

READ IT RIGHT
MATTHEW 22:23-33

I will never forget Dr. Bob's words to me in May of 1997. We were sitting in the living room of Elsie Beutler's home on 82nd Street. Mindy and I were candidates that weekend for the pastoral position at Emmanuel Bible Church, and Dr. Bob was a member of the Pastoral Search Committee. For the previous several months, I had been doing drywall construction in California and my back had been giving me a lot of trouble, so I had just had an MRI which had yet to be read by my physician. Bob had asked me to bring those MRI pictures with me on this trip, and as we sat in Elsie's living room, he held those pictures up to the light. Then he said, "Hmmm. You have the back of an 80-year-old farmer."

I replied, "Do I still get the job?"

He said, "You'll fit right in at Emmanuel."

For most of my adult life I have had back problems, the result of heavy lifting in construction, reckless behavior as a youth, and poor genetics. It wasn't long after we moved to Pratum that it was determined I needed spinal surgery, and so Dr. Bob recommended that I consult with his mentor and instructor when he was at OHSU, whom he considered the best spinal surgeon in the State.

Those words, "the best spinal surgeon in the State," meant something to me. When someone is cutting and carving in an area of your body where even a slight mistake can cause permanent damage, it is reassuring to know that the person doing it is known for being exceptionally skilled, precise, and successful. And after four surgeries by this doctor, I am a walking testimony to his skill and competence.

I would submit to you that this same degree of diagnostic and surgical skill is needed by those who study and teach the Scriptures...for the very same reasons. The outcome is extremely consequential, even more so, ultimately, than the outcome of a physical surgery. Imprecision, carelessness, and inattentiveness to detail can lead to mistakes that have eternal consequences. People can be led astray and end up in hell because of the misinterpretations of Bible teachers.

Paul knew that. Which is why he would write to his young protégé, Timothy, ¹⁵ *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15)*. The word translated "rightly divide" is a word that was used to describe a tentmaker who had to cut the camel hair cloth in the precise shape and pattern, or a farmer who plowed a straight furrow, or a stone cutter who had to chisel the stone in just the right shape to fit into its place in the building.

Paul is telling Timothy, and all other teachers and preachers, that when it comes to interpreting and teaching the Scriptures, utmost precision and skill are required. We must "cut it straight." We must interpret it accurately, explain it precisely, and preach and teach it correctly. That is how preachers and teachers become "approved by God" and keep from being ashamed, which suggests that all those who interpret and teach Scripture are held accountable for how they do it.

Of course, careless, imprecise, and inaccurate Bible teachers have been around for centuries, and have been prevalent in every generation. It was true even in Jesus' day. Judaism, at the time of Christ, had four major sects, each of which interpreted the Bible a different way. The Essenes were the strictest sect in terms of their piety, the Pharisees were the most popular and influential, the Zealots were comparable to Islamic jihadists in terms of their patriotism and militancy, and the Sadducees were aristocrats who prided themselves

on their strict interpretations of Scripture and their left-leaning political views.

On the Tuesday or Wednesday of Holy Week, some prominent Sadducees came to Jesus on the temple grounds in Jerusalem and questioned Him about one of their theological pet peeves. **Verse 22,** *²³ The same day Sadducees came to [Jesus], who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked Him a question...*

When introducing the Sadducees, Matthew inserts an editorial comment that has bearing on the conversation that follows. He tells us that the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, that is, that there is no life after death. They believed that when the body died, the soul perished along with it. That is because, unlike all the other sects within Judaism, they believed that only Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the Pentateuch—were Scripture and they derived all of their doctrine from these five books.

If you were to look in the Pentateuch for an explicit statement concerning life after death you will not find one, because there isn't any. The clearest teaching on the resurrection of all people at the end of the age appears in Daniel 12:2. But since Sadducees did not consider the Book of Daniel to be Scripture, they discounted Daniel's statement, regarding it as a doctrine originating from Persia.

This adamant denial of the resurrection is what the Sadducees became known for, and they debated the topic frequently with their rivals, the Pharisees, and whoever else dared enter the conversation. So, after seeing Jesus successfully escape from the Pharisees theological trap, the Sadducees came to Jesus with a question of their own. Not surprisingly, it is about life after death. They lay the groundwork for this question in **verse 24.** *²⁴ "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.'"*

The Sadducees appeal to a passage that all of them could agree was genuine Scripture, a passage spoken by Moses in Deuteronomy (25:5-6). Moses decreed that when brothers live together and one of them dies childless, his brother should marry the widow and the child of this new union would be regarded as the son of the deceased; thus, his name would be carried on (Morris, PNTC). This is called levirate marriage. Based on this passage the Sadducees ask a hypothetical question of Jesus that they are sure he will not be able to answer. Thus, they, too, are laying a trap in order to ridicule both Jesus and the notion of the resurrection.

