

"Answering the Sadducees and Pharisees"

Lesson 24

Matthew 22:23-23:39; Mark 12:18-44; Luke 20:27-21:4

We left off last week on the Tuesday before Jesus' crucifixion. He had spent the day debating with the Jewish leaders. He wanted desperately to win them over, but instead provoked and frustrated them to the point where the very next day, they set up their wicked plan to kill Him. In our last lesson, Jesus had just silenced the Pharisees by extricating Himself from their trap regarding payment of taxes. Chagrined, they left to regroup and plan another tactic. Meanwhile, their political opponents, the Sadducees, came forward to try their hand at discrediting Jesus.

There are five areas of Jesus' teaching we're going to cover this week:

- 1) Marriage and Resurrection
- 2) The Greatest Commandment
- 3) The Identity of Messiah
- 4) The denunciation of the Jewish leaders
- 5) The widow's offering

First, the Sadducees were a religious sect, considered a political party of wealthy priests and laymen who formed the majority in the Jewish courts. The common people disliked them because the Sadducees had adopted many Greek customs in the past and in Jesus' day they had compromised on several issues with the Roman government. Their followers rejected many of the man-made traditions and practices of the Pharisees and instead believed in a strict interpretation of the Torah. They were often at odds with the Pharisees because they believed that eternal life was for the soul only and that the body would not be resurrected. So they came to Jesus with their ridiculous hypothetical example of a woman who had been widowed seven times in the same family of brothers. Jesus got right to the core of their problem in Matthew 22:29 – "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God."

When you think about it, that's the core problem of every decision made on the face of the earth. When people don't know the Scriptures, or the power of God, they rely instead on their own understanding and get it wrong most of the time. Jesus was clearly telling the Sadducees and all of us today that human wisdom and authority is limited. It deals with only what can be seen and understood.

In contrast, the Word of God reveals God's ways to be far above our own understanding. Psalm 119:99 says, "I have more insight than all my teachers because I meditate on your laws." In Isaiah 55:8-9 the Lord says, "My ways and thoughts are higher than yours." God's wisdom and authority encompass all of time and the power of the universe in a far greater way than we can ever imagine. It is unchanging over time. It is not subject to the laws of a monarch, the rule of a majority, the constitution of a country or the decisions of the judges. Whenever we attempt to reason things out for ourselves without a clear understanding of God's Word or His power as revealed in Scripture, we can make glaring mistakes.

The Sadducees' question regarding marriage and the resurrection was wrong for several reasons: first, Jesus says that marriage would not take place in heaven, so for those of you who have been married more than once, or were looking to be free from your spouse, you'll not have to worry about it. Marriage is a basic fundamental structure for meeting the emotional, social, physical and financial needs of individuals in a family, and is especially important for the raising of children. In heaven, we will be immortal and will not procreate and therefore will not need the family structure as we know it on earth. In addition, from the church's point of view, the intimacy of the relationship between husband and wife is a metaphor of the intimacy of each of our relationships with Christ Himself, His church, as his bride, anxiously awaits the return of our Bridegroom. Once in heaven, we will be like angels; not that we will *become angels*, but will be like them in that we will consider it our highest aim to worship Him and do His bidding.

Jesus went on to prove the resurrection by using Scripture itself, pointing out the words of Exodus 3:6 when God declared Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By declaring Himself, 'I AM', instead of, 'I WAS', God showed that the patriarchs were still living even though God was speaking hundreds of years after their deaths. His conclusion regarding the Sadducees' stance on the resurrection? "You are badly mistaken." (Mark 12:27)

Much to their embarrassment, Jesus' wisdom and their own shallowness was clearly exposed in front of the people. "Well said, Teacher!" was one response recorded in Luke; while Matthew writes that the crowds were astonished; their own leaders had been refuted again and again that day.

