

Bad Question, Great Answers

Luke 20:27 – 21:4

Series: The Climax of the Cross (Luke, Spring 2020)

Preaching Date: February 16, 2020

Worship: O Day of Resurrection

Key Sentence: Jesus is always ready to expand our thinking

Outline:

I. An attempt to trap Jesus (Luke 20:27-33)

II. Answer 1: eternal perspective (Luke 20:34-40)

III. Answer 2: present Lord (Luke 20:41-44)

IV. Answer 3: active integrity (Luke 20:45-21:4)

Luke 20:27-47 There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection,²⁸ and they asked him a question, saying, “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.²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children.³⁰ And the second³¹ and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died.³² Afterward the woman also died.³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.”

³⁴And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage,³⁵ 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,³⁶ for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.³⁷ 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.³⁸ Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.”³⁹ Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.”⁴⁰ For they no longer dared to ask him any question.

⁴¹But he said to them, “How can they say that the Christ is David’s son? ⁴²For David himself says in the Book of Psalms, “‘The Lord said to my Lord, “‘Sit at my right hand,⁴³ until I make your enemies your footstool.”’⁴⁴ David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?”

⁴⁵And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples,⁴⁶ “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,⁴⁷ who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Luke 21:1-4 Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, ²and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³And he said, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. ⁴For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

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You may have heard it said that there are no bad questions. Teachers say this in class to encourage students. Employers say it when training new employees. Maybe in those situations it's true. But we all know that in real life there are bad questions. Politicians and journalists and critics ask bad questions all the time, questions intended to entrap or attack or embarrass someone. The classic is "are you still beating your wife?" You can't win no matter how you answer.

Someone recently said to Gail that the practice of tai chi, a breathing and movement oriented martial art, can actually expand the brain, physically. Now I'm not advocating tai chi. Many people who feel it is contrary to faith. Others don't. But I did check this claim of expanding the brain and it appears to be true. "Researchers at the University of South Florida and Fudan University in China found Tai Chi increases brain volume in seniors who practiced three times a week for 40 weeks. The study's results are pretty impressive, since gray matter usually shrinks with age." Or maybe you are into supplements. There are many that claim to increase not brain size but neural effectiveness, with names like Neurenol, Cebria, Cogniflex and Brain Awake. But I'm not concerned with that today, not with expanding our physical brains, but with expanding our thinking. I think both good questions and bad questions can expand the mind. Good questions lead there directly, but bad questions can force us to question the question. Moreover, good answers, to good questions or bad questions can expand and even revolutionize our thinking.

Our text begins with a bad question. But the bad question is put to Jesus, so the answers, three of them, are very good. If we listen they'll expand our thinking. Jesus is always ready to expand our thinking in godly ways. The bad question is Luke 20:27-33 *There came to him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection,* ²⁸*and they asked him a question, saying, "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.* ²⁹*Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children.* ³⁰*And the second* ³¹*and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died.* ³²*Afterward the woman also died.* ³³*In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife."*

This is not the first bad question in this section of Luke. Last week we read that the scribes and the Pharisees "watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said."

In last week's text we saw two questions intended to trap Jesus. The first was "where do you get your authority, from God or from man?" The second was "should we pay taxes to Caesar," intended to trap Jesus between the anti-tax sentiments of the people and the rigid authority of the Roman oppressors. This third question is an attempt to trap Jesus into denying the resurrection, a doctrine held by the Pharisees and by most of the Jews of the day. This question is posed by the Sadducees, a group which didn't believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees also denied the authority of the oral tradition that meant so much to the Pharisees. Leon Morris characterizes the Sadducees as 'the conservative, aristocratic, high-priestly party, worldly-minded and very ready to cooperate with the Romans, which, of course, enabled them to maintain their privileged position.' Like the other leaders they must have wanted to discredit Jesus, so they confronted him with what they thought was a difficult objection to the resurrection. It had to do with levirate marriage, the Old Testament law on preserving a family name. When a man died childless, as described in Deuteronomy 25, his brother was to marry the widow and raise up children to the deceased. Not many examples of the practice are recorded in Scripture, the one exception being the story of Ruth and Boaz.