Verses 25-28. *²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. ²⁶ So too the second and third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ After them all, the woman died. ²⁸ In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her."*

The Sadducees conceive of a situation in which a woman has gone through seven husbands, all brothers, because she has failed to conceive by any of them. By the way, they could have made their point just as easily with the story of a woman who had had only two husbands, but they want to make the situation look absurd. So, they pose the question, who will be married to whom when the woman and all seven men have new bodies in this supposed resurrection life? (Blomberg, PAC). For the Sadducees, this hypothetical situation presented an unresolvable theological conundrum that proved the doctrine of the resurrection was ridiculous.

Verse 29. *²⁹ But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God."*

Jesus has a definite answer to their "unanswerable" question. But first, He wants to make a simple observation. "You guys have no idea what you're talking about!" "You are

wrong,” or, “*You go astray*,” a verb that not only referred to literally straying from the right path but was used metaphorically of those who strayed from the truth.

The Sadducees had indeed used theological reasoning to come up with their conclusion, and they had based it on Scripture. But their conclusion was inaccurate because they were misinterpreting and misusing the text to prove their position on a subject that was not even addressed in the text. Moses was not contemplating life after death when he was instructing the Hebrews about levirate marriage. So, to use that verse to prove that there is no resurrection is careless and presumptuous.

That is why Jesus said that they did not know the Scriptures. Substantiating one’s views and doctrines by quoting a convenient passage from the Bible, especially when that passage is not related to the subject you are trying to prove, is Bible abuse. And besides being presumptuous, it is manipulative.

In the next verse, Jesus will give another reason to prove that they did not know the Scripture, but in verse 29 He also indicts them for not knowing *the power of God*. This was another major deficiency in their theological reasoning. In their hypothetical situation they were implying that God cannot raise the dead. And so, Jesus uses a play on words to correct their skewed understanding.

The verb the Sadducees used in verse 24 with reference to “raising up” offspring for the unfortunate widow is connected with the noun “resurrection,” the “raising up” of the dead. The Sadducees viewed levirate marriage as the way of “raising up” descendants for a man who had died so that he would “continue to live” through his offspring.

Jesus asserts that this view of resurrection does not take into consideration the power of God. For a God who has already proven His unlimited power in the creation of the universe and in the creation of man from the dust of the earth, raising people from death is not a big deal for Him. And if people continue to live after death, they do not need to “live on” through their offspring, for they are already living on in heaven.

Jesus goes on in **verse 30**. *³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven.*

By the way, just as the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, they did not believe in angels, so by alluding to angels, Jesus is not so subtly correcting yet another flaw in their theology. But here is the main point of verse 30. The Sadducees assumed that if there was a heaven, life there would be much like life on earth. So, they assumed that marriages would continue there as well. But that, too, is poor theology.

We cannot transfer or project our earthly concepts and experiences into the heavenly realm. Just because something is good and necessary and important here on earth does not mean that it will necessarily exist in heaven. Marriage is necessary in the earth realm in order to propagate the human race. But the human race will cease to be propagated in heaven, and so marriage is unnecessary and, therefore, will not exist in heaven. Life there will be of a different order, and we will be like angels, who are sexless beings that do not propagate.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that marriage between a man and a woman on earth is a shadow of a greater reality—the reality of Christ and His relationship with His church. Our focus in heaven, our devotion in heaven, our loyalty in heaven will be completely Christocentric, just like the angels.

Admittedly, the thought that we will not share the same kind of intimacy with our spouses in heaven that we do on earth seems disappointing to some of us. It seems like it would diminish heaven’s joy. But remember, marriage as God intended it to be, is a taste of heaven. Marital bliss in its fullest expression will be experienced when the Bride of Christ—

the Church—is united with Christ. In heaven, *all* relationships will far surpass the most intimate and pleasurable relationship we have on earth.

But Jesus goes on to address the bigger issue of the Sadducees flawed theology. **Verses 31-32.** *³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."*

As I said earlier, the Sadducees prided themselves on knowing the Pentateuch well and deriving their doctrine from the Pentateuch only. "Very well," says Jesus. "Let's consider what the Pentateuch actually says about resurrection." Then He references a passage that was very familiar to the Sadducees, for it was quoted frequently. It is the account of Moses at the burning bush, where God introduces Himself to him by saying, "*I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*" (Ex. 3:6).

