

## **Irreligious: Forsaking Religion and Finding Jesus' God (Mk. 12:18-27)**

**Chris Altrock – August 1, 2010**

Over the past few days I've practiced what I call the "ministry of presence" among the LaVelle family. When a young person like Liz dies, there few words worth speaking. The very best we can do is just be present with each other. And as I've tried to be present I've overheard numerous people saying the same thing over and over. As they've thought of the hurt and pain that comes in the midst of the death of a young person like Liz, they've said, "I just don't know how people make it through times like these without God and without the church." They've been testifying that times of tragedy reveal that there is nothing comparable to following Jesus, there is something indispensable about following Jesus. You can't make it through those times without that "thing" that only comes through following Jesus.

This Sunday morning series has allowed us to do some deeper thinking about that truth. As we've listened to Jesus debate religious leaders, we've learned that there is a big difference between religion and following Jesus. We've learned that there's something that only comes by following Jesus, something that religion can never offer. This morning's text punctuates that truth in a very timely way.

*18And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, 19"Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. 20There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. 21And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. 22And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died. 23In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." 24Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? 25For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 26And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? 27He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong." (Mk. 12:18-27 ESV)*

We've watched three members of the Sanhedrin attack Jesus at the temple. We've watched the unlikely duo of the Pharisees and Herodians attack Jesus at the temple. Today, the Sadducees attack Jesus at the temple. We've learned who the Sanhedrin is and who the Pharisees and Herodians are. But who are these Sadducees attacking Jesus today?

- The name "Sadducee" probably came from the name "Zadok," the high priest who served in the time of King David. The high priests after Zadok descended from Zadock's family.<sup>1</sup> The "Zadokees" or Sadducees were the influential families from whom the high priests were selected.
- This made the Sadducees *spiritually prominent*. It was hard to get much higher on the spiritual ladder than the high priest, and the Sadducees were comprised of the high priests.

- Not only were they spiritually prominent. They were *politically powerful*. The Sadducees allied themselves with the Herodians and Romans. This meant that they had influence not only in the sacred world but also in the secular world.
- Finally, the Sadducees were *theologically conservative*. You might remember that the Pharisees had manufactured all kinds of extra laws in order to keep people from breaking the actual laws of the Bible. The Sadducees rejected these extra laws. They accepted only what was written on the pages of Scripture. More specifically, they gave greatest weight to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

But this theological conservatism morphed into a kind of blind fundamentalism. They became one of the few religious groups in Judaism who did not believe in a resurrection from the dead. There are numerous Old Testament texts which affirm that God *will* raise the dead (e.g., Dan. 12:1-2; Is. 26:19; Ez. 37:1-14). But these texts all appear outside of the Pentateuch, those five books which the Sadducees valued above all others.<sup>2</sup> And since they could find no text in the Pentateuch which taught a resurrection from the dead, the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. Thus they come today in the temple with a contrived story designed to show just how ridiculous resurrection belief is.

The Sadducees point Jesus to a text in the Pentateuch—Deut. 25:5—which taught that if a woman’s husband died before the couple had children, the brother of the husband was to marry her and have children with her. Then the Sadducees concoct a “what-if” story about a wife whose husband dies and leaves no children, so the brother marries her, but he dies without fathering children, so the next brother marries her, and so on. All seven brothers marry her but die without leaving children. The Sadducees believe this law in the Pentateuch requiring brothers to marry a deceased brother’s wife makes belief in the resurrection impossible. Because if there is a resurrection, then whose wife will this woman be in the resurrection?

But there is more at stake here than a doctrinal dispute about resurrection. What is ultimately at stake is a world view, a way of making sense of life. One line from two biblical scholars helps us see this larger picture: “*In their view the present world is the place of the one encounter with God and the related reward and punishment.*”<sup>3</sup> The Sadducee’s disbelief in the resurrection led to ultimately to a distorted belief about life. They appeared to believe that the present world is the place of the one encounter with God. In other words, everything important that’s going to happen between you and God is going to happen in *this* world and in *this* life. Everything critical that God’s going to do with us, through us, and to us is going to happen in *this* world and in *this* life. Now, they did believe in the idea of heaven and of an afterlife. But in their mind there would never be a physical resurrection of the dead. There would be no new heaven and new earth. There would be no recreation of humanity and of the cosmos. The only real physical life is the life we are now living.

I think it’s permissible to put it way: *The Sadducees seemed to believe that the only physical reality is the world as it now exists.* There is a *non-physical* reality called heaven. But the only

*physical* reality is the world as it now exists. There is no hope of a physical world different than the world we have right now. In terms of the physical world and our physical lives, things will never be fundamentally different than they are right now.

It is little wonder that the Sadducees were not popular among the common people. What kind of religion do you have when it says the only physical reality is the world as it now exists? What kind of hope do you have to offer the farmers suffering in the midst of a drought or the sick, lame, and blind whose infirmities rob them of a normal life, or the entire population of Israel subjugated to the pagan powers of Rome when your religion says that there is no hope of a physical world different than the world we have right now?

It's little wonder that the Sadducees allied themselves with the political powers of the day: the Herodians and the Romans. If the only physical world is the world we have right now, you'd better become intimate with the most powerful political parties and preeminent people in the world—because they are the only ones who can offer any real hope of improving our physical lives and our physical world.

Seen through this lens, *the Sadducees offered a religion which could only help with the world that is*. The worst religion can only offer help surviving life in the world *as it currently exists*. The worst religion asks us to meekly accept the hard reality around us and then shows us how to survive in the midst of that reality. It asks us to believe there is nothing that can be done about that reality. Then it holds our hand and tries to relieve some of the pain from that reality.

