

## Questioning Jesus

Matthew 22:23-33

### Introduction

**Perplexing Question (Perplexing Passage):** Do you ever come across tough questions?

- Why do you drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?
- How does a snow plow driver get to work?
- If you were driving at the speed of light, what would happen if you turned your headlights on?
- Why does “fat chance” and “slim chance” mean the same thing?

I bring those up because today’s passage revolves around a perplexing question. Today’s passage is *not* one I would normally choose to preach (but we don’t skip passages, *even the hard ones*). It’s difficult on a *lot* of levels.

- Historical distance (Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians, etc.).
- Theologically difficult question (but not one asked in good faith).
- There are issues of personal discipleship involved. **Remember the context.** The **Pharisees** had already come to him to *test* him with a question of authority (Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?). This week we find another group coming to test Jesus again. Remember, these questions occur in this larger context of how the people of Jerusalem relate to Jesus.
  - **Everyone wants to co-opt, corrupt, or discredit Jesus**, his authority, and his message. But he is King of all kings and the only appropriate response is to submit your life wholly into his loving care.

**Who are the Sadducees?:** We learn a few things about the Sadducees from today’s and other passages. And history fills in some of the gaps, giving a little color to the b&w picture we briefly see of this group.

- If the Pharisees are the fundamentalists, focusing on separation from the world, trying to live lives of holiness and personal piety then the Sadducees are the more worldly Jews, who don’t mind acquiring wealth and positions of power and influence. They’re the priestly noble class who have more political influence and clout. They hold the most seats on the Jewish Supreme Court (i.e., Sanhedrin).
  - Their theology and their lifestyle support each other. The Sadducees (unlike the Pharisees) didn’t believe in an afterlife, angels, demons, or anything of the sort.
  - They “believed in God” but they were thoroughgoing materialists. What you see is what you get. This world is all there is. God is distant and uninvolved, like a Deistic vision (he got this whole thing started but now it can run on its own). When you die, show’s over, lights out, so might as well live it up now.
  - This showed up in the way they lived, they valued their political and social power at the temple but it didn’t impact the way they lived the rest of their lives.

**What is Theology?:** You'll notice in today's passage that these **Sadducees** come to Jesus with what appears to be a **theological question**, but don't miss that their theology is being used to justify their lifestyle.

- They are trying to use theology to justify their sin and trap Jesus rather than coming to Jesus to allow him to shape their theology?
- What is theology? It comes from the words meaning "the study of God" (i.e., *theos* + *logos*). The goal of Christian theology is to know God **as he reveals himself to us** so that we can **love him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength**.
- "Who is God and what is his gospel?" (Christy Thornton).

**Everyone is a theologian.** Everyone has a belief about God, right and wrong, eternity, purpose, etc.

- "The special mark of the modern world is not that it is skeptical, but that it is dogmatic without knowing it" (G. K. Chesterton).
- It might not be religion, but plenty of people have found righteousness in other ways (organic this-or-that, recycling, the latest social media banner). Houses all over our city and bumpers all over the world are dotted with little banners proclaiming various means of righteousness (e.g., political alliances, ideological causes, etc.).
- But what is theology if it is not God-focused. If it doesn't start with God. When we use our theology to justify ourselves and prop up our latest cause, we miss it's beauty.

What happens is that our insufficient theology has gaps. Remember Jurassic Park? (Sorry, like 20% of my brain is filled with useless movie trivia). Why there was more than one movie, I'll never know (did they learn nothing?!?). But the story goes that they filled missing dinosaur DNA with regular lizard DNA to fill in the gaps. That's what happens to us so often. The gaps in our theology get filled with ideology. Rather than being God focused, it becomes man focused.

- The goal of theology is to know God! It is to be conformed to his character, his story, and his purpose. "It is a good thing to possess an accurate theology, but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possesses us" (C. L. Mitton).
  - The God who is his own existence has revealed himself to us. The goal is to know him, to follow him, and to love him.
- Unfortunately, some folks take the wonderful opportunity of knowing God and twist it, they turn theology into an opportunity to justify themselves.

**Questioning Jesus:** As we look at this story I will hopefully answer some tough questions about heaven, angels, marriage, and more but I think, in the context of this section of the Gospel of Matthew, the more important thing to learn is how we come to God with our tough questions. I have questions about life, faith, the future, and more (and I suspect I'm not alone).

