

April 2, 2023

JESUS' CONFRONTATION WITH THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Luke 20:1-21:4

(7 of 16 in a series through Luke 16-24)

For those of you who remember watching shows on the major networks week to week, you'll remember what happened each spring. The season would develop, leading to some interesting point in the season, and then it would end on a cliff hanger, leaving you with all kinds of unanswered questions. And then there'd be a break over the summer as we waited for the television show to resume in the fall. It was excruciating. CBS promoted the show *Dallas* by asking all summer long, "Who shot J.R.?" which happened in the series finale of season 3. And apparently it was effective because I remember my friends and I making jokes in school about the question, "Who shot J.R.?" and I was only two-years-old when that episode originally aired. Somehow that promotion found its way into the hearts of elementary-aged kids in Western Kentucky for years. Well done, CBS! But these cliffhanger episodes and months of waiting for the questions to be answered was miserable.

And though I doubt any of us felt it in quite that same way, this is how we left things last week. At the very end of chapter 19 we were told, "And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him" (19:47). So, at the end of chapter 19 you're left asking, "How? What did they do to try to destroy Jesus? What approach did they take?" And the answer is found in 20:1-21:4. These verses are all organized around Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders in Israel as they carry out their mission of seeking to destroy Jesus.

Luke 20:1-21:4 is composed of Jesus having showdown after showdown with the religious leaders in Israel. They challenge his authority, ask him questions intended to trap him politically, and ask him other questions to trap him theologically. But all along the way, Jesus not only defends himself well but shines a light on their hypocrisy, ignorance of the Scripture, and wickedness. So, let's walk through the text and see how Jesus handles each of these encounters, and as we do so we'll see the wisdom of Jesus and the wickedness of his enemies put on full display. First, we see how Jesus exposes the chief priests, scribes, and elders.

Jesus exposes the chief priests, scribes, and elders

After Jesus had driven those buying and selling from the temple courtyard, you can imagine there were a lot of Jesus' enemies were wondering what authority he thought he had to do that. So, eventually, the chief priest, the scribes, and the elders decided to ask him. They ask, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority" (20:2). My guess is that they believe this one question is sort of a trap for Jesus. If he can't provide a good answer for why he thinks he has authority to cleanse the temple, then they can attack him for (as we said last week) acting like he owned the place. However, if he does provide an answer that exalts him enough to do such an act, they could likely accuse him of blasphemy.

But Jesus turns it on them and decides to ask them a question in return. He says, "Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?" (20:3-4). And with that, Jesus put them on the horns of a dilemma. If they say "from heaven," then Jesus will ask why they didn't believe John. After all, they didn't submit themselves to John's baptism or believe Jesus to be the Messiah, as John had testified. Why wouldn't they listen to John if his ministry was sanctioned by heaven? But if they say that John's baptism and teaching wasn't from God but was simply from man, then they'll risk the crowd coming at them and maybe evening stoning them because so many thought of John as a prophet. Therefore, seeing no good way to answer the question, they said they didn't know, and so Jesus answers, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things" (20:8).

And with that Jesus exposed them. These were supposed to be the religious leaders of the people, but they weren't willing to be honest and say what they actually believed (which in this case would have been that John's baptism was from man, as they didn't think John was a prophet). They feared man more than they feared God. And so they are exposed as cowards.

But it's not just that they're cowards, Jesus also shows that they're wicked. He tells a parable in verses 9-18 about a man who planted a vineyard, leased it to some tenants, and went away. Then, after some time, he sent a servant to the tenants to get some of the fruit that he was owed, but the tenants beat him and sent him away with nothing. So, the owner of the vineyard sent another servant, and the same thing happened. Finally, after the same thing happened to a third, he sent his own son.

Now, our first reaction at this point in the parable is probably to say, "What are you thinking? If they beat all three of your servants, why in the world would you send your son?" But the idea is that it'd be unthinkable that these men would do anything to his son. And yet, not only do they treat the son poorly, they do the unthinkable. They reason to themselves that they should kill him and that somehow this would lead to them coming into possession of the vineyard. It's irrational, but it's what they thought. So they kill him. But it doesn't end up as they hope because, Jesus tells us that the owner of the vineyard will "come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (v. 16).

This is one of those parables that is a bit like Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* where he has characters like Obdurate and Hypocrisy. It's pretty straightforward. The owner of the vineyard is God, and these tenants represent Israel throughout history (especially the religious leaders at the moment). The servants are the prophets whom God sent to his people throughout history who were treated terribly. And the son is Jesus. He's saying to these religious leaders, "You've ignored and abused the prophets, and now you're ignoring the Son himself and will kill him. Therefore, the kingdom is going to flourish among the Gentiles, and you're going to face judgment." And they can't believe it. So Jesus looks directly at them and says, "What then is this that is written: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him" (20:17-18). Jesus is quoting from Psalm 118, which prophesied the Christ would be ignored but

would become central in the building up of God's people. Those who are willing to be broken and come to him in faith will become a child of God, and those who won't will be crushed.

