaced by something far, far better." Stein, 501.

³ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark International, 1896), 470.

Psalm 110 was not only considered a song that the Jewish people sang. It was a part of God's word, and in Jesus's lifetime, Psalm 110 was seen as a prophecy about the Messiah.

The word "Messiah" literally means "anointed one." Remember, at the time of Jesus' life, the Jewish people were under the authority of a pagan empire. They longed for the day when God would send forth an anointed king who would deliver them from the tyranny and bring God's kingdom on earth.

There were tons of Old Testament references and clues about who this Messiah would be and what he would do. One thing was for certain; he had to be a descendant of the Old Testament King David (cf. 2 Sam 7).

But Jesus points out something that apparently no one had ever seen before. If Psalm 110 was about the Messiah, and it was written by King David, how is it possible for David to call his own descendant, "Lord"?

In Jewish culture, the father was always accorded more honor than his son. How then is it possible for David – the greatest king of Israel, from the golden age of the kingdom – how is it possible for him to call his own descendant "Lord"?

All the scribes, all the Pharisees, all the Sadducees, all the chief priests are speechless. No one can give Jesus an intelligent response. Jesus refuses to answer his own riddle. And in the world of first-century Judaism, when you ask a question that no one can answer, that means you win.

Conclusion

Now, I realize that I have just given you a bit more historical background than you probably bargained for on this Sunday morning. I do think all of that background is essential if you actually want to understand today's passage of Scripture.

But how does this passage all fit together? And what does it mean for us today?

I'll answer that first question of "how does this passage all fit together?" Because I do believe there is a relationship between the question that the Sadducees ask Jesus and the question Jesus asks in return.

Jesus has shown the Sadducees that they simply cannot imagine the brilliant glory of the age to come. Our world is so broken and stained by sin, and God's New Creation will be so good that we simply don't possess the categories to understand what it will be like.

In the exact same way, by asking this question about Psalm 110, Jesus is showing the Jewish religious leaders that the anointed Messiah that God will send is different and better than what they could ever imagine.

How, Jesus asks, can David call one who is his descendant, his “Lord”? The answer that no Jewish leader could have ever dreamed of. The Messiah of Psalm 110 could only be true of one who was fully man, descended from the line of King David. But this Messiah would also be one who was also truly God. And what the religious leaders of Jerusalem do not realize is that Messiah, who is both truly man and truly God, is standing before them at that very moment!

Even more, in the days and weeks to come, the city of Jerusalem will witness the death and resurrection of Jesus. Soon afterward, Jesus’ followers will be filled with the Holy Spirit from on high, and an educated fisherman by the name of Simon Peter, will stand before the people of Jerusalem and give a sermon, in which he solves Jesus’s riddle of Psalm 110. Luke records that sermon in Acts 2:

“Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:30–36).

Why does this all matter for us today? It shows us that God has a long track record of shattering our preconceptions in the most surprising and glorious ways. It shows us that whatever we might be able to imagine about God, he is infinitely better!

Who could imagine a Trinity of one God in three persons? Who could imagine a fully human yet fully divine messiah? Who could imagine a holy God that is so good that he would hang on a cross for his enemies? Who would imagine a God who would die and rise again so that death itself might be defeated? Who would imagine a God, who when his creation rebelled, he chose to glorify himself by unfolding a plan of redemption to make all things new?

These theological truths are not speculations or hypothetical scenarios. These are the theological truths that move us to worship! These are the truths that have changed history! These are the truths of first importance (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-4)! These are the truths that will change your heart! These are the truths that will set you free! These are the truths that will give you hope!

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who stand before Jesus with humble hearts that are awestruck before the gospel of grace. May we embrace the theology of the gospel that leads us to great faith, worship, and obedience. And may we rest in the truth that the God of this gospel is better than our greatest imagination.

AMEN.

GC discussion starters

1. Read Luke 20:27-44. Summarize this passage as best as you can.
2. What does Luke tell us about the belief system of the Sadducees (also look at Acts 23:8)? How does the question the Sadducees ask Jesus reflect the bias of their belief system?
3. In what way does the Sadducees' belief system prevent them from seeing Jesus for who he really is? Have you ever seen bad theology be a distraction from truly knowing God?
4. The answer to bad theology is not an absence of theology; it is *good* theology. How do we develop good theology? How does good theology help us love and worship God?
5. What is at the heart of Jesus' question for the religious leaders in Lk 20:41-44? How does Peter's sermon in Acts 2 give an answer to this question (see Acts 2:30-36)?

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