Luke Lesson 81 (2021)

**THE GOD OF THE LIVING**

Luke 20:19-44

Key Verse: 20:38

“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him, all are alive.”

Through the Parable of the Tenants in the previous passage, Jesus illustrated the rebellious pattern of God’s chosen people toward God, primarily Jewish religious leaders (20:9-18). Jesus predicted that they would kill him, yet he also declared that he would be the cornerstone of God’s redemption for all humankind through his death and resurrection. In today’s passage, the Jewish religious leaders keep looking for a way to arrest Jesus. They came to Jesus with some tough questions so that they could catch him in his words. If they were honest before God, they wouldn’t do what they did in today’s passage. They were deceptive and tried to get Jesus into trouble. Despite their deceptiveness, Jesus revealed God’s truth, the truth about our duties as the citizens of this world and the kingdom of heaven (19-26). Most of all, Jesus declared that God is the God of the living, not the dead. This morning let’s think about what it means that God is not the God of the dead but the living, and what we should do to have a deeper relationship with the God of the living.

Look at verses 20-21. “Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies questioned him: ‘Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.’”The pronoun “they” in these verses may refer to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, most of whom were anti-Romans. They used to criticize Jesus that he was a blasphemer and law-breaker. But to trap Jesus in his words, they changed their strategy from harsh confrontation to smooth and silk flattery. Now they said with a soft voice, “Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.” Of course, what these spies said about Jesus was actually true. That’s what Jesus had been doing. Yet, the problem is that they didn’t mean what they said. It was flattery.

We are susceptible to flattery. I don’t know about you, but when someone flatters me, I feel good because it satisfies my pride. But once I accept people’s flattery, I lose my discernment, not being aware that they are sneaky persons who seek to manipulate us using our pride.

How can we distinguish between genuine graciousness and flattery? It’s not easy to differentiate between them. The key is hidden motive. Guinness does not have a string attached, while flattery does. Jesus said in John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” What’s the difference between the thief and a good shepherd? They may look alike, but their motives are different. Insecure people are an easy target of ferocious wolves. Therefore, when somebody flatters us and is unusually generous and friendly, we should immediately raise our red flag. They may be ferocious wolves under sheepskins (Pic#1). Again, the key is a hidden motive, whether it's mine or others.

What did the spies ask Jesus? Look at verse 22. “Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’” Their question was dubious. It was not a question about regular taxes. It was a question about a particular tax: the tribute tax, often called a poll tax or head tax, paid with a denarius. According to the ESV translation, they asked, “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?” The Roman Empire demanded from people, including the people of Israel, the tribute tax as a symbol of their submission and dependence. As they paid this tax each year, it was a reminder of their subservience to Rome. We can imagine why the Jews were upset about and opposed this tax. So, if Jesus says not to pay the tribute tax, then Jesus is rebelling against the sovereign authority of the Roman Empire, which will lead him to the charge of treason. If Jesus says to pay the tribute tax, then he will lose his popularity with the people, and the Jewish leaders will get a chance to arrest him. Either way, Jesus could be in trouble.

How did Jesus respond to their dubious question? Look at verse 23. “He saw through their duplicity and said to them, ‘Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?’” The phrase “He saw through their duplicity” tells us something significant. Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the US, said, *“You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.”* s, we may be able to fool some people for a while, but we cannot fool God because God sees through our minds and hearts. In the end, everything will be exposed.

Indeed, Jesus’ answer to them was masterful. He first asked them to show him a denarius, a silver coin, with which people paid the tribute tax. (pic#2) Then Jesus asked them, “Whose image and inscription are on it?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. (24) The denarius had the image of Caesar August and the inscription *“Tiberius Casar, Son of the Divine Augustus.”* While they were looking at the coin, Jesus continued to answer in verse 25. “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

Jesus’ opponents could not trap him in his words. They became silent. However, we learn that we have dual citizenship, earthly citizenship, and heavenly citizenship as Christian disciples. Some religious leaders seem to teach that we don’t need to yield to the government's authority. But that’s dangerous and misleading. Our citizenship in heaven is not a license to neglect our obligations to the government under which we live. Jesus is teaching that part of our Christian duty is to give what the government requires. At the same time, we, created in God’s image, have our obligation to God our Creator and the Lord. Therefore, we should give God what belongs to him, not just the tithe but everything we have. Most of all, we should love the Lord, our neighbors, brothers, and sisters, as much as we love ourselves. Love is our primary obligation.

In the following verses, we see that as the spies withdrew from Jesus, another group of people came to challenge him. They were the Sadducees. Look at verses 27-33. “Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now, there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way, the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?’” Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees were pro-Romans and didn’t believe in the resurrection, life after death, or angels. Yet, they held the vital position of priesthood and made a lot of money through their temple business, which Jesus challenged and embarrassed them a while ago. I am sure they wanted to discredit Jesus before killing him.