So Jesus exposes the religious leaders as cowards—unwilling to say what they really think about John—and as wicked men, since they are plotting to kill the Son of God. Next, Jesus silences the spies.

Jesus silences the spies

I word this point that way because the next section (20:19-26) begins with the scribes and chief priests sending spies to Jesus and ends with the note that they became silent. Thus, Jesus silences the spies. So what happens?

Well, after realizing that this parable Jesus told was about them, the chief priests and elders wanted to kill Jesus. They would have done it in that very moment but they were afraid of the people who were impressed with Jesus. So, they decided to keep trying to trip him up. Therefore, they sent some spies his way who came to him acting like they were sincere and had a genuine question. Attempting to come across as sincere, they first speak flattery, telling Jesus that they know he speaks and teaches rightly, shows no partiality, and truly teaches the way of God. Then, they ask him, "Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not?" (20:22).

Now, this question too was designed to put Jesus in a no-win situation. The goal of this question is to entice Jesus to say something that could be seen as challenging Rome. Then they could hand Jesus over to Pilate, and he would do their dirty work of dealing with Jesus. The tax they're asking about was a poll-tax, which the Jews would have been required to pay to Rome and was about thirty to forty percent of someone's income.¹ Not only was the price a steep one, but it went to support "the hated imperial court in Rome and the pagan cult of the Roman state."² So, it was a tax paid to the foreign country that ruled over you, and many of the Jews thought that paying this tax sent the message that Caesar—not God—was Lord. You can see then why it was not popular among the Jews.

So, you can see the trap. If Jesus says you should pay the tax, then many Jews might think he's siding with Rome and perhaps even endorsing that Caesar is their Lord instead of Yahweh. But if he says you shouldn't pay the tax, then he could be turned over to Pilate and face legal problems with Rome.

But Jesus knows what they're up to. So, we're told, that he asks them for a coin, saying, "Show me a denarius" (20:24). Now, the denarius was the coin that one had to pay the tax with, and the coin itself was like minted idolatry. It was engraved with words that translated to, "Emperor

¹ David Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 800.

² Ibid.

Tiberias Son of the Divine Augustus.” So, perhaps if these men were really upright, they’d answer Jesus by saying, “We don’t have a denarius. We don’t want to handle a coin like that. We think it’s idolatrous.” But they actually do have one, and they produce it. So, Jesus asks them, “Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They answer, “Caesar’s (20:24). And Jesus responds, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (20:25).

Breaking this down for us, the word translated “render” is better translated “give back.”³ What Jesus is saying is that Caesar makes these coins, and they’re his. You accept these coins and use Caesar’s money to do business, so now you have to play by his rules. If you accept his money, you have to give it back to him when he asks for it.

At the same time, however, by saying, “Give back to God what is God’s,” Jesus is making clear that Caesar isn’t Lord. And whereas these coins belong to Caesar, everything belongs to God. So, while paying the tax, they also must devote their entire self to God. This is what we read earlier in the service from Deuteronomy 10:12-13 when Moses says, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?”

That’s what God has commanded us—to devote our entire selves to him. You see, Jesus had silenced them. Pay the taxes because you happily accept Caesar’s money, but commit the entirety of your being to God because he is Lord. And they were hypocrites. They complained about Caesar’s taxes under the premise that they wanted to devote themselves to God, not Caesar. But they were clearly not devoting themselves to God. If they were, they would be honoring and worshiping and obeying Jesus. And so Jesus silences the spies. Next, Jesus confounds the Sadducees.

Jesus confounds the Sadducees

The Sadducees come to Jesus not with a political trap like the spies but a theological trap. They’re hoping to expose what they see as the ridiculousness of his teaching. You see, Luke tells us that the Sadducees deny that there is a resurrection. So, they come to Jesus with a Bible question, but it’s really a question they’re wanting to use to expose the absurdity of believing in a resurrection. They say, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife” (20:28-33).

³ Ibid., 801.

The idea they're talking about is Levirate marriage. The idea was that if your brother married and died without children, then you should marry his widow and try to have a child who would carry on your brother's line. Of course in the Sadducees' example, this repeatedly happens because each brother dies without having a child, and so the process is repeated until this woman who has been married to seven brothers, never having children, died. So, when the Sadducees ask Jesus whose wife she'll be when they're all raised from the dead, you can almost imagine the laughter they were trying to hide.

But as Jesus answers, we see that the joke is on them. They're simply ignorant of what life will be like when we're raised and dwelling in a new creation. Jesus answers their question saying, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" (20:34-36).