Based on this little used law, the Sadducees describe seven brothers who all, in succession, had been married to the same woman, in each case without bearing a child. Whose wife she would be in the resurrection, since she had been the wife of all seven, and none had the greater claim on her? Clearly, they thought ridiculous the idea of being married to seven at once, or of not being married to someone she had been married to. They were sure this kind of logic problem ruled out a doctrine of resurrection. If the age to come and the resurrected life has the same kinds of relationships and institutions as the present age, earthly circumstances like this will indeed pose almost insurmountable problems.

But Jesus wants to expand their thinking. It's a bad question not only because they are trying to trap him, but because it doesn't account for eternal realities or an eternal perspective. In the first answer he addresses their concern directly. Verses 34-40 *Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, ³⁶for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. ³⁷But 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. ³⁸Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him." ³⁹Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." ⁴⁰For they no longer dared to ask him any question.*

Jesus responds to their trap by expanding their thinking and pushing back on their supposedly irrefutable logic. He draws a contrast between this age and the one to come, and in the process gives us plain teaching on eternal realities. He begins by agreeing that people of this age do indeed marry and are given in marriage. But the age to come is not like this one. Those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead, will neither marry nor be given in marriage. The fact that those who are resurrected are considered worthy or counted worthy is clear evidence of God's grace at work. It is not on the basis of something they've done, some standard they've maintained, but on his grace, which calls qualified those who have no qualifications of their own, simply because of the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross. Those thus rescued by God will receive resurrection to life.

Jesus has in fact taken sides on this question. He does not agree with the Sadducees who say there is no resurrection. Instead he agrees with the Pharisees, on this issue. He affirms and teaches the resurrection from the dead, and has already prophesied his own resurrection. Starting from his teaching and from his resurrection, this becomes a central tenet of the New Testament, the blessed hope for all believers. Death has been conquered, and that there is life beyond the grave. Jesus himself says in the Gospel of John: "I am the resurrection and the life everyone who believes in me will live, even though he dies." Isn't it reassuring, isn't it wonderful to know that the dead in Christ will rise? Many of you here have lost loved ones, especially parents, over the past few years. Many of those were believers, who had openly placed their faith in Christ. This teaching of Jesus means that death is not the last word for them. The Apostle Paul in 1st Corinthians captures our feelings about this truth: "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

Jesus, in his death on the cross, and in his victorious resurrection has removed the sting of death from our lives. I may drop dead tomorrow. So could you. We know the reality of death in our own congregation each year. But the death of His saints is no tragedy. It is only the sad prelude to a glad victory. It is the prelude to an imperishable life, and to heaven and to eternity. Jesus goes on to teach us something about that eternity in verses 35 and 36. First, there is no marriage there. "They neither marry nor are given in marriage." What does this mean? Some have said that in heaven there will be no personal relationships, only the bare glory of God and man's worship.

I don't agree. Though God's glory and his worship will be central to the age to come, I think the Bible teaches more: a personal resurrection, personal existence, personal relationships, a new heaven and new earth to enjoy together. So, Jesus must be talking about the physical side of marriage. It is the absence of the physical relationship and childbearing that solves the problem of the seven brothers. Personal relationships between individuals continue into eternity. I look forward to spending eternity with Gail, as well as with others I love.

Jesus is teaching that the new heavens and the new earth are a new kind of place, and we ourselves will not have the same limitations that we have here. The verses we just read in 1st Corinthians told us that we will be clothed in immortality. And Jesus tells us here that in that age to come we no longer die, we will be like the angels, we will be sons and daughters of God, sons and daughters of the resurrection. Of these four things, the easiest to understand is that we will no longer die. As Revelation promises, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. In this eternal life, and in other ways we will be like the angels. The angels are immortal, as far as we can tell from the Biblical data. They always do the will of God, and are free from indwelling sin, though we know that some have fallen into complete disobedience. The angels are his servants and worshipers. We will be these things as well.

But we will be more than angels. We will be God's children, This is one of the most glorious things about our future and our hope. We are adopted as sons and daughters of God, and we will spend eternity in his family. The Gospel of John says: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." Romans 8:15 says "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." We are now God's children and we will be in the age to come.

