

HE IS THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Luke 20:20-47

Key Verse: 20:37b,38

“...for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

In the last passage Jesus told the parable of the tenants to those in the temple, including the religious leaders. It seemed a concise and comprehensive summary of the whole Bible, from Genesis through Revelation. Most of all, we learned the love of God. Though the tenants were so evil, the owner of the vineyard was patient with them. He sent his servants to them one after another, bearing their mistreatment. Finally, he sent his son to them. Likewise, God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to shed his blood for the sin of the world. It was the love of God for sinners. One young man delivered a message last week at the Easter Bible Conference titled, “Jesus, the Lamb of God.” He accepted the love of Christ personally for the first time after eight years of Bible study. Jesus’ blood cleansed his sins and gave him peace and joy in his soul. He was freed from self-condemnation. He became bright, joyful and powerful. When we realize God’s love that sacrificed his one and only Son Jesus, we can only thank God with many tears and repent of our pride and self-righteousness. May God help each of us to accept the marvelous love of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today’s passage contains three public exchanges between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. Down through the generations there have been remarkable public debates that changed the course of history, such as the Lincoln/Douglas debates. But Jesus’ public debates with the religious leaders are matchless. Not only did Jesus solve the immediate problem in his answers to the critics, but Jesus taught the eternal and unchanging word of God. Today let’s open our hearts to Jesus’ wisdom and word of eternal life. May God enlighten us with the knowledge of God, especially that our God is the God of the living.

First, give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s (20-26).

Look at verse 20. “Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.” These spies came from the religious leaders. Probably, they had taken off their fancy robes and put on poor clothes to give the appearance that they were suffering under Roman oppression, like ordinary Jews. Look at verses 21-22. “So the spies questioned him: ‘Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’” They seem to appeal for relief from Roman taxation. They wanted Jesus to make a statement against paying taxes to Caesar. Then they could report him to the Roman governor and have him arrested for insurrection.

What did Jesus do? Look at verse 23. “He saw through their duplicity and said to them, ‘Show me a denarius. Whose portrait and inscription are on it?’” Jesus was not deceived; he saw through their duplicity. So Jesus did not fall into their trap. Jesus asked them to show him a denarius. A denarius was a silver coin minted by Rome worth about a day’s wages. At the time, Tiberius Caesar was the Roman Emperor. This coin must have had his portrait with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” So they answered, “Caesar’s.”

Look at verse 25b. “He said to them, ‘Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’” Jesus’ answer astonished his enemies. In one sentence, Jesus taught the whole duty of man, both civil and spiritual. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” teaches our duty to be a good citizen in our nation. The Bible teaches that God is the sovereign Ruler of all. It is God who raises leaders and it is God who deposes leaders. So we must respect civil leaders out of reverence for God and submit to their authority (Ro 13:1-7). In his gospel, St. Luke presents the Roman Empire as merely the background for gospel work. When Joseph and Mary obeyed Caesar’s decree to travel to Bethlehem, even though it involved much suffering, they actually fulfilled God’s will. For the last few months we have prayed a lot about the war in Iraq. We must believe that God is sovereign over all. God’s will has been done. Now the door of evangelism has been opened to the Muslim world. We don’t have to be sorry that our tax dollars were used to finance the war. Instead we must trust the sovereign rule of God and pay our taxes. Christian faith cannot be used as an excuse to avoid national duty. Rather, Christians should be eager to fulfill their national duty. These duties include paying taxes and national defense. Moreover, we must honor those who fulfilled their duty at the risk of their lives.

There was a man known as “Sergeant York.” He was a country boy from the hills of Tennessee who enjoyed carousing with wild friends. Once he got angry. Then he got drunk and decided to kill his adversary. On the way, he was struck by lightning and fell from his horse. The fear of God came into his heart. He repented and gave his life to Christ. Later he was drafted to fight in World War I. He really didn’t want to go because the Bible says, “You shall not murder.” He sought God earnestly through fasting prayer and reading the Bible. Jesus’ words came to his heart, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” He went to war, fought bravely, and saved many lives. On the other hand, there was a man who claimed to be a Christian but avoided paying taxes. After a few years the IRS caught him and forced him to pay taxes by garnishing his wages. To compensate his decrease in spending money, he stopped tithing to God, claiming that the IRS took it. His bad example dishonored God’s name.

Jesus clearly taught us to fulfill our duty as citizens of the country we live in. Christians should all be exemplary citizens. We must pay our taxes, buy car insurance, buy state licenses and city stickers, get straight A’s, educate our children, and serve military duty. But that is not all. Jesus went on to say, “...and to God what is God’s.” What is God’s? Everything is God’s. Especially, our lives belong to God. As the coin had Caesar’s portrait and inscription on it, we each have God’s image in us and God’s inscription on our hearts. Therefore, we must give our lives to God. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” When we love God, we discover God’s broken heart for the perishing world. When we love God, we want to participate in his work by sharing the word of life with others so they may be saved. We can love God when we feed his sheep and participate in world mission.

