

The God of the Living  
Matthew 22:23-33

So, who are these Sadducees, anyway? Well, from the references in Matthew's Gospel, along with a little more information in the Book of Acts and what we can learn from other ancient sources like the Jewish historian Josephus, we can say a few things with relative confidence.

First, while the Pharisees focused their attention on keeping the moral and ethical principles of the Law, the Sadducees paid careful attention to the Temple, to its sacrifices and other rituals. The priests thus naturally tended to be Sadducees.

Second, since they were so closely connected to the priestly class, the Sadducees tended to favor cooperating with the Romans. After all, since the Romans could shut down the Temple at any time, it made good sense for the Sadducees to be on good terms with them.

Third, the Sadducees' focus on the Temple and their tendency to cooperate with unbelievers fit right in with their view of the Scriptures: you see, they thought that they only had to pay attention to the first five books of the Bible, the Books of Moses that describe the sacrificial system in such great detail. This, by the way, is why Jesus answers their question about the resurrection with a quote from Exodus chapter 3 – he was appealing to the only part of the Bible they recognized as authoritative.

But the most important characteristic of the Sadducees is the one Matthew mentions in verse 23: Being so wrapped up in the things of this world, they tended to deny the reality of the spirit realm. That's why they didn't think that anyone would be raised from the dead.

Okay, so what can we modern Christians possibly learn from such a passage? Sure, it's fun to watch Jesus tie his opponents in knots, but why spend any time beating a dead horse? It's not as though we are going to meet any Sadducees any time soon – they disappeared when the Romans tore down the Temple in AD 70.

But there are in fact lots of people who still share parts of the Sadducees' worldview. For remember, the Sadducees denied the reality of the spiritual world, focusing instead on the power and prestige they could enjoy here and now. Well, this sort of philosophy is still quite popular – today we call it materialism.

Now materialism isn't just for the businessmen or industrialists who have devoted their lives to the acquisition of wealth. No, socialists like Bernie Sanders are just as focused on the material things of this world as are the "robber-baron capitalists" whom they despise. After all, orthodox Marxists believe that there is no God, and so the only reality that matters to them is power – the ability to control who gets to possess the material things of this world.

But in America today, there's another type of materialism, another type of focus on the things of this world, that has been growing steadily in recent years – it's called hedonism. Hedonists are just as indifferent to God and His will as are robber-barons or commissars. But instead of being focused on power like the Socialists or money like the capitalists, hedonists are mainly interested in the pleasure they can get from worldly things.

But to all of these materialists, to all those who focus their lives on the things or the sensations that belong to this world, Jesus has one response: God is. God is real, and He will in fact raise the dead one day. Thus, the things that this brief life has to offer, whether money or power or pleasure, are nothing in comparison to the eternal reality to come.

So much is obvious from this passage. But we need to remember that, however much the materialistic Sadducees thus had in common with the power-hungry, idol-worshipping Romans, they were nevertheless Jews: they claimed to be part of the people of God. Just so, there are plenty of people today who call themselves Christians whose views are nevertheless similar to those of the ancient Sadducees.

Think about it. The worldly Sadducees denied the possibility of supernatural things like the resurrection. In the same way, so-called Liberal theologians refuse to believe in any of the miracles of Scripture, any events that can't be explained in purely scientific terms. Some of them even go so far as to question the bodily resurrection of Jesus. But how does Jesus respond to such hardened, critical, worldly, oh-so-sophisticated skeptics both ancient and modern? "Ye do err – you are mistaken." Simply put, the miraculous is possible in this world because this world is not all there is. The Sadducees are wrong and their materialistic descendants, the so-called Liberal theologians, are just as wrong.

But why did the Sadducees back then, and why do the Liberals today, believe such rot? It all starts with the way they look at the Bible. Remember, the Sadducees only recognized the Books of Moses and discarded all the rest of the Old Testament in the process. Modern Liberals, of course, go even farther, doubting the Divine origin of

any of the books of the Bible, either Old or New Testament. “It’s all just myths and legends, or at best oral traditions that were written down hundreds of years after the events they record” – that’s what they say.

And even if there is a passage that a Liberal might grudgingly admit to be authentic, he or she instantly denies that such a passage could ever be limited to any one meaning, much less used to determine any sort of absolute rule of faith and practice. Oh no. That would be what they call “proof-texting.” No, the ancient Jewish Sadducee and the modern Liberal Christian both believe that life is to be lived only according to what our senses can experience, only according to the dictates of reason and experience. They thus refuse to bow before the clear meaning of the inerrant, infallible Word of God.

But Jesus’ own view of Scripture stands in direct opposition to this relativistic, critical, worldly-wise approach. For Jesus was not afraid to prove His point by citing a text from the Old Testament, as He does in verse 32 of today’s passage. And as He does so, He expects that such a quotation should be sufficient evidence to settle a dispute. Oh yes, Jesus Himself obviously believed in the absolute authority of Scripture.

