

JESUS TEACHES THE SADDUCEES THE LIVING GOD

Matthew 22:23-33

Key Verse: 22:32

“‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

In this passage, the Sadducees come to Jesus to try to stump him with a hard question. They were mischievous, like some students in Chicago classrooms. They deserved to get an “F” and be dismissed. But Jesus saw their inner agony. They were tormented by the power of sin and death. With great compassion, Jesus taught them the truth that would save them. Jesus taught them that God is living and that man can have life in the living God. There are so many of us who are like Sadducees. We are rich in worldly things but suffering under the power of sin and death. Only the living God can save us from death. Jesus teaches us how to believe the living God. Let’s listen to Jesus’ teaching.

First, the Sadducees were tormented by the power of death (23-28).

Look at verse 23. “That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.” The Sadducees were a sect among the Israelite religious leaders. They were aristocratic people and men of wealth. They controlled the office of the high priest. They were the envy of many in terms of their worldly success. But Matthew simply calls them those who say there is no resurrection. They also denied the existence of angels and spirits (Ac 22:8). They denied life after death and the kingdom of heaven. They tried to live in this world as if it were everything. They thought if they could just enjoy ease and pleasure they would be happy. Then they would die and disappear.

Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus had proclaimed the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’ first message was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt 4:17). Jesus’ parables emphasized the existence of heaven and hell. Jesus had done his best to plant faith in the kingdom of heaven in men’s hearts. Jesus’ teaching had given new life to many. But it really irritated the Sadducees. It convicted them that there was a spiritual world. This made them very uncomfortable. It meant they would have to give an account for their wickedness. They really wanted to discredit Jesus and justify their worldly way of life. So they came to him with a weird story to make resurrection faith seem ridiculous.

Look at verses 24-28. “‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?’” They told this story to discredit resurrection, but they only revealed their own folly and misery.

First of all, they were poor Bible students. They claimed to accept the Pentateuch as authoritative. They picked Deuteronomy 25:5-6 as a basis for their story. This dealt with a man’s duty to his brother’s widow. He should marry her and have a son by her to carry on the name of his deceased brother. Obviously, this was not a universal principle in the word of God; it had a very limited application. But this was the basis of their story. In fact, they were trying to borrow the authority of the Scriptures to advance their own corrupted and perverse teachings. They remind us of the devil in Genesis chapter 3, who ignored the main point of God’s love for mankind, and God’s gift of freedom, and only presented God’s command as an unbearable burden to man. The Sadducees did not honor the word of God as the word of God. They did not understand God’s love, God’s hope to restore paradise, or God’s desire to bless all people on earth. In a word, they were very poor Bible students. It was because they loved the world. Those who love the world cannot love God and they do not like to study the Bible or write testimonies.

In the second place, they were selfish and inhumane. This is an inevitable result of denying the resurrection and the kingdom of heaven. Such people adopt hedonism as their lifestyle. Hedonism distorts the image of God in man and robs his humanity. The Sadducees could talk about a poor woman, who had suffered through seven marriages and been widowed seven times, and who remained barren and died, without any compassion as a mere case study. Most

likely such a thing has never happened, nor will happen. How can human beings think like that? Hedonistic people are selfish people, and they are dangerous people.

In the third place, they were very miserable. When we examine the contents of the story, we see their thought world. They thought about marriage, death, barrenness, and more death. In fact, they were under the power of death. This is the agony of the Sadducees. Romans 8:6a says, "The mind of sinful man is death...." The thought of death makes a person feel dead even though his body may be alive. The elements of death include sorrow, bitterness, fatalism, depression, and despair. No one can be happy when his heart is full of these things. Those who live for worldly success and pleasure are spiritually dead. The Sadducees had fame and wealth, but they were the most miserable people on earth.

There are many little Sadducees on our college campuses. They think that worldly success and pleasure is everything. So they pursue them blindly, completely ignoring their spiritual life. They live as if there is no God and no kingdom of heaven. But they become the most miserable people. Recently, the IIT school paper quoted The Big Ten Suicide Study and The American College Health Association's Health Assessment as follows: "Amongst the findings of these studies is the high prevalence (9.5%-10.3%) of serious suicidal thoughts among college students. As many as 1 in 12 college students surveyed reported having made a plan to commit suicide. In a 12 month period, 1.5% of college students attempted suicide across all studies. The quantified rate of completed suicides was 7.5 per 100,000. Applying the above statistics to IIT's 5,500 students, in 1 year over 550 students will struggle with suicidal thoughts, 82 students may attempt to take their own lives and 1 student may succeed in ending his or her life by their own hand." The power of death is working on our campuses. As shepherds for college students, we are responsible for this. How can we help them?

Second, Jesus teaches faith in the living God (29-33).

When Jesus looked at the Sadducees, his heart was broken. Jesus heard the miserable cry of their souls. They were dying. In two days they would be the ones presiding over Jesus' trial. They would hand Jesus over to the Gentiles to be crucified. They were slaves of Satan. They were candidates for hell. Knowing this, Jesus had great compassion on them. Jesus did his best to teach them faith in the living God. Look at verse 29. "Jesus replied, 'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.'" They must have been surprised at this. Jesus was telling them that they had a spiritual problem. To them, if they had a problem, it was a marriage problem, or perhaps a financial problem. But Jesus said that they had a spiritual problem, a faith problem. They needed faith in the living God. How could they have faith in the living God? They needed to know the Scriptures and the power of God.