In 1962, God called Don and Carol Richardson as missionaries. They obeyed God’s call and went to the Sawi headhunters in Irian Jaya. When these cannibals heard about the Last Supper, they were fascinated—not by Jesus’ divine love, but by Judas Iscariot’s act of betrayal. They valued treachery as a virtue. Overcoming cultural shock, Missionary Richardson prayed and God helped him. He discovered the Sawi custom of the “peace child.” Parents in one tribe tearfully gave their son to members of another tribe, and vice versa. As long as the children lived, both sides lived in peace. Missionary Richardson taught them that God offered his one and only Son Jesus as a “peace child” to sinful man. They realized the forgiving grace that comes to us through Jesus. They realized that God loved them so much that he sent his only Son for them. They also realized that Judas Iscariot was a villain and not a hero.

Still, however, they were bound by the power of death. They had a vague cultural idea of regeneration, based on seeing caterpillars turn into butterflies. Through this, Missionary Richardson taught them that the Risen Christ gives eternal life and resurrection bodies to those who believe in him. Next, he taught them faith that overcomes the world through constructing a huge church building with their own hands. By 1977, they had become independent enough to carry out their own worship services. This was possible when one man listened to God’s call and gave to God what is God’s. May God help us all to get straight A’s, feed five sheep per week, and go out as missionaries in God’s time.

Second, he is the God of the living (27-40).

Look at verse 27. Some of the Sadducees came to Jesus to question him. The Sadducees were religious in appearance but they were not spiritual at all. They denied the resurrection, life after death, angels and spirits. They claimed a literal interpretation of the Pentateuch and rejected the Prophets and the Psalms. To them, being a Sadducee was for the sake of raking in money from the offerings of the poor, enjoying honor and recognition among people, and to have clout with the Roman government. They had everything in this world. They loved their lives in this world. When they loved the world, they could not see God. 1 John 2:15-17 says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” Those who love the world cannot love God. Those who love the world do not like the idea of resurrection. So they wanted to discredit Jesus’ teaching about resurrection. They concocted a story, loosely based on the law, and brought it to Jesus. Look at verses 28-33. “‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?’”

Their story is more gruesome than a modern soap opera and more tragic than Shakespeare's plays. It shows us clearly how their minds worked and what was in their hearts. The contents of their story can be summarized as marriage, death, and who gets the woman. If it was made into a movie, it might be titled, "Seven weddings and eight funerals." Here we must deeply realize that man without resurrection faith is nothing but a slave of the power of death, no matter how well decorated he may be. As St. Paul said, "The mind of sinful man is death..." (Ro 8:6). Those who think that money is everything or that pleasure is everything or that worldly glory is everything are greatly mistaken. Without resurrection faith, there is no escape from the power of death. Those who live without resurrection faith all become slaves of the power of death. Those who are under the power of death suffer from the symptoms of death, such as sorrow, fear and despair. Without resurrection faith, the Sadducees were nothing but the walking dead.

How did Jesus answer them? Look at verses 34-36. "Jesus replied, 'The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.'" In the age to come there is no marriage. The age to come will not be an extension of this age; it will not be a mere continuation of present reality into eternity. Rather, the resurrection age will be totally different. Those who participate in that age will be like the angels. They will be neutral beings. They will be spiritual beings. They will be motivated by holy desires; there will be no more base desires. They will serve God with overflowing joy and thanksgiving and praise. They receive eternal life and can never die. They will bear the image and likeness of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:49 says, "And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven." We shall be like Jesus in the resurrection age. How does this happen? 1 Peter 1:3,4 says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you...."

As the Son of God, Jesus can speak authoritatively on the resurrection. Because Jesus said it, we believe it. But Jesus did not stop there. He went on to show the Sadducees that the part of the Bible they claimed to believe teaches that the dead rise. Look at verses 37-38. "But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive." The phrase, "The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," is an important Bible truth and is repeated over and over again. It is repeated to emphasize that our God is the living God. It is repeated to emphasize that in the living God we are all his children through the resurrection of Christ Jesus. "The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" means that man is immortal. "The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" means that God is not only the Father to Abraham, but also the Father of Isaac and of Jacob. It also means that before the living God, the three of them are all alive, even though they died a long time ago. There is no death to those who believe in the Son's resurrection. Abraham learned this resurrection faith through his life of obedience to God's word (Heb 11:17-19). But when the Sadducees loved the world more than God, they did not study the Bible from their hearts. So they remained under the power of death. We can have resurrection faith when we love God more than the world and obey God's word from our hearts.

Look at verses 39-40. "Some of the teachers of the law responded, 'Well said, teacher!' And no one dared to ask him any more questions." The teachers of the law believed in the spiritual world. They were theologically opposed to the Sadducees. When Jesus showed from the book of Exodus that the spiritual world is real, they suddenly became enthusiastic about Jesus' teaching. They also enjoyed the public humiliation of the Sadducees. Then Jesus turned his attention to them.

Third, the Christ is God (41-47).

Look at verses 41-44. "Then Jesus said to them, 'How is it that they say the Christ is the Son of David? David himself declared in the Book of Psalms: "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" David calls him "Lord." How then can he be his son?'" Of course, the answer is that the Christ is God. The teachers of the law needed to realize that the Christ is God and that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus had proved himself the Christ through his divine compassion and matchless Bible teaching. But the teachers of the law

did not accept him because they wanted honor from men. Jesus rebuked them with a broken shepherd's heart (45-47).

In this passage Jesus teaches us that we must give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Most of all, Jesus teaches us to believe the living God through Bible study and have the promise of resurrection in our hearts. Resurrection faith gives us victory over the power of death and all its symptoms. May God richly bless you.