

A Lesson in an Absurd Question

Luke 20:27-40

In the time between Palm Sunday and the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus, we find Jesus still doing what He had been doing since His earthly ministry began: teaching. Luke and the other Gospel writers tell us that Jesus used these days in the Temple courts to keep teaching, and to continue to use the language and lessons and methods of teaching that would reach those being taught. Sometimes that might mean that the lesson would zip right over the heads of other people that might be listening, like we might sometimes miss the significance of something Jesus was saying to the keeper of a vineyard or a shepherd. Those people got it, and we do too, eventually, even if we have to work at it a little. This lesson for the Sadducees is one of those that might initially leave us scratching our heads. Let's see if we can get to its meaning for us.

READ Luke 20:27-40

It is worth reminding ourselves who the Sadducees were. Luke reminds us right at the beginning of this passage that the Sadducees did not believe in the concept of resurrection of the dead – which made them sad, you see (sorry, I couldn't resist that) – a good way to remember that particular characteristic of their group. What is less obvious to us is that the Sadducees were the aristocracy among the Jewish people. The Pharisees were an exclusively religious group, with no interest in politics as long as the government left them alone to enforce the religious laws, which for the most part the Romans were fine with as long as civil order was maintained and the taxes were all paid. The Sadducees were a much smaller group, generally quite wealthy; most of the priests were in that group. The Pharisees accepted all Scripture as valid and binding, plus all the rules and regulations that they had developed out of the Law of Moses and the prophets. The Sadducees accepted only the direct Law of Moses as binding, and did not place any value on the teachings of the prophets. Their discounting of the prophets meant, among other things, that they had no concept of the Messiah. That was fine with them, because a Messiah like the Pharisees expected would upset their world and threaten their authority and power and wealth. Stay tuned to the story after this, because the real Messiah did just that, and they killed Him. We'll get to that.

The question that the Sadducees posed to Jesus is absurd because they didn't believe in the resurrection anyway. What difference was the answer going to make? It would be like me arguing with someone who claimed to be a wizard about the color of the horn on a unicorn. But Jesus was not going to miss an opportunity to teach. The Sadducees subscribed to the provision in the Law of Moses that required exactly the sequence of marriages that their question presumes. The outcome of that sequence of events in their minds was the kind of thing that made the whole idea of resurrection ridiculous. Jesus smacked them between the eyes with His response. Don't you love the end of this passage? The Pharisees were listening to all this, and when Jesus shut the Sadducees up, they were giving each other high-fives and talking some smack themselves. Can you imagine the look Jesus gave the one that yelled out "Well said, teacher!" Suddenly, nobody had any more questions for Jesus.

There are two important parts to Jesus' answer to the Sadducees that give meaning to this passage for us. We'll take them in reverse order.

Jesus went right to the heart of what the Sadducees claimed to believe with his reference to Moses and the burning bush. They knew the story, and believed the story, but it had never occurred to them that the way God identified Himself to Moses, as Moses stood barefoot in that holy place, validated the concept of the resurrection of the dead. This is not just about resurrection; it is about the fundamental nature of God. When God is identified as the "God of..." somebody, it speaks to a relationship, the relationship of oneness with God that God made us for from the beginning. God was telling Moses that He had a living, personal relationship with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in that moment, hundreds of years after those men had been dead and buried. God's relationship, God's covenant, God's protection, God's promises did not stop when those men died. God's relationship with us is not limited by our mortality. God Himself transcends time to extend that relationship and that covenant and that protection and those promises into eternity for God's people, for those who choose relationship with God. God's people, those who choose relationship with God, are alive and present with God in eternity. If we make that choice, we are alive and present with God in eternity now. Eternal life in the presence of God does not begin when we die; it begins when we come into that relationship, when God would identify Himself in

a burning bush as the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob and the God of me, the God of you. Let that soak in for a minute. How much greater could it be than for God to describe Himself as the God of me? That is exactly what God offers us, all the time.

The lesson in the absurd question is that the questioners had no idea what they were talking about. The lesson from Jesus about the nature of marriage in heaven is not nearly as much about marriage, anywhere, as it is about the nature of heaven. Jesus is telling the Sadducees that their question is absurd because it is grounded in a complete lack of understanding about the nature of heaven, the nature of eternity in the presence of God. They were assuming that if heaven existed, it would be some image of life on earth. That assumption demonstrated their failure to listen to the prophets. Hear how Isaiah describes eternity in the presence of God:

READ Isaiah 65:17-25

That is not simply an improved version of life on earth. That is a whole new life, a whole new creation, an existence in the presence of God that is beyond our imagination. It is an existence of perfection, including perfection in relationships among those living there. That perfection is mediated by God, where all are one in relationship with God, and, through that relationship with God, where all are one perfectly with each other. Jesus doesn't answer the question about whose wife the woman in the question would be because the question is absurd in the context of what perfect relationships will be in eternity. The legalities of human marriage are overwhelmed by the perfection of relationships mediated by God, and the Sadducees are still wondering what color a unicorn's horn might be.

We rejoice in the truth that God is the God of the living, eternally, and that in His great love for us, through His grace toward us, God offers us the choice to be among the living. God offers us not some better version of the life we have, but a whole new life of joy and peace that even Isaiah struggled to describe. Listen to the God of the living call you to that life, now, to hear God joyfully claim to be the God of you.

Amen