You see, one of the reasons we have marriage in this life is for procreation. And one of the reasons we need to procreate is because we die. If from now on no one ever again had children, then we're only one lifespan away from all humanity being gone. However, when we're raised from the dead and with the Lord in eternity, we won't die anymore. Therefore, there'll be no need to have any children because we won't die. We'll be like the angels in that respect. And so Jesus shows them that their question which was intended to show the absurdity of the idea of a resurrection actually has just exposed their ignorance of what eternity will be like.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He knows this isn't a sincere question, so he pushes a bit further to show that their disbelief in the resurrection was foolish in light of the teaching of Scripture. He says, "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him" (20:37-38).

Jesus' point is that when God made the covenant with Abraham—which we heard read earlier—he promised to be God to Abraham and to his offspring after him. To be the God of Abraham doesn't simply mean, then, to be the God that Abraham worshiped and obeyed. The phrase the "God of Abraham," tells us something about God, namely, that he is committed to and has set his affection on Abraham. So Jesus notes that after Abraham's death—in the time of Moses—God is still referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are dead, that makes no sense. How can you be a God who is committed to and have affected for one who is dead? Well, you can't. And that's Jesus' point. They're still living. God's commitment to them and affection for them is shown in that though they've died, they still live, and he will one day raise even their bodies.

The Sadducees came in quite arrogant about their beliefs, but Jesus has pointed out that they've not thought through the implications of the teaching of Scripture. They're ignorant of eternity and haven't read their Bibles closely. And the text says that they tell Jesus he's spoken well and

asked him no more questions. They're no longer a group sure of themselves. Jesus confounds the Sadducees. And, finally, Jesus discloses the ignorance and wickedness of the religious leaders.

Jesus discloses the ignorance and wickedness of the religious leaders

In 20:41-21:4 Jesus goes on the offensive. All the religious leaders among Israel have attacked him, putting questions to him, to see if he might stumble. Now, he puts one to them. He refers to Psalm 110—a psalm written by David—and notes that David writes in that psalm, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (20:42-43). Then Jesus asks them if the Christ (the Messiah) is David’s son—and everyone would have known that who were familiar with God’s promise to raise up David’s son to reign forever in 2 Samuel 7:12-14—then why does David call the Christ his Lord in this text? Do you see? David is the king. There’s no one above him who he might call “Lord” except God. And yet in this text he says, “The Lord” (that’s God (Yahweh)) “says to my Lord.” That second “Lord” is the Christ—God’s forever king. So, if the Messiah is David’s son, how is David referring to him as Lord here? How do you put these things together?

And of course we hear no answers from these unbelieving religious leaders. But the answer is that David can refer to the Messiah as his Lord because the one who would come from his line and reign as a human king is not *merely* human. He’d be *fully* human, but he’d also be fully God. He is God the Son who took on flesh. He is the God-man. And Jesus brings this up because everyone needs to recognize that’s who he is. He is David’s son and David’s Lord. He is man, and he is God. And the religious leaders need to realize that in fighting against him, they are warring against God himself.

And so Jesus turns to his disciples, after disclosing the unbelief of the religious leaders and discloses their wickedness. He says, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation” (20:46-47).

In other words, these religious leaders like to do a lot of things that give the appearance that they’re godly men, but they’re not. They abuse widows, are simply trying to get men’s praise, and want all the honor their peers can manage. But they’ll be condemned. Meanwhile, Jesus sees the opposite of these religious leaders. Instead of holding up those who put on big shows while being empty of any godliness, he points to a widow.

People were bringing their gifts to the offering box, and the rich were putting in amounts that were impressive, but a poor widow put in two copper coins, the amount you could earn in less than ten minutes of work in a day. Nothing about her was showy. No one was honoring her or praising her. But Jesus does. He points out that she gave more than everyone that day—obviously not in amount but in that she gave all she had. Here was someone who was utterly devoted to the Lord and knew that even if she were to keep being able to live the Lord must be her provision. It’s not the ones they were all tempted to look at who was a picture of devotion

but one they were all tempted to ignore and look past. Jesus had disclosed the ignorance and wickedness of the religious leaders, but he'd also pointed the eyes of the people beyond them to a better example.

The religious leaders had come at Jesus to expose and destroy him, and all they'd done is exposed their own ignorance, wickedness, and unbelief. Yes, they'd ultimately succeed in seeing Jesus killed. He'd be hanging on a cross, being crucified by the end of the week. But even that would not be their victory but his. He would be fulfilling his mission of laying down his life for us so that he might take it up again on that Easter Sunday morning so that we might—by faith—have forgiveness and sins and eternal life. So, let's come and give him thanks for that now as we come to the table. Amen.