Jesus points out that if the Sadducees had paid attention to the tense of the verb in this verse they would have come to a different conclusion about the concept of resurrection and life after death. When they quoted this verse, they did not say, "God was the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." But if there is no afterlife, that is what the text would have said when referring to the patriarchs and their God. But the fact that He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob implies that they are alive—indeed, that God is the God of the living.

The Sadducees failure to contemplate simple grammar in a familiar verse led to a critical error upon which they built an entire theology. And Jesus' demolition of that theology in such short order left them speechless. Look at **verse 33.** *³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at His teaching.* And **verse 34a,** *The Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees...*

What *could* the Sadducees say? Jesus' citation of the well-known passage was so unexpected and His short interpretation of it so convincing that they found themselves speechless. And the crowds who were watching and listening were astonished.

They had witnessed the Sadducees' heated debates before. Whether they agreed with them or not they had heard them hold their own against their rivals, the Pharisees. And now to hear their position demolished in such short order was truly astounding.

But please understand that Jesus did not say what He said merely to win an argument or to make them look bad. He was instructing them about how to read the Scriptures right. And brothers and sisters, I believe that is the application that we ought to take away from this story.

I do not need to convince some of you how consequential it is to read the Scriptures right. Some of us have been raised in churches or traditions in which theology has been built upon misinterpreted or misapplied Scripture, and as a result people have been led astray from the truth. Convinced by the shoddy and careless interpretations of their leaders, people from these churches and traditions have built their lives upon half-truths and lies, which has even prevented some of them from understanding the clear message of the gospel.

So, I want to make two points of application with two principles that can be derived from this story—principles that we must follow as we read and study the Bible or prepare to teach and preach it.

First, *we must build our theology on a careful examination of the Scriptural text rather than on anecdotes or human reasoning.* You have probably heard this statement before: Anyone can use Scripture to prove any point they want. Hitler used Scripture to incite hatred toward the Jews and convince people to exterminate them. And the Germans, just like the

Sadducees, were no dummies. Yet they did not read the Scriptures right and were led astray by a madman.

When we read the Bible, when we prepare to teach the Bible, or when we hear the Bible being taught, we need to be critical thinkers—critical in the sense of paying attention to the text of Scripture. We need to let the text of Scripture determine the meaning, rather than projecting our own opinions and biases onto the text.

That brings me to the second principle. *The details of Scripture are important, and we must pay careful attention to those details lest we go astray.* Every word in Scripture is inspired by God, and therefore it is important that we understand the correct meaning of those words and how the author used them in that context. The grammar in the text is inspired by God, and we must understand the grammar if we are going to get the correct meaning and interpretation. Every passage, with the exception of the Book of Proverbs, has a context, and that context is essential to know because it will always shed light on the meaning and interpretation of the passage. We cannot be careless or thoughtless or inattentive when we are studying the Scriptures.

Earlier I compared a Bible teacher to a surgeon and submitted to you that the same degree of diagnostic and surgical skill is needed by those who study and teach the Scriptures...for the very same reasons. The outcome is extremely consequential. Imprecision, carelessness, and inattentiveness to detail can lead to mistakes and misinterpretations that have eternal consequences.

On the other hand, “Cutting it straight,” interpreting it accurately, explaining it precisely, and preaching and teaching it correctly is life-giving. It is nourishing, refreshing, soothing, and medicinal. It is the power of God for salvation. It is profitable for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. And it prepares God’s people for works of service so they can become mature, equipped for every good work.

Read it Right Matthew 22:23-33

Main Idea: *Correct theology is built on a careful analysis of the Scriptural text, not anecdotes or human reasoning.*

The Sadducees try to trap Jesus (23-28)

Their theology (23)

Their usage of Scripture (24)

Their hypothetical question (25-28)

A most unfortunate widow

A theological conundrum

Jesus condemns and corrects the Sadducees' theology (29-32)

An accusatory statement (29)

"You don't know your Bibles!"

"You don't know how God works!"

The resurrection state (30)

No marriage

Like the angels

The real issue (31-32)

Your theological reasoning is careless

Your theological conclusions are false

The crowds are astonished...again (33)

Application:

- Correct theology is built by a careful examination of the text of Scripture, not by anecdotal evidence or human reasoning
- We must resist the temptation to interpret heaven through the lens of our earthly experiences