Religion can offer *help*. But it can never provide *hope*. It's no better than the aspirin or the drink or the TV or the novel at the end of a very hard day. Religion can mask some of the pain. It can dull some of the despair. But it cannot fundamentally change anything about the world as it currently exists.

Rarely has that been more significant in the Highland family than right now.

- Kate Garner, daughter of long-time Highland members Ken and Brenda, was in a serious car accident a couple of weeks ago. She's alive but in a lot of pain and dealing with a very serious injury. When I visited her in the hospital she wept and wondered aloud if she'd ever get back to the life she was living before. Would she ever walk again? Or would she just have to accept the world as it is?
- The Sayers, long-time Highland members, lost Sharon's mother two days ago. The Prines, long-time Highland members, lost Sean's father to cancer last week. The Hanisco's, long-time Highland members, lost Mindy's mother and then her grandmother within the span of several days.
- The LaVelle's, long-time Highland members, lost their daughter Liz in a car accident four days ago as she travelled to Nashville for college. On the eve of Liz's death, as many of us packed into their crowded house on Mallard Lane, one woman screamed out "Can I just say that I hate this!" She, and none us, could stand the reality of the world as it currently exists.

And what these families need, and what we all need, is so much more than just religion. We need more than just help as we cope with what is. We need hope that there's more than this. We need hope that what is can be changed into what isn't. We need hope that the way things are today are not the way things are going to stay.

That's exactly what Jesus offers: *24Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? 25For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 26And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? 27He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong."* (Mk. 12:24-27 ESV)

The Sadducees quoted from the Pentateuch because they believed it to be the most important part of the Bible. So, Jesus quotes from the Pentateuch. Jesus quotes from the Ex. 3 story of God appearing to Moses in the bush. That story is particularly significant given the implications I've spelled out regarding the Sadducees.

The story Jesus quotes from begins with the fact that, for hundreds of years, the Israelites have been enslaved by the Egyptians. This enslavement has become their reality. This is all they know. There is no one left alive who remembers what life was like before this life. There is no one with memories of a life before Egypt. From child to parent to grandparent to great grand parent, the only stories anyone can share are stories of life as a slave. Poverty. Injustice. Hopelessness. That is the only physical world they know. And as far as they know, nothing can change that reality.

Then one day God speaks to a man named Moses at a bush that appears to be burning: *7Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, 8and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." 11But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" 12He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." 13Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. 16Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me,*

*saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, 17and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey."* (Ex. 3:7-16 ESV). This is the story Jesus paraphrases in his response to the Sadducees.

And it is a resurrection story. The Israelites are as good as dead. The only reality they know is suffering and despair. But God has come not simply to help them cope with the world as it is. God has come to change what is. He's come to recreate reality. He's going to turn their world on its head. They'll go from poverty to wealth. They'll go from death to life. They'll go from injustice to justice. They'll go from oppressed to free. They'll go from hurting to hallelujah! With power beyond imagination, God sends plagues, parts a sea and passes the Israelites over into a new reality.

I think all of that is in Jesus' mind when he mentions this story, when he scolds the Sadducees for not understanding the power of God, and when he says that God is not a God of the dead but of the living. The dead is the way the world is right now. The dead is the hard reality we are now facing. But the living is the way the world should be. The living is the reality that can be. And God is not a God of the dead, but of the living. Because following Jesus is about following a God who is not merely powerful enough to help us cope with life as it is. It is about following a God powerful enough to change what is. Following Jesus is not just about help for the world that is. It's about hope for the world that will be. Following Jesus is following a God who resurrects, who changes death into life, who transforms ends into new beginnings, who turns hurting to hallelujah. And the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt was just one small example of that enormous power. God is capable of not only helping you cope with the world as it now exists. He is capable of changing that world. He is capable of remaking your reality. He is not the God of the dead. He is the God of the living. He is the resurrection God.

As Kate Garner lay in her hospital bed a few days ago recovering from her car accident, and as she wrestled with that accident and its implications, I told her "This is Friday. But Sunday's coming. Things are not always going to be this way. This is not forever. This is Friday. But Sunday's coming. This reality is not the only reality." Our God is not a God of the dead. He is not a God who merely gets us by in the world that is. Ours is a God of the living. He is a God who ultimately changes all that is.

And what a powerful message that is to our Highland family. As the Sayers grieve from the loss of Sharon's mother, as the Prines grieve from the death of Sean's father, as the Haniscos grieve from the death of Mindy's mother and grandmother, and as the LaVelles and hundreds of others grieve from the death of Liz, what Jesus offers is not religion. What Jesus offers is the living God. What Jesus offers is a God who in the resurrection of Jesus has already started changing the world that is; who one day will resurrect and recreate all that is, including those in Christ whom we so dearly love. The LaVelles will not be without Liz forever. That's not how things are going to remain. There's a resurrection coming. And one day they will be reunited. The Sayers and the Prines and the Haniscos will not be without Sharon's mother or Sean's father or Mindy's mother or grandmother forever. That's not how things are going to remain.

There's a resurrection coming. And one day they will be reunited. He's going to turn the world on its head. We'll go from poverty to wealth. We'll go from death to life. We'll go from injustice to justice. We'll go from oppressed to free. We'll go from hurting to hallelujah! We do not have to accept things as they are today. We believe in the God of the things that will be. We believe that God is not the God of the dead. He is the God of the living.

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<sup>1</sup> Myers, A. C. (1987). The Eerdmans Bible dictionary (902). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

<sup>2</sup> Gundry, 705.

<sup>3</sup> Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1995). Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (993–994). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.