**What does it look like to take those questions to Jesus?**

<sup>23</sup> The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, <sup>24</sup> saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.' <sup>25</sup> Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. <sup>26</sup> So too the second and third, down to the seventh. <sup>27</sup> After them all, the woman died. <sup>28</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her." <sup>29</sup> But Jesus

answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. <sup>30</sup> For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. <sup>31</sup> And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” <sup>33</sup> And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. We Must Ask Sincere Questions

**Insincere Question:** The question they ask *could* be a legitimate question. It could be important. But we can tell by the way it is framed that it is insincere. They are coming not to be informed but to confound and trip up Jesus. **They want to test him, not learn from him.** They trust him as long as he doesn’t tell them something they don’t want to hear.

- We can tell by the fact that Matthew tells us their pre-existing beliefs: Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. They’re trying to disprove the resurrection by using a complicated and extreme hypothetical example. They’ve gone to the most extreme exception. They are not asking a question, they are engaging in an argument.
  - “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’ <sup>25</sup> Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. <sup>26</sup> So too the second and third, down to the seventh. <sup>27</sup> After them all, the woman died. <sup>28</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.”
  - Why seven? Would two or three not be enough?
- They’ve already made up their minds! How often is that us? We want to hear our opinion out of God’s mouth. We want him to bless our relationship and not tell us it’s wrong. We want him to cosign on our dreams, not redirect them. We want to be Lord of our own lives while giving lip-service to him as King.

**“Gotcha” Question:** Which, btw, they don’t end up “getting him.” It falls in the long line of dumb questions (which there are such things), like “Can God make a rock big enough that he can’t lift it?”. The whole approach is silly and unserious and belies the truth that most people aren’t interested in what God says. They’re not interested in what the Bible says. They’ll spend hour after hour debating theological minutia while ignoring the clear commands of Scripture that are repeated without confusion throughout.

- It’s using **theology to trap** Jesus rather than looking to Jesus to **direct our theology**.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>23</sup> Ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ προσήλθον αὐτῷ Σαδδουκαῖοι, λέγοντες μὴ εἶναι ἀνάστασιν, καὶ ἐπηρώτησαν αὐτὸν <sup>24</sup> λέγοντες, Διδάσκαλε, Μωϋσῆς εἶπεν, Ἐάν τις ἀποθάνῃ μὴ ἔχων τέκνα, ἐπιγαμβρεύσει ὁ ἀδελφὸς αὐτοῦ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναστήσει σπέρμα τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ. <sup>25</sup> ἦσαν δὲ παρ’ ἡμῖν ἑπτὰ ἀδελφοί· καὶ ὁ πρῶτος γήμας ἐτελεύτησεν, καὶ μὴ ἔχων σπέρμα ἀφῆκεν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ· <sup>26</sup> ὁμοίως καὶ ὁ δεῦτερος καὶ ὁ τρίτος ἕως τῶν ἑπτὰ. <sup>27</sup> ὕστερον δὲ πάντων ἀπέθανεν ἡ γυνή. <sup>28</sup> ἐν τῇ ἀναστάσει οὖν τίνος τῶν ἑπτὰ ἔσται γυνή; πάντες γὰρ ἔσχον αὐτήν· <sup>29</sup> ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Πλανᾶσθε μὴ εἰδότες τὰς γραφὰς μηδὲ τὴν δύναμιν τοῦ θεοῦ· <sup>30</sup> ἐν γὰρ τῇ ἀναστάσει οὔτε γαμοῦσιν οὔτε γαμίζονται, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ εἰσιν. <sup>31</sup> περὶ δὲ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τῶν νεκρῶν οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε τὸ ρηθὲν ὑμῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ λέγοντος, <sup>32</sup> Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς Ἀβραάμ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰσαὰκ καὶ ὁ θεὸς Ἰακώβ; οὐκ ἔστιν [ὁ] θεὸς νεκρῶν ἀλλὰ ζώντων. <sup>33</sup> καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ ὄχλοι ἐξεπλήσσοντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ.