After saying these things, Jesus caps his answer with a brief compelling argument that there must be eternal life. He makes this argument from a Scripture passage of central importance in which God revealed his name, Yahweh. The Bible had not yet been divided into chapters and verses, so he refers to Exodus 3:1- 6 as the passage about the bush. There God is called the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Each of these patriarchs had, of course, been long dead when these words were spoken to Moses. So the statement that God is not the God of the dead but of the living recognizes that these patriarchs are alive beyond the grave. The alternative, according to Leon Morris, is to think of God as the God of non-existent beings, which is absurd.

Another commentator, Caird, makes another good point. He says: “All life, here and hereafter consists in friendship with God. Death may put an end to physical existence, but not to a relationship that is by nature eternal. Men may thus lose their friends by death, but God will not.” Morris concludes: “Our certainty of resurrection rests not on some speculative doctrine of the immortality of the soul, but on the fact of God’s eternal love.”

So Jesus has effectively answered their question and given them a lot to think about. He’s answered it so well that they are silenced. In this answer Jesus had sided with the Pharisees, something he didn’t often do. It was probably Pharisees who chimed in at this point “Well said - good answer.” The Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but still hadn’t accepted Jesus as Lord. So he asks them a Biblical question to expand their thinking. It’s a question about the nature of the Messiah as Lord. Luke 20:41-44 *But he said to them, “How can they say that the Christ is David’s son? ⁴²For David himself says in the Book of Psalms, “The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, ⁴³until I make your enemies your footstool.”’ ⁴⁴David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?”*

All of the Jews expected the Messiah to be the Son of David, and they are right. The evidence of the Old Testament and Luke’s own evidence proves this. In the opening chapters of Luke, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, and said “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” Luke knew from his research that Jesus was both the Messiah and the Son of David. So, when he includes these words of Jesus that we’re studying, it’s not to question this foundational truth. Rather, he includes this episode, and Jesus asks this question, to expand the idea of what Messiah is beyond being the Son of David.

“How do you, teachers of the law, understand the fact that the son of David is called Lord by David? Surely David would not speak that way about a mere human descendant?” Jesus quotes here from Psalm 110, verse 1: The Lord says to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” This verse, and several others in Psalm 110 can be easily applied to the Messiah as Son of David: victorious in war, conquering and extending the reign of Zion, ruling over enemies. This is the kind of Messiah that was anticipated. But how can this Davidic Messiah sit at God’s right hand? Wouldn’t one have to be deity to sit at the right hand of God? Jesus makes the point that when we hear David saying this, he must be saying that his lord, the Messiah, is equal in majesty and position to the Lord, Yahweh.

Do you see what Jesus is doing? He wants these people to recognize him not only as the Son of David, but as the Lord, Son of the Most High, one who exceeds even David in majesty and position. We've seen the same thrust in his teaching for the last two weeks in Luke. Jesus wants to expand their vision, and challenge their hard-headedness. If even David had to call the Messiah, Lord, then in you would recognize me as the Son of David, you too would have to call me Lord in your heart, and recognize my Lordship over your lives.

This is exactly what the teachers and leaders of the people had not done. They not only refused to call him Lord, they refused to recognize him as Messiah. A political Messiah would challenge their political position. A spiritual Messiah who was Lord would challenge their spiritual authority. They really wanted no Messiah at all. Leon Morris, again, has a good comment: "But he was Lord. Lord of people's hearts and lives. To call him Lord meaningfully is to see him as greater by far than merely another David." Jesus is trying to focus the minds and hearts of these people in the right place. He wants people to expand their thinking, to embrace him as their Lord. These are the things he wants for us as well. He wants our hearts and minds enlarged toward heavenly things and realities, but more than he wants our hearts and minds to embrace him as Lord, the one who has made it possible for us to experience resurrection and life.

As we celebrate communion together this morning, we will celebrate Jesus as Lord and Savior, as resurrection and life. We will proclaim his death, and remind ourselves of it, until he comes again. If it were not for his body that was broken, and his blood that was shed, then we would have no forgiveness for our sins, no redemption. We would have to bear the death penalty ourselves for our rebellion and sin. But now he has offered these things freely to those who trust in him. And by his resurrection he has won for us resurrection. He fought the last enemy, death, and defeated it forever. Thus, he can offer us eternal life, as children of God, children of the resurrection.

