

HONORING GOD AND TAKING HIS WORD SERIOUSLY

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Scripture: Luke 20: 20-26, 27-38

Truly speaking, I do not really have a unique message for you. Being the last Sunday of the year, I do not have any special message, but you know that in the last few months of the last year, I was preaching on the parables of Jesus, and I continued in Luke. So, I'm very familiar with the text. I would like to share the parables from Luke as well as some of the passages which impressed me from Luke's gospel, chapter 20. There are two texts that I'm going to read for you; one is from ch.20:20-26 and the other from 27-38.

Luke 20:20-26

So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch Him in something He said, so as to deliver Him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. So they asked Him, "Teacher, we know that You speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not?" But He perceived their craftiness, and said to them, "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch Him in what He said, but marveling at His answer, they became silent.

In this passage, our Lord is trying to correct a couple of incorrect thoughts the Jews had about paying taxes and about resurrection. (We'll talk about the resurrection part later). Not only did the Jews have incorrect thoughts; perhaps we too could have incorrect thoughts. So in this process, He will correct our incorrect thoughts and our incorrect attitudes towards His word.

A background is necessary for us to understand. Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and He did so in such a way claiming to be the Messiah, claiming to be God's very king. That created a bit of worry and problem with the Jews. Back in ch. 20:2, people came to Him, a great delegation of the priests and teachers of the law and the elders saying, "What authority do you have? How can you teach this kind of stuff before people when we haven't given you any authority?" so Jesus comes in and makes a claim. They challenge His claim and He responds with a bigger claim, first of all by telling them the parable of the tenants, where He claims to be God's Son come to them, and that He should be given appropriate respect.

He responds with even bigger claims in ch. 20:19 "The teachers of religious law and the chief priests wanted to arrest Jesus immediately because they were very worried the way He was claiming the Messiah-ship from the people." They knew He spoke this parable against them. He challenged their response, actually their rejection of Him. But they were afraid of the people. So they were keeping quiet at that time. And now the scribes and the Pharisees and the delegation of the Jews wanted to get rid of Him. They do not like Him. He is claiming too much for Himself in these passages and they are trying to trip Him and catch Him at His words.

Therefore they throw a few challenging questions at Him. Jesus responds with a few challenging questions of His own. He not only answers their questions but He ends up challenging their attitude. And I trust He will be challenging us this morning in two areas.

1. FIRST CHALLENGING QUESTION:

Do you honor God – His claims on you as a Christian just as you honor your government for what the government does for you?

In the scripture we just read, they first asked Him a question which was a trick question. It was to catch Him at His words so that they could hand Him over to the authorities. So they first begin by buttering Him up. It is worth noting here how they are right in that Jesus is indeed a good teacher, and He teaches what is right, does not show any partiality, does not have any bad motives, only teaches what is right in accordance with the scriptures. So they say, “Jesus, we know you are going to give us the best answer ever, so we want you to tell us about the tax system. We know you are brilliant, so we’ve got this question for you. Tell us – is it right to pay taxes to the Roman government, or not?”

The Romans are the occupying force in Israel, and they have this tax system that helps to pay for the running of the government, for the roads and for the soldiers and for the government and so on. Many people felt that to pay this tax was to buy into Caesar’s authority, something like: I’m acknowledging Caesar as my ruler. So they were very hesitant to pay this tax. There were mixed responses from the people. Some refused to pay the tax altogether and they could actually be imprisoned for it. Others did not like this tax system but gave it grudgingly anyway. Still others said it was fine and paid the taxes thinking that it would get the government off their backs. A total mixed response!

So the authorities, the scribes and the Pharisees came together and asked Jesus, “Tell us, Jesus, what do you think? Is it right to pay taxes? It is yes or no? Tell us.” If Jesus had said yes, they would say, “You are nothing more than a Roman puppet who has come to change nothing, and You tell us to pay taxes.” Supposing Jesus had said no, then they could easily hand Him over to the authorities by reporting that Jesus was guilty of insurrection and trying to defy the Roman government.

I want you to see what was going on here. They are not actually asking the true and honest question, but are pushing their own agenda against Jesus, and trying to trick Him into falling into the trap. They are not actually trying to work out how to honor God in the matter of taxes, but have their own agenda which is to catch Jesus. In a sense, they do not want a true answer for that question. What they want is to get rid of Jesus.