- Whether or not there was a resurrection from the dead, an afterlife, a paradise, a heaven, etc. was one of the main theological issues dividing the Pharisees and the Sadducees. By disproving Jesus, they thought they could diminish his popularity (Christians are closer to Pharisees theologically). Obviously their plan backfired. But we can tell their motives to some extent. They aren't interested in his answer, they are trying to sabotage him. They are asking him a theologically loaded question.

This is an exhausting way to approach God and his Word.

- Lunch meeting with someone to discuss God and the gospel. Went to all the hardest passages (that's fine, I can handle that). But all the passages that were clear on these topics were avoided or downplayed. *Not seriously interested in what the Bible said.*
- My sense is that the Bible with all of its historical difficulties and challenging passages, is (on the whole) cohesive and clear on its central message and basic doctrine.
- Skepticism toward God and his Word makes it impossible to understand its cohesion. The beauty is in the tension but you'll never get to appreciate it if you play it off against each other.

**A Damning Superficial Reading:** This leads to all sorts of folks who quote Scripture without knowing it. They try to borrow the authority of Scripture for their own purposes without submitting to its authority in their own lives.

- Quoting the Bible is not enough!
  - Athletes quote Phil 4:13 as if that has anything to do with hitting a homerun or dunking a basketball.
  - Politicians misquote Bible verses to justify all sorts of misguided policies.
  - In the Bible, we see Satan quote Scripture.
- We know that the key to interpreting Scripture correctly is the intention of the author! What did God mean when he wrote this? And we know that, in some way, all of Scripture points to the redemptive work of Christ: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27).
  - You can't say you believe Scripture, which testifies to Jesus, and Jesus, who testifies to Scripture, if you won't accept what they say.

They quote Deuteronomy (they preferred the Torah): "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.'

- Was that really the point Moses was making in Deut 25:5? For people who claim to honor Scripture, they're *intentionally* misrepresenting the context, etc. (e.g., is "judge not lest ye be judged" about never telling anyone anything is ever wrong or sinful?).

**What About You?:** Are your eyes open to see what God is saying? Or are you unwilling to see? Have you already made up your mind before you even ask God? Are your questions sincere? Or are you looking for a way to make God agree with what you want? It is good and healthy to have questions and even doubts, but how are you bringing them to God? Are you bringing your questions like a child looking for comfort from a loving Father, or are you bringing them as accusations against him like a rebellious teenager, thinking you know best and he's out to get you?

## 2. We Must Be Willing to Change

**Misunderstanding:** There are some **severe** misunderstandings at the core of their question.

- The biggest issue is their misunderstanding of **resurrection life**.
  - <sup>30</sup> For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.
- There is a lot to unpack in this verse:

### (1) There is a Resurrection.

- Life does not end at death:
  - “And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’” (Lk 23:43).
  - “Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).
- Resurrection is an embodied reality (not disembodied cherubs on clouds playing spirit harps):
  - “In the resurrection” indicates that “resurrection life” is a state of being, existence (not just a moment in time).
  - “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5).
  - Kind of the whole point of 1 Cor 15, because Jesus is risen, we can hope for a resurrection from the dead.
  - Paul’s hope is to “attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:11).
  - Jesus made this clear when his friend died, talking to Lazarus’ sister, here’s the conversation: Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (Jn 11:23-26).
- “This” is not all there is. This is not the end. There is a future judgment or reward for all people. “It’s a magnificent thing: The only newly-originating life in the universe that comes in the image of God [are human beings]. The only newly-originating life in the universe that lasts forever [are human beings]” (Piper). The Sadducees didn’t want to face this fact. They’re not the only ones. How many people today live their lives, spend their money, budget their time like there is no eternity?

(2) **Life in the Resurrection is Similar but Not the Same.** We see this from Jesus’ own resurrection. He has a body, he eats food, but he also passes through walls. We see the descriptions of heaven throughout Scripture to be physical realities (e.g., water, food, streets, animals, etc.) but also be different (e.g., no tears, no disease, God’s perfect presence). “There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another” (1 Cor 15:40).

- The Sadducees are thoroughgoing materialists. They are using their present reality to judge the promises of eternity impossible. But resurrection life is *real life*, it is analogous to life here and now, but it is not identical.
  - We see this in the description of marriage: <sup>30</sup> For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, (if you're married this is not the time to say "amen").