Now in Mark chapter 12 we pick up the next part of the scene with an expert in the law who posed an important question regarding the greatest commandment. The entire Mosaic Law consisted of over 600 individual commandments, all of which were the subject of constant debate as to which ones were binding and which were considered less important. Certainly there was plenty of argument as to which was the greatest. Would Jesus choose sides in this debate?

Instead of the Mosaic Law with all of its jots and tittles, Jesus went to Deuteronomy 6:4, and asserted the basis of the Jewish faith: the Shema which means, "Hear" and is recited even today at the beginning of the Jewish worship service. Listen to Mark 12:29-31:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these.

If you didn't know what Jesus had said, what would you have said is the greatest commandment?

Obey the Lord with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength?

How about worship with all your heart, soul, mind and strength?

How about do not covet . . . anything?

How about never tell a lie . . . ever?

How about do not murder . . . with words or actions?

Isn't one of those the greatest?

No, Jesus did not command obedience, worship, forbid greed, false anything, or killing. He commanded LOVE, agape, complete, unconditional love which comes from our hearts, our souls, our minds and our strength. How could anyone argue with that? It was a no-brainer . . .

end of argument. Simple . . . love God and love others. Profound . . . six hundred laws all summed up in two verses: love God and love others. Is it possible to love God so deeply that that love motivates us to go out and love others?

And why would God command us to love Him in the first place? Does He really want us to love Him merely because He commanded us? Doesn't He want us to choose to love Him? Does He want robots or people? It's sort of an oxymoron; loving because we are commanded is not real love at all . . . or is it? Not unless we know Scripture or the power of God! We can only understand why God has commanded us to love Him when we look at the Scriptures and see how much He has loved us since the creation of the universe. He knows our deepest needs and desires, shows each one of us His love in a way that suits us uniquely. He may show you His love with a beautiful piece of music. Or He may show you His love when you enjoy a delicious meal. Or when you win a round of golf, or when the timing in your busy schedule works out perfectly. Or when He gives you pleasure in helping someone who is in need. Perhaps His love is shown when you're awakened to watch a beautiful sunrise or smell the perfume of roses blooming in your garden.

He loves us first because God wants to be loved by us. You've heard it said, I'm sure, that in every human heart is an empty place that only God can fill. But the reverse is also true: God has an empty place in His heart that only I can fill, and a place that only you can fill with your unique life experiences and giftedness. He desperately longs for you and has since the beginning of time. The only way God's empty space can be filled is if you will come to Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Your love is so desired by the King of Kings, that He has made it His greatest commandment. In fact, you were created to love Him. Your love is vitally important to Him.

Do you see this? More importantly, do you believe it? The teacher of the law who had questioned Jesus in the first place saw it, and agreed with Jesus.

"Well said, Teacher, you are right. Loving God and your neighbor as yourself is more important than burnt offerings." (Mark 12:32-33)

Jesus saw the sincerity of the man's response and gave him the encouragement to continue on his quest: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Why "not far" but not "in" yet? The man lacked one thing that the thief on the cross would understand just three days from then; repentance. Repentance of his sin, recognition of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, and the only way to heaven, and this could only come with an understanding of how much God loved him – enough to sacrifice His only Son.

Matthew picks up the narrative in chapter 22:41. Time was short and Jesus knew that most of the Jewish leaders were not yet convinced of who He was and His purpose for coming. He wanted desperately for them to know the truth. He wanted their love! "What do you think about the identity of the Messiah?" he questioned them. Their answer clearly shows that they knew that the Messiah came from the line of King David. So Jesus went back to the Scriptures to pose them a question based on the first verse of Psalm 110. This psalm was widely accepted by the rabbis as Messianic. It says:

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

If the Christ was merely the son of David, why did the Lord Almighty address the Messiah as His Son? In other words, how could Messiah be God's Son and David's son at the

same time? In addition, how could Messiah be David's son and his Lord at the same time? Remember that their concept of Messiah would be a conquering King who would fight against Roman occupation and restore a physical kingdom on earth. What Jesus was trying to do was show them that Messiah is someone who was different than King David from whom He was descended. They were now physically confronted with their Messiah in person, with a totally different ministry and function than they had been expecting.