Today, we too can do the same thing. Let me explain to you how. There is such a thing as a dishonest question. The honest question expects an honest answer but the dishonest question does not expect an honest answer, but has some other motive hidden behind it. Here they try to avoid God and His Word and His claims – a question that is not really interested in the issue but just wants to avoid what Jesus is claiming over them. Some people can ask questions once they become a Christian just to keep Jesus at a distance. They throw a few questions, create a little bit of doubt, then they say, “Well, I’m still not sure about Christianity, about what Jesus is talking about – about denying the self, taking up the cross and things like that which are very tough to follow. The bible has many claims on our life; it is not a happy-go-lucky type of preaching. So all I can say is that I believe in Jesus but I do not have to be that committed.” Just as the Jews are trying to avoid Jesus, we can also try and avoid the areas in our life which are not very comfortable with the word. Back in our passage, Jesus saw through their duplicity. Jesus knows their motives. We should also notice, as a result, that Jesus will notice our motives when we go through the scriptures and believe and whether we are truly following Him or not.

What does He actually say in reply to the question when they asked Him, “Teacher, tell us; is it right to pay taxes or not to the Roman government?” What does He actually say? His answer consists of a couple of things:

Firstly, let us read w. 23-26 again. *He says, "Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things of Caesar, and to God the things of God."*

I think there are two things that are going on in this answer.

- Jesus is answering the question honestly. He's saying they should indeed honor their government even if the government is a group of Roman pagans. There is nothing wrong in paying taxes to them; you are benefitting from the roads and the security and the coinage and everything which the government is providing. One can clearly notice that Jesus is separating the state from the church in a very profound way. He says that you do not have to agree with the government on matters of religion, but you should honor their rights to govern their nation by giving them the appropriate money.

So in paying taxes, actually He tells them that you are honoring God and honoring Caesar, as they are not incompatible. They have got nothing to do with each other. So indeed, they have to pay the Roman taxes. Later on, in the years to come, there had been many limits and issues which the Jews had with the Roman government. Christians were forced to worship Caesar and declare him to be the lord. They could not do that because that would mean actually dishonoring God. But there's nothing wrong in paying taxes for what the government provides for them. This implies being good citizens and honoring the government.

So, Jesus was telling them a right answer, but we should also take the principles very clearly – we should honor the government. In fact, the apostle Paul says very clearly that every one of us must obey the government and the ruler.

- Apart from rendering to Caesar the things of Caesar, Jesus says we must render to God the things that are God's. Now rendering to God the things that are God's, though it is similar, it has to be clearly understood. So Jesus is not only answering their question but He is also exposing their attitude by bringing up this question of rendering to God what belongs to God. Here Jesus is making an implied comment on the attitude towards God – honor your government but also honor God.

When He says, "Render to God what belongs to God." Whose image does the denarius bear? It is the image of Caesar. But He's talking about the image of God here. So what He is saying is: What bears God's image? Of course the coin bears the Roman governor's image, so a part of it should go to the Roman government. But the hidden implication is: Who bears God's image?

We bear God's image. The Jews knew that very well. every Jew knows that he bears God's image. The second chapter of the Bible tells us that God created man in His own image. Every Jew was fully aware of it, but for their own convenience they've simply forgotten that. So Jesus is bringing up this issue of rendering to God what belongs to God. If you and I bear God's image, do we truly honor God? Being created in His own image, it's as if God has made us and stamped His image on us and put His character in our genetic matter. If we do not behave according to the truth, according to the characteristic and nature of God, actually we are not rendering to God that which belongs to God.

And so I think Jesus in His reply here, not only answers that crafty question but also challenges their attitude as to how they are. He's asking: Do you truly honor God as you should? We have to answer now whether we truly honor God and obey Him. Will you truly bow before His claims on you? What is the image and nature of God that is spoken here? God is love, God is forgiving, God is eternal, God is holy, God is full of goodness, God is merciful. But at that very moment, it involves honoring His Son who is standing in front of them, the very One they are trying to trap and evade and avoid. They clearly are not in accordance to the truth that they themselves have brought out.

We have to ask a question – whether our attitude bears any resemblance to these attributes of God. F. B. Meyer said this: “O soul, thou belong to the great king. Thou art stamped with His image and superscription and therefore, give to Him that belongs to Him.”

Man is created in God's image, but that has been marred by sin and lost completely. It is defaced due to sin. Sin has destroyed everything of God in us. But still God is trying to restore that image. In salvation, God does exactly that. He restores us with the image of His Son, Jesus Christ who is co-equal and co-eternal image of God. So the Jews were actually defying Jesus and in that, they were defying the very thing that they were asking Jesus.

2. SECOND CHALLENGING QUESTION:

If God has said something clearly in His word, will you take Him seriously? Will you believe in it?

Luke 20:27-38

There came to Him some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, 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. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be, for all seven had her as wife?”

And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. 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, for they cannot die anymore because they are equal to angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to Him.”

This is the question about resurrection which again the Jews ask Jesus in a very similar fashion. The Sadducees don't believe in resurrection. There are lots of questions that we also have about the state of resurrection. We do not know much actually until Jesus revealed a lot of things about resurrection. In fact, that time the Jews knew less. But the word of God always said one thing very clearly, and it stated that God's saints never die to Him.