This is a tough question, one that I'm not perfectly clear on: "Some are troubled that Jesus says earthly marriage relationships no longer apply in heaven. The verse doesn't exactly say that... It says that we will not marry nor be given in marriage, for one of the purposes of marriage (procreation) has ended, and the other purposes (relationships, learning to love, intimate companionship, mirroring the Triune God) have been transcended. I think we will always have a special relationship with people who have been special to us here, but again, we must realize that earthly marriage, as all earthly relationships, are the shadow. Earthly life, and earthly marriage as a part of this life, is God's school to teach us how to love, and how to be the bride of Christ. Our relationship with our earthly spouse will not be less in heaven; it will be more and be extended to Christ and others. Special earthly relationships are given to us as schools where we learn to love. School may end, but the love goes on, only broader and wider and deeper. Moreover, there will be one marriage in heaven, that of Christ and his bride, the church. This is the real marriage, of which earthly marriages were only a shadow" (Hammett).

- The "power of God" makes "eternal life" something unique. We are still human but life in the resurrection is different, it's better!
  - BTW, it says we will be like angels in heaven. We will not become angels. Don't diminish our privileged position (we can talk about this some other time). Humans are greater than angels (heaven didn't gain an angel when someone died), God took on human flesh (not angelic), Christ died for the sins of human beings, etc.
  - Every word matters (the word "as", "ὡς", matters a lot). In heaven, we will not become angels but we will exist to worship God (as angels presently do).
- This is why we trust the promise of God. Whatever eternity is, for those in Christ, it is better.

**Change:** They'd already made up their minds and it blinded them to the truth of the Scripture they claimed to believe. **They wanted Jesus to change, not the other way around.** They wouldn't believe in the resurrection no matter what his answer.

- Too often we want God to confirm what we want, not change what we want. But following Jesus means **dying to ourselves** so that we can live.
- This is not the way to enter into any disagreement (with God or other people). We can't just assume we're right and others are wrong, that everybody else needs to change. And this is *especially true* when it comes to God because he's never wrong!

### 3. We Must Trust the Word of God and the Power of God

**Didn't Know:** They had all sorts of earthly wealth and power and claimed to be keepers of Scripture and temple but the indictment from Jesus is sobering: But Jesus answered them, "You

are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. Despite quoting the Torah they had no real knowledge and experience of God (e.g., Deistic, Materialistic, etc.).

- “Whether for good or evil, each man lives by his love” (Augustine). The Sadducees loved this world more than they loved God. They are so focused on themselves and the here and now that they are missing out on God’s power and hope both **now and forever**.

**Is God Powerful Enough?:** Why is the resurrection real? Why is eternity good? Because God’s power to keep his promises is certain. ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” Quoting Ex 3 (because these Sadducees prioritized the Torah). There might be more direct passages in the OT to quote but Jesus is meeting them where they are.

- God’s promises (covenants) are too strong to be dissolved by death.
  - Why did the Son of God become a man? Because of the promises of God (Swain)
  - Because God promised to crush the serpent’s head and reverse the curse of sin.
  - Because God promised to bless the nations through Abraham’s seed.
  - Because God promised the offspring of David would inherit an eternal throne and receive the worship of the nations.

**People’s Response:** <sup>33</sup> And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. The crowd was amazed that Jesus answered the seemingly unanswerable. Jesus transcended the conundrum.

### **Conclusion:**

What does this mean for you? It doesn’t mean you don’t have questions or shortcomings or misunderstandings. It doesn’t mean that everything the pastor says is the perfect interpretation.

- It means that your faith (trust in God) is the foundation for your pursuit of understanding. You seek the truth, trusting in Jesus who is the truth.
- It means that you come to every situation, every decision, every relationship with a posture of trust and obedience to God.
  - In those things that you understand to be of God, you stand firm.
  - In those areas that you are still figuring out, you walk in trust (sometimes only knowing the next step as you hold the hand of the father).
  - You worship with sincerity, you love without pretense.

“They [the Sadducees] were looking for a builder to construct the home they thought they wanted, but he was the architect, coming with a new plan that would give them everything they needed, but within quite a new framework” (Wright).

- What would it look like if you stopped fighting God and joyfully and willfully followed him? What if you let go of that sin God has called you to flee, and trusted that, in Christ, God has something better for you? What if you stopped trying to get God to underwrite your dreams and, instead, followed his better path, his desires, his call.