

The God of the Living
Mark 12:18-27

So, who are these Sadducees, anyway? Mark says very little about them, but Luke gives us a little more information in Acts, and between that and the few references we have in Matthew's Gospel and in other ancient sources like the Jewish historian Josephus, we can say a few things with relative confidence.

First, the Sadducees tended to focus their attention not on keeping the Law, as did the Pharisees, but on careful attention to the Temple and its sacrifices and other rituals. The priests thus tended to be Sadducees.

Second, since they were so 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 sacrificial system and their tendency to cooperate with pagans were a natural corollary to their view of the Scriptures: they only thought that they had to obey the first five books of the Bible, the Books of Moses that described the sacrificial system in such great detail. This, by the way, is why Jesus answered their question about the resurrection with a quote from Exodus.

But the most important theological distinctive of the Sadducees is the one Mark mentions in verse 18: Being more or less concerned exclusively with the things of this world, they denied the reality of the spirit realm in general and the existence of angels in particular. That's why they didn't think that anyone would be raised from the dead.

Okay, so why should we study this 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, believe it or not, there are people alive today who share parts of the Sadducees' worldview. In fact, it's not too much of a stretch to say that the Sadducees' sort of thinking is enjoying quite a bit of popularity these days.

Think about it. The Sadducees denied the importance of the spiritual world. They focused instead on the power and prestige they could enjoy in this one. This sort of philosophy is called materialism, and it is shared by all sorts of people today.

Now materialism doesn't just refer to people who have devoted their lives to the acquisition of wealth – men like Donald Trump. 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 also think that there is no God, and so the only reality that matters to them is power – being able to control the 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 – hedonism. Hedonists are just as indifferent to God and His will as are robber-barons or commissars. Hedonists are simply focused on the pleasure they can get from worldly things, rather than on the power or money itself.

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. The concerns of this brief life, whether money or power or pleasure, are nothing in comparison to the eternity 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 self-centered, idol-worshipping pagans, they were nevertheless Jews. The Sadducees claimed to be part of the people of God. Just so, there are plenty of people today who call themselves Christians whose views are uncannily similar to those of the Pharisees.

Think about it. The worldly Sadducees denied the possibility of supernatural things like the resurrection. In the same way, liberal theologians refuse to believe in any of the miraculous events in Scripture, anything that happened that can't be explained by merely material causes. And it's not just the story of Jonah and the Fish that gives them indigestion. No, liberals deny every miracle from the parting of the Red Sea (it wasn't nearly so deep, they say) to the Feeding of the Five Thousand (the real miracle was that they all shared what they had, and thus everyone was satisfied with so little).

But most similarly to the Sadducees and most seriously of all, liberal theologians even question the resurrection. It was such "scholars" that have said that Jesus never really died on the cross – he just swooned, and was revived by the cool of the tomb. Others suggest that He really did die but that His disciples just stole the body and then made up lies that He had walked out of that tomb alive.

It is to such hardened, critical, worldly, oh-so-sophisticated skeptics that Jesus' words in this passage ring out loud and clear: "The dead are raised." The miraculous is possible in this world because this world is not all there is. The Sadducees are wrong and their materialistic descendants, the Liberals, 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. The Sadducees, you remember, said that only the Books of Moses are unquestionably the Word of God. Modern liberals, of course, go even

farther, doubting the Divine origin of any of the books of the Bible. “It’s all just myths and legends, or at best oral traditions that were written down hundreds of years after the events they record,” 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 can be used as an absolute rule of faith and practice. Oh no. That would be “proof-texting.” That would be asserting only one of a hundred different interpretations that can be brought to any text. No, for the ancient Sadducee and for the modern liberal Christian, life is to be lived according to the dictates of reason and experience, not according to the inerrant, infallible Word of God.

But Jesus’ own view of Scripture is 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 today’s passage. And as He does so, He expects that such a quotation is actually sufficient evidence to settle a dispute. Modern day liberals to the contrary, 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 talking about the Resurrection at all. Liberals would never interpret Scripture this way, even when they take the time to read it.

So, why does Jesus use Scripture in this way? It’s because He knows that every detail, every word of Scripture is absolutely true. That’s why He is able to draw 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 Liberals and the Sadducees in their smug self-confidence, in their worldly power and prestige.

Let’s look at it again. Jesus says that when God says that He is “The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” that proves these three men are still living, because God is not the “God of the dead, but the God of the living.” But does that quote really say that? Why couldn’t God mean that He used to be Abraham’s God when Abraham was still alive? Why couldn’t God simply be identifying Himself as the God that these three dead men used to worship?

It’s because of something that we often forget about what the word “god” means. For the word “god” doesn’t only refer to Yahweh, the One Who Is, the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No, every ancient nation had its own god, sometimes more than one. Those ancient pagans carved images to their gods and constructed temples in their honor and made sacrifices

to them. And the fact that none of these gods were real didn't make any difference to those people – they worshipped them nonetheless.

So what is a god? 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, describing 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. You might be a god to your children or your husband or your wife, for example, even though you know good and well that you aren't divine.

But here's the point: given the relational reality of all gods, it is impossible for dead men to have gods. 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 becomes simply an object or a person – or if your god was a figment of your imagination, it simply ceases to exist.

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

It's also that eternal relationship with God that ought to put materialism into its proper perspective: in the light of the overwhelming reality of the one true God, focusing only on the things of this world is so simple, so stupid, so terribly tawdry and temporary.

Yes, it's this relationship we will have to God that is really all that matters 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 having children, for we will all be 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 can learn something from Jesus' rebuke of the Sadducees after all. Given what He says, maybe we should take an honest look inside ourselves as well. Maybe we should ask: Who is our God – really?

Oh, we Evangelical Presbyterians say all the right things. Unlike the Sadducees and the Liberals, we say we believe in miracles. We say we believe in all of the Bible, accepting it as 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, "Oh, that's just one interpretation?"

And why would we do that? Oh, we say that God is our God and that we are His people – but of course the Sadducees and Liberals make the same sorts of claims. Could it be that, like them, we pick and choose which parts of the Scripture we believe, which parts of the Scripture that we 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 think 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 just as limited to the things of this world as those ancient Sadducees? In our times of grief do we also doubt the hope of the resurrection?

No, we need to hear what Jesus has to say, just as much as the Sadducees did, just as much as the 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. God is eternal. And our relationship to God is thus all that really matters, in the light of eternity. 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 Him alone?