

GOD IS THE GOD OF THE LIVING

Luke 20:20-47

Key Verse: 20:38

“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

In today’s passage, religious leaders tried to trap Jesus with political and theological issues. With God’s wisdom, Jesus turned these potential traps into opportunities to teach about God, and what kind of attitude we should have toward him. Presently, there are many hot debates going on in our nation. Sincere Christians sharply disagree with each other. Many appeal to Jesus as their authority and claim to represent him. It is easy for us to feel offended and disoriented. What would Jesus say? Jesus did not avoid hot issues. But Jesus did more than win arguments. Jesus helped people to encounter the living God and have life in him. This is what we really need most. Let’s not be overwhelmed by the debates of our time. Let’s listen to Jesus’ words which lift us above all these issues to what really matters.

First, give to God what is God’s (20-26). In the previous passage, Jesus told the parable of the tenants. Jesus revealed himself as the Son of God and warned the religious leaders that they would be destroyed if they did not believe him. Instead of repenting, they wanted to kill Jesus immediately, but they were afraid of the people. So, they changed their strategy. They hired spies, who were well trained to lie and win arguments—political lawyers. They tried to trap Jesus by asking clever questions publicly. They hid their claws in their furry paws and tried to charm Jesus with disingenuous praise: **“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”** (21). Though what they said is true, they were using it to entice Jesus. They asked, **“Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”** (22) They wanted Jesus to oppose paying the tax to Rome, so they might hand him over to the authority of the governor. The tax in question was the imperial tax, a poll tax, which was paid to Caesar by all people in the Roman colonies. Was it right for Jews, as God’s chosen people, to pay this tax to a pagan emperor? This was a hot button issue at the time. If Jesus advocated paying this tax, he risked alienating the crowd. It seemed that Jesus was trapped. But the Spirit of wisdom and understanding rested on him (Isa 11:2). Jesus immediately saw through their duplicity (23). Sometimes we think that no one knows our inner

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thoughts. So, we entertain evil thoughts. We secretly envy people and hope they will fail. We secretly hate people and enjoy their pain. But Jesus knows everything we think. No one can hide their inner thoughts from Jesus.

How did Jesus respond? He said, **“Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?”** A denarius was a Roman coin with a bust of Tiberius Caesar and an inscription which read, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.” So, they replied, **“Caesar’s.”** He said to them, **“Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”** (25). Jesus’ words had deep meaning. Jesus not only avoided the trap, but taught practical truth: to carry out both civic duty and divine duty. We should not neglect either one. For us, civic duties include paying property taxes, income taxes and sales taxes, serving on jury duty, voting, shoveling the snow in front of our house, getting a city sticker and state license plate, and so on. If we avoid these in the name of serving God, we offend worldly people and they close their hearts to the gospel message. We should be careful to do our civic duties so that the gospel message is not maligned. In addition, we should pray. Paul urges that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior (1Ti 2:1-3).

Though Jesus’ teaching about civic duty was clear, his main point was about divine duty. As Caesar’s image was on the coin, God’s image is on people. This means that everyone belongs to God. God is the Creator and we are his creatures. God made us in his image so that we may communicate with him. God loves us dearly and wants a relationship with us. We should love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Dt 6:5). This is a higher duty than civic duty. In truth, giving oneself to God is a great privilege and blessing. When we give ourselves to God, God is pleased to bless and reward us. He fills our lives with meaning, purpose and glory.

It is noteworthy that Jesus emphasized the words **“give back”** in his answer. These words are translated “render” in other versions (ESV, KJV, NASB). This means to pay something that is owed. Jesus wanted the religious leaders to recognize God as the owner, themselves as the tenants, and give back to God what is God’s. But they thought they were the owners of everything. They were greedy. They wanted to get, get, get for themselves.

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They did not like the word “give.” Jesus want us to recognize God as God—the Creator and Owner of all things. We are just stewards. When we know this truth, we can give back to God what is God’s. For example, the Bible encourages us to give back to God of our material things by giving a tithe of our income. When we do so, God is pleased. He opens the storehouse of heaven and pours out so much blessing that we cannot contain it all (Mal 3:10). The Bible urges us to give praise, glory and honor to God. This pleases God and he recognizes us and fills our hearts with joy. Giving ourselves to God is the way to true happiness and abundant blessing and becoming a blessing to others. Jesus’ wisdom overwhelmed the religious leaders. They could not trap him. Astonished, they became silent (26).