Now, a few basic things are clear from this passage about resurrection.

- 1) The condition of resurrection. In resurrected state, this passage says that there are no marriages – no one marries or is given in marriage. We will not have children for there won't be any need for procreation as no one would die. Population count will remain the same – static in the new age. We would be like angels; not spirits but like angels with bodies like that of Jesus' body.

- 2) The certainty of resurrection. It's an age which a certain class only who are considered worthy of it shall obtain – a separate resurrection of the just. Not the resurrection of the dead but the resurrection from the dead. This class is composed of certain children of God being the children of resurrection.
- 3) While waiting for the resurrection, the souls of people who die survive death. All lead to God although they may be hidden from the eyes of men.

Now, coming back to their attitude in this, we know that not only did they not believe in the resurrection but they also did not believe in their own bible. The bible for the Sadducees is different. They jettisoned most of the Bible which is the Old Testament, taking only the first five books of the bible, and rejected all the rest. Jesus picks up the answer to the question they asked from their own text within the first five books – from Exodus. So Jesus points out that they don't even believe in their own bible. He shows them that Moses says that God is known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses called God as the God of the three big patriarchs of the Old Testament. That is when those three are long since dead. The point is God has entered into a relationship with them as their God; it is inconceivable for Him to let them die and be gone forever. To Him all are alive. To Him, Abraham is alive, Isaac is alive, Jacob is alive; everyone is alive. To Him all those saints are alive even though they may be long since dead and gone. So, Jesus affirms the truth of resurrection.

If God were to say, "I am the God of Billy Graham," He is saying that Billy Graham is alive to Him at that time when He said that. But to us Billy Graham is long since dead and gone. However, when God Says that He is the God of Billy Graham it clearly means that God is indeed in a relationship with Billy Graham at the time that He said that.

Again, He not only answers their question but He exposes the attitude of His questioners. That's more important. He wants them to take what God says seriously. God has said something; it is there in their bible. They could read it. It is in the very books that they say they believe in. The question is whether they believe what God says, or do they stand in judgment over it. Even if someone comes up with some hypothetical situation which seems silly, would you doubt God's words because of this silly example? God means whatever He has said in the Bible. Are you going to believe Him?

Some people repeat exactly this issue today. They try and remove the resurrection itself. They try and make Christianity a way of living here and now with nothing more to come. In fact, most of us pay no attention to this particular phrase called resurrection from the dead. Even the disciples did the same. In spite of our Lord's repeated mention about His resurrection after His crucifixion, Peter and John were astonished at the empty tomb. Mary did not go to see the risen Lord but to prepare the body for entombment.

So you clearly see that most of us do not believe in resurrection from the dead. We think that there is a general resurrection. But the bible does not speak about a general resurrection. The bible speaks about two resurrections:

- Only those who are considered worthy will rise from the dead.
- Everybody who is dead will rise.

Clearly, when we do not truly take God's word seriously, it would mean that we are ignoring what God has said and we are standing over the Word rather than God's Word standing over us. And we could do the same with other issues as well. It is not that we should not ask questions and wrestle with what God has said. The true question is: if God has said something clearly, will you take Him seriously when you believe in it? Will you agree and follow what He says, or will you decide what you want to think which fits your argument?

Indeed we can have rubbish teaching as long as it is true and taking it seriously would lead to a far healthier Christian life than to have a wonderful teaching with no seriousness to follow. We may or may not thirst for clear or clever impactful teaching, but if we, after listening to what God says is true and not take Him seriously, would only mean that we are in unbelief of His words.

So, what is our attitude to God's Word? If our attitude is one of wanting our own current thinking to be confirmed, I guess we'll be putting questions to God's word just like the Sadducees did in Jesus' day. Is there some area that you know God speaks about something you do not like from the bible? What is your response to that? do you take all of God's word seriously?

So I leave with you these two challenging questions today:

1. Do you honor God?
2. If God says something clearly, do you take it seriously? Do you believe that what He says is true?

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come to Your holy presence in the name of Your Son Jesus, who loved us, who gave Himself for us. Lord we thank You for Your Word. Your Word is true and You are true, Lord. Your Word is Spirit. Thank You Lord for speaking to us today about how to honor You, how to truly follow what You said in the Word. Help us Lord that we not only honor our governments with the money that we earn and pay as taxes, but that we truly honor You because You created us in Your own image. Lord, even as You speak to us through the Word, many times we do not truly take the word seriously. Help us Lord, that not only we believe in what You say is true, but help us to also take it very seriously and follow it. Help us to do this. In the name of Your Son Jesus we ask this. Amen.