Their question to Jesus was about resurrection based on what Moses said in Deuteronomy 25:5, that if a man’s brother dies, without leaving a child, it was the duty of the man to marry his sister-in-law and produce a child for his brother. To make the idea of resurrection ridiculous, they brought a cleverly invented case in which the widow had to experience the death of seven brothers one after another, still had no children, and she also died. Imagine what would happen in heaven when seven brothers fight over one woman. Since most people had no idea about our life after death or in heaven, this kind of strange question persuaded many people, among the Jews, not to believe in the resurrection of the dead*. “Yeah! If there is a resurrection of the dead, heaven will be another chaos and continuation of tragedies. Sadducees are right in saying that there is no resurrection. They are smart. What we need is not future resurrection but our happiness now. If we die, that’s all! So, let’s eat and drink for tomorrow we die!”*  People who don’t believe in resurrection or life after death live their lives at random. I am sure the influence of these Sadducees was toxic and growing among many people in Israel. The Sadducees thought that there was no way for Jesus to get away from their question.

How did Jesus respond to their question? In verses 34-38, Jesus takes it as an opportunity not only to answer their question of “whose wife will she be?” but also to elaborate on the gospel of the resurrection.

**First, marriage is not part of the age to come.** Look at verses 34 and 35. “Jesus replied, ‘The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die, for they are like the angels. They are God’s children since they are children of the resurrection. ’” Here, we learn that life in the age to come is different from our current life. In heaven, we will no longer be living in the flesh. We will live in a spiritual and glorified body. There will be no distinction between males or females in heaven.

Jesus said that we would never die in heaven because we will be like angels. We will be immortal. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” What is immortality? It’s an ability to live forever. We don’t want to live forever if life in heaven is miserable and boring. I don’t know, but I believe that life in heaven will be another adventure and experience that will give us more profound joy in the eternal God. The resurrection from the dead and eternal life in heaven is the best gift and reward God prepared for us. The resurrection is something to which we all look forward.

**Second, Moses showed that the dead rise (37-40).** The Sadducees invented a peculiar story of seven dead brothers and the widow, quoting Moses, particularly Deuteronomy 25:5, to make the idea of resurrection absurd. But according to Jesus, even Moses showed that the dead rise. Look at verses 37 and 38. “But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.’” When Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, in the wilderness, an unusual thing captured his attention (Ex. 3:1-6). The bush was on fire, but it did not burn up. Moses got curious about it and tried to approach it to look more closely (Pic#3). Then God called from within the burning bush, “Moses! Moses! Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Wow! God, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, is undoubtedly mysterious. According to Jesus, however, Moses began to believe in the resurrection of the dead because God introduced himself by saying, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Jesus’ point is in the following sentence, “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” God wouldn’t say to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham,” if Abraham would remain dead forever, or there is no resurrection of the dead.

In the following verses, verses 41-44, Jesus declares that he is not just the son of David but God the Messiah. Look at verses 41-44. “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Why is it said that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself declares in the Book of Psalms: ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” David called him “Lord.” How then can he be his son?’”

God is immortal. Therefore, his children should be the children of the resurrection and everlasting life. If there is no resurrection of the dead, God might not be the eternal God, or he might not even exist. When we deny the resurrection of the dead, we are rejecting God. A German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), said, ***“God is dead.”*** Many Christians, including myself, misunderstood it. Some Christians commented saying “Nietzsche said *‘God is dead,*’ but God said, ‘Nietzsche is dead.’” But what Nietzsche meant is that God is dead or remains dead because we, humans, killed him. Jesus was aware that the Jewish religious leaders would arrest him, condemn him, and hand him over to death in a few days. But he would not remain dead, and he would rise from the dead. The killing of Christ Jesus is the worst sin that we, humans, could have ever committed. But on the cross, Jesus prayed, crying out to God, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!” Jesus didn’t remain dead. He rose from the dead.

Who is this Jesus? He is the Christ, God the Messiah, who is our Savior and King. Romans 1:3-4 states, “Concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the fleshand was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” If Jesus died and didn’t rise again, he is not who he claimed to be. If Christ has not risen from the dead, God remains dead. But he has risen, and he lives in us now and forever. He said in Matthew 28:20b, “And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”

Let me close the sermon. It seems that today’s world is full of ominous signs, global warming, earthquakes, flood, wildfires, pandemics, widespread violence, injustice. Everything is shaken, including our ecosystem, international community, democracy, capitalism, religious system, infrastructure, etc. Many are experiencing emotional, mental, and spiritual breakdowns because they feel insecure. But what shall we do? To escape to another planet? Who can we trust? Money? No. Nothing. But there is only one person whom we can always trust and turn to. He is our Lord Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of the Living God. He is the Creator of heaven and earth. He is not only with us, but he also wants to have a deeper relationship with us in our day-to-day life. And he will reward us with the crown of everlasting life when he returns. Therefore, we should not be like the religious leaders who tried to manipulate him in today's passage. It’s time for us to acknowledge Jesus, our sovereign Lord humbly, and let him take charge of our lives. That’s faith. It's most rewarding, safe, and secure when we are in the hands of his mercy and sovereignty. Are you willing to trust him? He is not the God of the dead but the living. He lives in us.