

Mark 12:18-27

God is Not a Cemetery Keeper

2/3/19

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Introduction

We hear much about the Pharisees. Our text this morning presents another religious group called the Sadducees. They do not receive much mention, but they are present and powerful. Indeed, they are the aristocracy of Jerusalem. Most of the chief priests are Sadducees; they make up the majority of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews. They are the political power in corroboration with the Romans.

They also are not popular. Actually, the Pharisees are the popular leaders. The Sadducees have to share power and yield to Pharisee traditions because the latter is the more respected and popular of the two groups. The Pharisees are more respected because of their zeal to keep the law; they are more popular because, believe it or not, they are more lenient. The Sadducees also have a reputation of being harsh and even crude with the population, as will be seen in their bullying ways with Jesus at his trial. They certainly hate Jesus who represents a threat to their political stability because of the people hailing him as a king.

The biggest contrast between the Sadducees and the Pharisees involves religion. Whereas the Pharisees devote themselves to the oral traditions of the elders passed down over the centuries, the Sadducees reject them altogether. Only the Torah has divine authority. They disagree over the doctrine of the resurrection. The Pharisees believe in a final resurrection; the Sadducees not only reject such a belief, they deny the concept of life after death altogether. They also discount belief in angels and spirits, which, again, was a belief of the Pharisees. Most people, by the way, agreed with the Pharisees on all these issues.

So now, the Sadducees take the floor ready to shame Jesus with their impeccable logic and biblical knowledge. Jesus, by the way, also agrees with the Pharisees in their belief in the resurrection and angels. The Sadducees choose the topic of the resurrection as the means to show Jesus up. You have to hand it to them; they choose a topic to debate in front of a crowd that differed with them. They are not intimidated. But their sarcasm certainly comes out.

Text

¹⁸ Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ¹⁹ "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. ²⁰ Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹ The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²² In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³ At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

Well, guess they showed Jesus! Obviously the idea of the resurrection is foolishness. If people would just think the matter through logically, they would see it makes no sense, particularly in light of the Torah (the five books of Moses). That is a smooth stroke, by the way, to bring in Moses. No one can dispute his writings as anything but the divine Word of God.

The reason for such a law about marrying the widow of a deceased brother, by the way, was to preserve a lineage for the brother. If brother Jacob died before his wife Miriam bore a child, brother Levi married Miriam. The first child born by Miriam would carry on the name and lineage of Jacob. In this case the widow bears no children; so who claims her for his wife in the resurrection?

I suppose the Sadducees finished with a smirk on their faces and expected Jesus to turn red in the face and become flustered. After all, what could he say? How could he respond?

In truth, he has no trouble responding, and he does so in a way that is a verbal smack in the face.

²⁴ Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵ When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

He basically asks, "Why are you so dumb? Evidently you (the chief priests who bear the authority of interpreting the Scriptures) don't know the Scriptures. You, who serve as mediators between God and man, don't know the power of God. Are you sure you've had training?" He then corrects their false understanding of the resurrection. We do not carry on our marital relations, but instead will be like the angels in that regard. That last remark no doubt irritated these unbelievers of angels!

Jesus then, unlike his opponents, deals straightforwardly with the issue of the resurrection. *²⁶ Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? ²⁷ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"*

This is "in your face" talk. Who do the Sadducees revere above all writers? Moses. His books alone are the ones they study. Jesus has the audacity to retort, "*have you not read in the book of Moses?*"

The fundamental argument of the Sadducees was that Moses did not teach the resurrection, and, by the way, they had a strong argument. There is no explicit reference to the resurrection of the dead. Indeed, the word does not appear in all of the Old Testament. A clear teaching of a resurrection does not develop until the period between the Old and New Testaments. Thus, many Jewish rabbis today do not believe in, or are skeptical of, life after death.

But Jesus does, and he goes straight to the writings of Moses to prove his position. Again, like the previous answer he gave regarding taxes, his answer appears to be little more than a clever retort. God is the God of the living because he says “I am” the God of the patriarchs, not “I was.” But Jesus is not a mere spinner of words and phrases; he is the master rabbi who understands the true depths of the holy Scriptures.

What does God mean, calling himself “*the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*”? Consider what the statement would mean according the Sadducees’ viewpoint. According to them, God means, I was their God only while they lived. At death, at the moment of man’s greatest fear, I ceased to have anything to do with them. They are now nonentities. They do not exist except in memory. The promise to Abraham that he would be the father of millions was no more than that – a promise for him to dream about. It cheered him while he existed and nothing more. There is no future, only now.

Do you, Jesus is saying, really think that was the message God was giving to Moses as he called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt? I am your God Moses while you live, but when you die you will be no more. Do you believe that Moses left his secure life at the age of 80 to do a work that he admittedly feared to do, because he was so moved at the idea of God proclaiming himself to be the God of those who no longer exist?