So, what have Jesus' answers to this narrow and trapping question been so far? First, to expand your thinking about eternity. It's not a place for human institutions but for true life, truly eternal and glorious. Second to expand your thinking about Jesus himself. He is not only the promised Messiah but truly the Lord God. His third answer, and the incident that follows at the start of chapter 21 encourage his disciples, and us, to expand our thinking about integrity. This is Luke 20:45 to Luke 21: 4. *And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples,* ⁴⁶ "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, ⁴⁷ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

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Luke has already recorded the criticisms Jesus made against the Pharisees and teachers of the law. but he records them again here because they show that the teachers not only had bad theology, but that they did not live up even to their own standards. They were hypocrites and their outward show was a cover up for sin. Jesus longs for us to trust him in such a way that our hearts and lives reflect that trust. He calls out hypocrisy and commends integrity and faith.

“Beware of the teachers of the law,” he says. They are puffed up with pride. They like to walk around in flowing robes, a sign of wealth and leisure. They like to be greeted in the marketplace, a sign of honor and power. They like to have the most important seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, an outward sign of recognition and respect. These people are like any elite in any age. They are filled up with themselves, and have become addicted to the honors and deference that frightened or misled people continually offer them.

But we’ve got to examine ourselves as well. We may not be in a position to receive a lot of deference or honors, but it’s easy to be filled up with ourselves, to be thinking only of ourselves, and to be living for the pleasures and comforts and securities of life, rather than setting ourselves aside and living for the Lord. Jesus wants to expand our thinking, to get our eyes off ourselves, onto others.

These teachers of the law illustrate two traps we can easily fall into. You can see them both in verse 47: They “devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers.” The first trap is materialism, a desire for things, security and comfort. It’s not clear precisely how these scribes devoured widow’s houses. It may be that as lawyers they charged exorbitant fees for settling a husband’s estate, thus impoverishing the widow. Jesus’ simple phrase makes the result clear: illicit gain for the teachers and loss for the widows. The second trap is the trap of appearances. For show these teachers made lengthy prayers. Not for God, not for a deepening of their own spirituality, but for show. When we find ourselves doing things because we don’t want to be caught not doing them, we are living for appearances rather than reality. I’m not counseling that we stop our praying or our devotions or our serving, but that we do them for real, not for show. God doesn’t service that is offered to be seen or prayers that are offered to be heard. God wants our hearts, not our appearances, integrity not sham, the best part, not the leftovers of your time and energy.

All that is positively illustrated in the closing account of this section. Jesus, having said all this, is still seated in the temple area. He is in the court of the women, where the offering boxes for the temple stood. The court of the women was not exclusively for women, it was just the court they could not go beyond. Jesus was teaching where women as well as men could benefit. The offering boxes, (tradition says there were 13), were trumpet shaped, narrow at the top, wide at the bottom. From where he sat Jesus could see the rich, probably ostentatiously, putting large sums in the offering.

But he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. This led to a last exercise in mind expansion. “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them.” On the purely financial level this was not the case. These rich men contributed much more than she did. Her two small copper coins were equivalent to pennies. The NET Bible says they were “the smallest and least valuable coins in circulation in Palestine, worth one-half of a quadrans or 1/128 of a denarius, or about six minutes of an average daily wage. This was next to nothing in value. But Jesus says it is worth more than what any of the others put in. He explains “For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” How much you give is not important in God’s eyes, but how sacrificially you give is important. How much you give is not important, but the integrity of your giving, its focus on God alone, that’s important. To give “all you have to live on” may not be his calling on every life in this room, but it is a challenge to every life in this room. How sacrificial is our giving and our service?

So what can you and I do to expand our minds. I don’t think homeopathic remedies or tai chi are the answer. I do think that the key thing is to take Jesus seriously. Whether he is talking about personal integrity or the life-changing hope of eternity or his own divine Lordship, when we take what he says seriously it will expand our minds, and our hearts, in the best possible way.