In this case, the Scripture they needed to know was Exodus 3:6. This was from the part of the Bible they claimed to believe. But in fact they were ignorant of its significance and spiritual meaning. This was not an obscure part of the Bible, like the part they had quoted from. It was a great revelation of God to his servant Moses when he met him in the burning bush. It was God's personal introduction of himself to Moses. It was something they should have been eager to study, understand and accept. Look at verses 31-32. "But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." In this verse, Jesus clearly says that God is the God of the living. This means that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were living. It means that those who believe in God are living in God. God is not the God of the dead but of the living. To know this is to solve the root problem of mankind. It is the good news of great joy to all human beings who are suffering under the power of death.

We must study the Bible with a deep desire to meet God and to know God. It is interesting that Jesus said to them, "...have you not read what God said to you...." Jesus did not say, "...have you not read what God said to Moses...." Historically, God was speaking to Moses. But Jesus taught the Sadducees that God was speaking to them. They should accept this word of God as their own, as God speaking to them. What an amazing truth. These wretched guys could claim God's revelation to Moses as their own. This is true for us as well. God wants us to know him through the Scriptures. God does not want us to study the Bible as history only. God wants us to know him by listening to him speak through his words. Bible study is the most wonderful time of listening to the sweet words of God. Jesus said in John 5:24, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." Knowing God gives us eternal life in our souls (Jn 17:3).

We must know the Scriptures. Most importantly we must know God's love and saving grace revealed in the gospel, and the reality of the kingdom of heaven. We must hold this gospel in our hearts as of first importance. In the mid-80's Dr. Samuel Lee often asked us to memorize, write down and recite the gospel key verses. At the time I was suffering under the power of sin and death after trying to live like a little Sadducee in my college days. Sometimes I felt tormented in my soul. It was not easy to hear the word of God in the gospel. But I struggled to write Romans 6:23b again and again. It says, "...but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." After about 100 times, this word touched my heart. I could hear God speaking to me that the gift of God was for me personally. The word of God liberated me from the power of sin and death and gave me new life, new spirit, new joy and new strength. Each one of us must accept the gospel with personal faith.

Jesus also said that we must know the power of God. To have the right knowledge is not enough. We must also experience the power of God in our lives. To help us do so, God gives us many opportunities by placing us in an impossible situation that only he can get us out of. When God brought his people out of Egypt, he led them to the shore of the Red Sea. They were happy to be liberated from bondage. But soon they saw chariots approaching. The Egyptian army was coming to attack them. They were trapped between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army. They thought they would surely die there. But God had a plan in this. God had shared his plan with Moses. Moses told them, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." Then the Lord opened the Red Sea and the Israelites passed through as on dry land. But when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. In the time of crisis, we must listen to the word of God all the more and obey it. Then God leads us to victory by the power of God. The Sadducees should have been experiencing the power of God in their daily lives. But whenever a challenge came they medicated themselves with pleasures and ran to hide behind their money and status. In order to know the power of God we must respond to challenges by putting our faith in God into practice. We must experience the power of God personally.

Dr. John C. Kim was a speaker at the KIMNET conference that some of us attended last week. He is a retired professor of American political science. He came to the U.S. from Korea as a young man. He worked hard and received a Ph.D. He became a professor in a small private university and received many honors. But he confessed that he was bitter toward God after having failed the entrance exam at Seoul National University. So he lived only for himself for 22 years. He participated in many Christian activities, but said, "It was all for myself. I was the center and lord of my life." Then, in 1976, he received a sentence of death. He was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis. He lost 37 pounds. There was no way he could live. He came to God and said, "I surrender to you. Give me one more chance." Then God healed him and restored his health. From 1977 he served God with all his heart. He became a professor in the University of Alaska. Since then, he has experienced God's resurrection power. He has lived with Jesus as the Lord of his life. Now he is busy telling young people to believe the resurrection when they are young and to work hard for the glory of God instead of wasting their precious youth as he did.

With faith in the living God we can enter the spiritual world. We can understand the nature of heaven. Look at verse 30. "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven." The kingdom of heaven is not a mere continuation of life on earth as we know it. It is new and different. In heaven there is no marriage. There is, however, one marriage. It is the marriage of Jesus to his bride the church. Jesus promises that we will be like the angels in heaven. This means we will be holy and sinless. We will be spiritual beings with power to love and serve God. We can understand this transformation from physical to spiritual better through 1 Corinthians 15:42-44a. It says, "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body." Revelation 21:4 says, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Heaven is glorious beyond our present understanding. Those who believe in Jesus will all be raised into holy children of God who live in the perfect peace and joy with God in heaven.

When our Lord Jesus Christ taught the Sadducees about the resurrection and the kingdom of heaven, he knew that his crucifixion was imminent. He would be hung on a cross and die for the sin of the world. Yet Jesus said with confidence that God was the God of the living. Jesus was sure that God would receive his spirit. Jesus was sure that he would live in glory with the living God. Jesus was sure that God would raise him from the dead and crown him King of kings and Lord of lords. It happened. At Pentecost, Peter said to the Jewish leaders, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge. And you with the help of wicked men put him to death by

nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him” (Ac 2:23-24). Jesus shows the way to victory by faith in the living God.

We live in a world that is under the power of death. But our God is the living God. The living God speaks to us in the Bible. His words give us eternal life. Let’s listen to him and overcome the power of death and be a blessing to the young people of our time.