But even more amazingly, He chooses a text, the passage about Moses and the burning bush, that is admittedly not focused in any way on the doctrine of the resurrection. So, why did Jesus choose to draw such an application from such a verse? Because He knows that every detail, every word of Scripture is absolutely true. That’s why He is able to prove a doctrinal point by necessary inference even from such a seemingly unrelated passage.

In other words, Jesus didn’t read Scripture like a Liberal – He read it as though every single word of it were breathed out of the mouth of God. And the point He chooses to make with his proof-text strikes at the very heart of both the modern Liberals and the ancient Sadducees, indeed at the heart of anyone’s smug self-confidence, anyone’s worldly focus on power or money or prestige.

Let’s look at verse 32 again. Jesus asserts that when God told Moses that He is “The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” that proves these three men still had to be alive in the days of Moses. And why? Because God is not the “God of the dead, but of the living.”

But does this quote really say that? After all, why couldn’t God have meant that He used to be Abraham’s God when Abraham was still alive? Why couldn’t God simply have been identifying Himself as the God that three of Moses’ ancestors used to worship?

It’s because of what the word “god” really means. For the word “god” doesn’t only refer to the One True God, to Yahweh, the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is to Come, the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No, every ancient nation had its own god. They carved images of their gods and constructed temples to their gods and made sacrifices to their gods. And the fact that none of these gods were real didn’t make any difference to any of those ancient people – they worshipped them nonetheless.

So what is a god, really? A god is whatever or whoever leads and guides someone, whatever or whoever determines for someone what is true and what is right. The word “god” is therefore fundamentally relational. It describes someone or something toward which anyone has an attitude of worship.

It is therefore possible for anyone or anything to be a god, as long as someone else worships it. Your car might be your god, or your hobby or your job might be your god. You yourself might even be a god to your children or grandchildren, your husband or your wife – even though you know good and well that you aren’t really divine, not really worthy of such worship.

But here’s the point: given the relational reality of all gods, it is impossible for dead men to have them. After all, once someone is dead, he can no longer look to anyone or anything for leadership or guidance or truth. So, once someone is dead, whatever it is that he once worshipped ceases to be a god, and goes back to being simply an everyday object or person – or if his god was a figment of his imagination, it simply ceases to exist.

That’s why this quote from Exodus proves Jesus’ point: the only way that the One True God could still be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is for two things to be true: God has to be real and, these three guys still have to be alive to worship Him. It’s the ongoing relationship of God to His children, and the ongoing reality of their worship even after their departure from this world that thus proves the reality of the resurrection.

And the possibility of such an eternal relationship with the One True God ought to put the materialism of the ancient Sadducees and the modern materialists – the Marxists and hedonists and Liberals – to shame: for given Who God really is, and given the possibility of living with Him forever, well, choosing to focus only on the money or power or pleasure that this world has to offer is just stupid.

Yes, it’s only the relationship we have to God that will matter in the next world. That’s why Jesus says the whole question of marriage just isn’t important there. Not only will our immortal resurrection bodies be somehow

different. There also won't be any need for anyone to have children, for we will all be the children of God. It is our relationship to God, not our relationship to other people that will be critical in the next world.

And so maybe we modern Evangelical Presbyterians can learn something from Jesus' rebuke of the ancient Sadducees after all. For given what He told them, maybe we should take stock of our own goals and desires. Maybe we should take a good, honest look at the focus of our lives. Maybe we should ask ourselves: Who is our God – really?

Oh, I know we say all the right things. Unlike the Sadducees or their Liberal descendants, we say we believe in miracles. We say we believe in all of the Bible. We call the Scriptures the sufficient rule of our faith and practice.

But what do we do when the Bible tells us to do something that we don't want to do? Are we ever tempted to just forget about it? Do we ever try to wriggle out of one of those prickly passages by saying, like those skeptical Liberals, "Oh, that's just one interpretation?"

Oh, we say that God is our God and that we are His people – but could it be that, like the Sadducees and the Liberals, we are actually picking and choosing which parts of the Scripture we believe, which parts of the Scripture that we want to follow because we actually do have other gods in our lives?

"Love not the world, or the things of this world." That's what the Scripture says, but the god of materialism objects. "Deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow Me" – that's what Jesus says, but the god of pleasure and comfort will have none of it. "Love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you." What does the god of self-preservation have to say about that?

And when troubles come into our lives, do we really believe in the miraculous power of God to save us and our loved ones? Or in our anxiety and fear, in our doubt and despair is our vision, like the ancient Sadducees, just as limited to the things of this world? In our times of grief do we catch ourselves doubting the resurrection just as they did?

No, we Evangelical Presbyterians need to hear what Jesus has to say, just as much as the ancient Sadducees did, and just as much as the modern Liberals do. For all of the Scriptures point us to the same reality that Jesus holds up before us today: God is real. The resurrection is real. And our relationship to God is all that really matters, in the light of eternity. So will we turn away from everything that is holding us back? Will we turn away from the gods of this world and draw nearer to Christ alone?