Second, to God all are alive (27-47). The chief priests and the teachers of the law were totally defeated by Jesus. Some of the Sadducees may have thought, “Aha! This is our chance. We will defeat Jesus and show our superiority!” Who were the Sadducees? They originated as a priestly sect, descended from Zadok (2Sa 8:17). They were aristocratic and catered to the well-to-do. They were political allies of the Romans. Differing from the Pharisees in doctrinal matters, they refuted the resurrection of the dead, life after death, and the existence of angels or demons. They refused to recognize the oral traditions, and all Old Testament books except the Pentateuch (Ac 23:8). They were like modern liberal theologians who deny Jesus’ incarnation, miracles, resurrection and even his divinity. They claimed that there is no resurrection because the word “resurrection” does not appear in the Pentateuch. To discredit the resurrection, they came to Jesus with a weird story based on Deuteronomy 25:5-6. 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 raise up offspring for his brother”** (28). The purpose of this law was to keep the family line alive. We can find a beautiful story of this in the book of Ruth. Through Ruth’s loyalty to her dead husband’s family, and her faith in God, Boaz was moved and took her as his wife. It may be the most romantic story in the Bible. God blessed their union and sent the Messiah in their line. Instead of telling such a beautiful, true story, the Sadducees told a gruesome horror story which may have been fictional. There were seven brothers. The first one met a woman and decided to marry her. Then he died. Right away, the second brother married her. Then he died. Then the third brother married her, and he died. In the same way, brothers four through seven all married the woman and died, without leaving any children. Finally,

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she died. This story is very dark. It is full of tragedy, death, sorrow and fatalism. The Sadducees' question was, **“At the resurrection, whose wife would she be?”** They pictured the brothers fighting with each other. One would win the woman and the others would live as eternal bachelors. They tried to make the resurrection look ridiculous. They considered it unnecessary. To them, all that mattered was life in this world. Paul summed up this philosophy: **“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die”** (1Co 15:32). The Sadducees thought they were smart. But they were under the power of death and they were miserable and hopeless.

The Sadducees' story was so bizarre and grotesque that it was not worthy of a genuine response. But Jesus, out of his great mercy, took this opportunity to teach them basic truths that would help them. **First of all, Jesus taught the power of the resurrection (34-36).** Jesus said, **“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage”** (34). This is God's creation truth. God blessed mankind to be fruitful and increase in number through marriage. God wants mankind to produce godly offspring (Mal 2:15). Marry, have children, and raise them as godly offspring—this is life on earth. The Sadducees depicted heaven as a continuation of life on earth. Many people think like this and assume that heaven is very boring. So, they don't have any real desire to go there. But that assumption is not true. Heaven is very different than earth, and those who go there will be very different than they are now. To live on earth, we need an earthly body. To live in heaven, we need a heavenly body. Our present bodies must be transformed. Apostle Paul revealed that this will happen in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye when Jesus comes again (1Co 15:51-52). By his great power, God will transform our lowly bodies into heavenly bodies like that of Jesus (Php 3:21). Our bodies will be imperishable, powerful, glorious and spiritual (1Co 15:42-44). The age to come will be different than the present age. People will neither marry nor be given in marriage. They can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection (35-36). There will be no more death, no more tears, wounds, pain or sorrow. There will be no disease, deformity, mental illness, earaches or flu. There will be no more devil, and no evil people. There will be no violence or terror. The age to come will be full of life, love and light; it will be full of joy, peace, and goodness; it will be full of truth, righteousness and holiness. Life will be dynamic, powerful, inspiring and creative. Not even one moment will be boring, but every moment will be filled with wonder and awe. Do you want to

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go to heaven? Me too. We wonder how this can happen. God can do it. God is the Creator God who made the universe out of nothing. God is the author of life who raises the dead. Nothing is impossible with God.

Secondly, Jesus taught the Sadducees who God is. The Sadducees believed that the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, were the words of God. Though they studied and memorized these books, they did not know the deep meaning of them. Jesus said, **“But in the account of the burning 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’”** (37). Before God said this, Moses seemed like a useless person. He was a political criminal, living as an ordinary desert shepherd at age 80. He must have had a deep sense of rejection and failure. Then he saw the burning bush. Though the fire was evident, the bush was not consumed. This attracted Moses and he went to see about it. God called him, **“Moses! Moses!...I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”** (Ex 3:1-6). Moses came alive. Later, God said, **“This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation”** (Ex 3:15b). Indeed, many Bible writers referred to God in this way. God was pleased to identify with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Who were they?