His questions and answers both puzzled and angered them at the same time. The common people were not expected to understand and respond to deep theological questions, but the leaders? Well that was another story! Although they normally loved to debate, they were clearly frustrated and did not dare ask Him any more questions lest they continue to look stupid. Instead, they became more determined to get rid of Him. Here were the leaders of the nation, the very guardians of the sheep gate and not only did they reject Him, but they were leading the people to reject Him also.

Jesus' emotions began to well up. As the Jewish teachers and leaders walked away from Him, the time for tender appeal was over. Jesus turned to the people and delivered a series of stinging rebukes for all to hear. He denounced the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law, assuring them of damnation, and then overwhelmed with emotion, He wept with sorrow over their coming fate. Let's look at these last words to the Jewish nation as recorded in Matthew 23:

Verses 1-3: Then Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

Although the leaders had proper authority, they burdened the people with man-made rules and regulations from which they exempted themselves. They made an outward show of holiness by wearing phylacteries, scrolls of paper or parchment, on which were written paragraphs of the law, on their foreheads and left arms in order to be thought more zealous for the law than others. The command in Deuteronomy 5:8 regarding God's commands was to "tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads." The Pharisees of later ages distorted the message into the materialistic practice of phylactery. In conservative Jewish circles it has been maintained throughout the centuries, and Orthodox Judaism faithfully follows it even today. Every male, who at the age of 13 become bar mitzvah-ed, must wear the phylactery and perform the accompanying ceremonial.

God appointed the Jews in Numbers 15:38 to wear tassels upon their garments which would swirl about their ankles as they walked to remind them of God's commands; but the Pharisees made them larger than common, as if they were thereby more religious than others. Jesus flatly denounced their self-pride.

He then denounced their love of titles and places of honor, reminding them that honor in God's kingdom comes from serving rather and exalting self.

As He continued, Jesus became more agitated as He was reminded of the many ways that the leaders and succumbed to the enemy. He pronounced the famous "Woes" beginning in Matthew 23:13 . . .

1. The scribes and Pharisees had become enemies to the gospel of Christ and, therefore, to the salvation of the souls of men. It's bad enough to refuse to acknowledge the truth of Who Jesus is, but far worse to keep others from knowing Him.

2. Now here is a NIV trivial pursuit question for you: what does Matthew 23:14 say? (It's missing! But you can find the same idea in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47). The footnote, however, says the missing verse is this: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Therefore you will be punished more severely."

The Pharisees must have been known to exploit widows' hospitality then pretend piety with long-winded prayers. For this Jesus charged them with hypocrisy.

3. Then Jesus attacked those who travel to distant land to make converts, not from Gentiles to Jews, but to convert Jews to becoming Pharisees. Each generation of Pharisees drifted farther from the law and became more zealously and completely devoted to man-made traditions.

4. Next Jesus attacked those who make a show of verbalizing binding oaths that were based on gold, the temple, the altar or even heaven itself. Recall that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that any oath beyond our own 'yes' or 'no' came from the evil one.

5. Continuing, Jesus pointed out the foolishness of the meticulous tithing of possessions instead of practicing justice, mercy and faithfulness, which truly manifested devotion to God's people. He called the leaders, "blind guides that strain out the gnat, and swallow a camel!" An expression showing that they cared too much for little faults and lacked concern for what really mattered.

6. Jesus then compared the Pharisees to a woman who washes the outside of her dishes so they look clean, but left the inside dirty, indicating greedy, self-indulgent hearts inside those who appear to the world as well-groomed and well-dressed. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was like the ornaments of a grave, or dressing up a dead body, only for show.