God is not a cemetery keeper! He does not walk around the big cemetery in the sky, pointing to memorial stones and saying, “I remember your father Abraham. We had good times together. I sure do miss him. There’s Jacob’s grave. Boy, he was a rascal!”

Yahweh, Jehovah, I Am Who I Am, is the God of the living, not the dead! Isn’t that plain in the way that God interacts with his people? Did he create man in his own image just to pass the time with him for a little while before his life is snuffed out? Come on, Sadducees, think about this. What’s the tree of life about if God had not intended for man to live forever? In Genesis 5 Moses lists the descendents of Adam noting how each died, but that God took Enoch away. Is there a way to end life without dying? Doesn’t it make more sense to understand that Enoch is still alive with God? Do you really think that the exodus was about nothing more than improving living conditions? The great displays of God’s power in deliverance, establishing the Israelites as God’s holy nation, establishing the law and sacrificial system were all for the mere purpose of making the people good citizens the few years they exist? When God threatened to blot his people out of his book, do you think it meant nothing more than a scrapbook of memory keepsakes?

As one person commented, “No wonder they were Sadd-u-cee!” All they have to live for is the moment, which explains their focus on possessing wealth and power. It explains their impatience with the masses and rudeness. They don’t have time for the life-long work of developing patience and other virtues, and there certainly is no payoff at the end. Their destiny is the same as the most virtuous, God-honoring saint – they all cease to exist.

Truly, though, as Jesus said to them, “*You are badly mistaken!*”

Analysis

Let’s consider further how badly mistaken is the view that there is no immortality or resurrection. Such a view is mistaken because it misinterprets Scripture and because it degrades our mortal life. First, consider the Scriptures.

Jesus confined himself to the one story involving Moses because he was sparring with the Sadducees. He could have pointed to Elijah who was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. He could have recited Job’s great statement of faith:

²⁵ *I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.*
²⁶ *And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;*
²⁷ *I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another (19:25-27).*

¹¹ *You have made known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Psalm 16:11).*

⁶ *Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever (Psalm 23:6).*

Jesus could have pointed to the prophecy of Isaiah:

¹⁹ *But your dead will live;
their bodies will rise.
You who dwell in the dust,
wake up and shout for joy.
Your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead (26:19).*

Or to the prophecy of Daniel:

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt (12:1-2).

Of course, for us our greatest cause for believing in the life to come and the resurrection is Jesus himself.

²⁰ *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.* ²¹ *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.* ²² *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.* ²³ *But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him* (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

⁵ *If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection* (Romans 6:5).

¹⁰ *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,* ¹¹ *and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead* (Philippians 3:10-11).

Our cause for believing comes from the very promises of Jesus:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ *and whoever lives and believes in me will never die* (John 11:25-26).

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.* ³ *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am* (John 14:1-3).

To deny life after death and the resurrection requires that we deny the promise and hope that fills the pages of Scripture. Such a view is also badly mistaken because it degrades our mortal life. John Lennon, in an honest desire to see peace on earth, wrote,

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

So let's imagine. Thomas Hardy did not believe in heaven or hell nor God. He believed all that existed was this life. Listen to a man who deals with the reality of life on earth without a God in heaven above.

If but some vengeful god would call to me
From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"
Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,

Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
 Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
 Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
 And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
 – Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
 And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan...
 These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
 Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

As pleasurable as it may seem to first think of this life as the only one that there is, it in truth leads to deep depression. Not only is this the one life to make the most of, there is no one who cares about our life.

Without immortality and resurrection, why would it matter if there were a God in the sky? If all God does is play with us in our brief existence, what does it matter in the end? How terrible for a man who lives a wasteful life, to realize his error on his death bed, and then cease to exist? How meaningless for a man to live a life of self-sacrifice only to die and the good he did come undone anyhow. The Teacher is right: all is meaningless if there is nothing but this life.

But we are not God's play toys to throw away when we wear out. Our destiny is not a mere plaque on God's memory wall. As C.S. Lewis wrote:

There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat" (Weight of Glory, p. 15).

Lewis' point in bringing that up was that we should treat our neighbor with respect and seriousness. The Sadducees saw only temporal, small mortals. Thus, their arrogance and rudeness. That is a good lesson for us to take note of. Again, Lewis points out:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

But here is the primary lesson to learn. It is the emphasis that I think Jesus was making. The God you worship is your God forever. He will not leave you; never will he forsake you, especially at the time of your greatest peril – traveling into death. He who created you will sustain you.

And he wants you to know that he is, not was, the God of all the saints that have gone before you, including the loved ones you are thinking of now. My God is the God of Ali Large, my Christian sister who died at 25. He is the God of Richard Scheer, my college

mentor who died in his early thirties. He is the God of my spiritual mentor James Boice who died at 61. Your God is, not was, the God of... You complete that sentence now. And then recite these words:

⁵⁵ *“Where, O death, is your victory?*

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* ⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).*