Humanly speaking, Abraham made many mistakes and did not seem to accomplish much. But he trusted and obeyed God even though he did not understand fully what God’s words meant. Isaac inherited Abraham’s faith. He loved his wife Rebecca and enjoyed gourmet food. He does not seem to be a significant person. But he obeyed God in the time of difficulty, believing God’s blessing. Jacob seemed to be a man of worldly ambition. He tried to get what he wanted: fame, love and wealth. In doing so, he made enemies. When he faced the threat of death, he realized that what he had gained could not help him at all. Leaving all these things, he struggled with God and encountered the living God. Then he was changed. At the end of his life he became a true worshiper of God and a blessing wherever he went. These ancestors lived by faith in God. God was pleased to be called their God.

When God said to Moses, **“I am...”** he taught that he is self-existent and eternal. Though the patriarchs died, God said, **“I am the God of Abraham ...Isaac... Jacob.”** This means that they were alive in God. God gives eternal life to people who live by faith in him. God is the God of each

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person who lives by faith in him. The life God gives is not just a future blessing; it begins now. When we have God's life in our souls, we are free from the power of death and all darkness. We can live dynamic, joyful lives for the glory of God.

Jesus concluded: **“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive”** (38). Who are the dead? Most people think those buried in the ground are dead. However, the dead are those who have no faith in God like the Sadducees. Though they look gorgeous outwardly, their thinking and way of life is negative and dark, and everything ends in death. They cannot escape from the elements of death: fear, meaninglessness, powerlessness, hopelessness. Though their bodies move around, they are the walking dead, like zombies. God is not the God of the dead. Who are the living? They are those who live by faith in God like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They believe God exists, they live before God and they believe God rewards those who seek him. They believe that nothing is impossible for God. They live by faith and walk by the Spirit. They are full of hope and vision. Their thinking is alive; their words are alive; their actions are alive. When we simply put our faith in the living God, God makes us alive. Last week Shepherd Edward Papabathini's mother passed away at age 78. In response to my condolences, he wrote: *“Over one thousand people attended the funeral to pay respects: commoners, politicians, educators and pastors, many of whom I had never met. They shared memories of my parents' prayers and sacrifices for them. My parents boldly proclaimed the gospel in communities which persecuted and even killed Christians. It seemed that countless people came to Christ through them. A bishop who spoke during the ceremony looked at me and my 9 siblings and said, ‘Now it's your responsibility to carry on their legacy and good work on this earth to today's generation.’ Even though I am deeply saddened, I am grateful to God for my parent's rich inheritance. Such inheritance is not made of gold or money, but the life-giving testament and the gospel of Jesus Christ my Savior. I hope and pray to heed to the words of the bishop and continue to walk in my mother's footsteps, follow the example of her faith, and live a life totally for Christ.”* Surely, he is alive in Christ. God is pleased to be called the God of those who have faith in him. Do you belong to the dead or to the living?

The Sadducees were badly defeated by Jesus. Then some teachers of the law were encouraged and said, **“Well said, teacher!”** Since then no one

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dared to ask him any more questions. Then Jesus took the initiative to correct their concept of the Messiah. Teachers of the law knew that the Messiah would be the son of David. But they did not know his deity. Jesus taught from the Psalms of David that the Messiah was David's Lord (41-44). Then Jesus taught his disciples not to be influenced by the teachers of the law. They disguised their greed and self-glory seeking with religious hypocrisy. They would be severely punished (45-47).

In the last ten years, there have been a plethora of movies, television shows and video games with a common theme. It goes like this: a virus or disease wipes out civilization as we know it; individual survivors or small bands of scattered people recycle remnants of infrastructure to forge a new world; while doing so, they are attacked by zombies and must fight for survival. This is more horrible than the story told by the Sadducees. It reveals the fear and despair that people fall under when they have no faith in God. Many young people in our times are afraid to get married or to have children. They may give many reasons. But at the bottom of it, their thought world is controlled by the power of death. God is not dead, nor is he the God of the dead. God is alive; he is the God of the living. God lives forever. His living presence can be experienced by faith, and only by faith. With faith in God we can boldly marry, have many children, raise them as godly people, preach the gospel to all nations, and go to the kingdom of God. Let's put our faith in God who always lives and makes us alive forever.