His anger reached a crescendo when Jesus used the same words John the Baptist had used three years ago: "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" Jesus recognized that it was the devil himself who had blinded the eyes of His people. The very one who had deceived God's people to murder the prophets, all the way back to Abel, the son of Adam up to the murder of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles, a long list of God's spoke-persons had not only been ignored, but may had been put to death for daring to proclaim the Word of the Lord in the face of opposing public opinion.

Because of this, Jesus declared for all to hear, the coming miseries of His own people. "And so will come upon you all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth!" The thought of it brought such grief that Jesus cried out in Matthew 23:37, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, . . ."

How strange and unique for Jesus to identify Himself as a mother! Talk about an intimate relationship. Mother is the source of life, the source of physical and emotional nurturing and comfort. A mother knows her child's needs before they are expressed in words. A mother distinguishes her child's cry from all others in the nursery. A mother's heart breaks when her child is hurt physically or emotionally. Jesus related to what a mother knows; the pains of knowing what lies ahead for a child who goes his or her own way, not knowing the Scriptures or the power of God. If you are a mother whose heart has been broken, Jesus identifies with your pain. He felt it here deeply.

“. . . but you were not willing.” Jesus wanted to *gather* them. In heaven, there will be no need for marriage . . . you’ll have ME! What is the greatest commandment: Love ME, because I desire your love so desperately. I am the Messiah, the son of David with a different agenda, not to defeat Rome, but to defeat Satan himself. Christ wanted the salvation of Jerusalem; His will was for them to be saved. He came to Jerusalem to die for them, but first, He wanted them to know that He loved them from the beginning. But they refused, and their rejection was too much for Him.

Matthew 23:38 “Look, your house is left to you desolate.” Jesus was about to leave the temple, and once He became the sacrificial lamb, God would no longer accept its worship. “For I tell you,” said Jesus, “you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.’” With the departure of Jesus, the presence of God departs. Now, its fate was sealed for destruction a mere forty years later. These were the last words in the temple precincts, but they were not without hope. Until you say, Blessed is He who comes . . . The Jews will once again have the opportunity to behold their Messiah in the final conversion of Israel when every knee will bow, and they will look upon the One whom they pierced and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Why did Matthew record the vivid details of the scathing denunciation of the Jewish leaders? Certainly it was not so that we could join in their condemnation, but rather so that we could examine ourselves and ask how we are guilty of the same. There’s always that danger that what was prevalent among the Jewish religious leaders is also always tempting us: spiritual pride, love of self, the worship of others, hypocrisy.

Do we want the praise of other for our outward holiness, lofty prayers, and our good deeds? If so, then we do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. For it is He who strengthens the weak, makes wise the simple, enriches the poor in spirit, and exalts the humble.

Scripture does not record how anyone responded to Jesus’ words of denunciation or cry of rejection. I would imagine that there was shocked silence for a time. Mark 12:41 records that Jesus happened to be across from the temple treasury where people came and placed their monetary offerings in large inverted megaphone-shaped containers. The wealthy made sure that they were noticed. Jesus probably sat down, and may have put His head in His hands for a time, emotionally and physically drained.

But He looked up and observed a poor widow putting in two small coins. Jesus saw her just at the time that He needed encouragement and what she did must have blessed Him: extravagant worship, an expression of her love that was noticed by no one except the One who had created her and knew her heart and her circumstances. Despite the rejection of the leaders, a seemingly insignificant woman still loved Him with all her heart, soul, mind and strength. She knew enough of the Scriptures and the power of God to provide for her needs, despite her poverty. He called the disciples to notice what she gave and said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.”

Here was an example of how one loves the Lord, trusting Him to provide, giving out of poverty rather than out of an excess of her wealth. We don’t have to be able to debate great theological mysteries, or perform outward acts of devotion to be loved by the God of the Universe. If we know the Scriptures and the power of God, we can appreciate what looks

insignificant to the world, may well be extravagant to God. When we know the Scriptures and the power of God, we will be prepared when He returns so we can join with those who will say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."