

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message #33 Tumult in the Temple

Scripture Luke 20:1-8, 19-26, 27-40

Today we will think about the last public interactions of Jesus before His death. During Passover Week, Jesus had lots of contact with the multitudes who were in the city. He went to the temple courts every day in order to teach the people. Luke describes how the people “hung on his words” (*Luke 19:48*).

On one of the days He drove out the money changers and merchants who had set up shop in the temple courtyard. This was an action taken in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies (*Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11*). In explaining His actions, Jesus said, “It is written, ‘My house will be a house of prayer’ but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Each of the public encounters contributed to the tension which was building. The people were excited about and supportive of Jesus. However, the leaders were becoming more and more angry about Jesus behavior.

The portions of the Gospel of Luke we will focus on today describe the final confrontations that Jesus had with different groups of religious leaders. These leaders all hoped, in their own unique ways, to catch Jesus in some inconsistency by which they could openly condemn Him and remove Him from what they considered interference with their activities.

Read Luke 20:1-8

This controversy arose as Jesus was speaking to people in the temple. The religious leaders were very upset about His actions and His popularity. They had lost their control over the religious activities of this Passover week. Jesus had captured the attention of the crowds with His triumphal entry into the city. He had disrupted their commercial enterprise in the temple court. The program of temple activities was being influenced by Jesus’ teaching. The religious leaders were angry. They had not given Him permission to change the normal routine of Passover week.

And so a delegation of “chief priests and teachers of the law, together with the elders, came to Jesus” with two questions: “By what authority are you doing these things?” and “Who gave you this authority?” The first question had to do with Jesus’ personal right or credentials to do what He was doing. What were His qualifications to step into such an important arena of religious activities? The simplest answer from Jesus would have been, “I am the Messiah; I have the right to do what I am doing.” The people who were gathered around Jesus would have considered this as an appropriate answer. However, the leaders had previously convinced themselves that Jesus was not the Messiah, and hence they would have rejected such an answer.

The second question had to do with the source of Jesus’ accreditation. Who had authorized such behavior? Who had sent Him? The priests, teachers of the law, and community elders assumed that they were the only ones qualified to guide and lead the Jewish people. Jesus had not received their permission to come into the temple as He had, or to do the things He was doing. If those in the highest echelons of Israel’s religious leadership had not authorized Jesus’ activities, then who had? Where did Jesus get the right to challenge their authority?

Jesus answered their inquiry with a question of his own. This was a popular technique used in debates in the Jewish culture. It was used as the means to get an opponent to reflect on a problem and come up with the answer on his own. Jesus’ question was a simple one: “Was John’s baptism from heaven, or from men?”

By asking His question, Jesus avoided an extended discussion over traditions, credentials, rights, derived authority, etc. Had God guided John in his ministry, or not? Among the general population of Israelites, there was a consensus of opinion that had developed. The vast majority of the people would have answered, “John came from God.” They recognized that God’s presence had been clearly manifested in John’s preaching and baptism ministry. Rejection of that conclusion by the religious leaders would indicate how out-of-touch with the people and with reality they were.

Jesus' question put the religious leaders in a catch-22 kind of dilemma since there was no way of answering without exposing themselves to charges that they were out of step with God. If they acknowledged the fact that John was under God's authority, then the matter of their lack of support for and acceptance of John would come up. If they took the other option and said "from men," they would run the risk of being stoned, because the people were persuaded that John was a prophet, and, according to the Old Testament, the rejection of a true prophet of God merited stoning (*see Deut 13:1-11*).

Recognizing that they were trapped in a no-win situation by Jesus' question, the religious leaders refused to take a position. It was not that they didn't have a strong opinion about John's authority. There had been the day when they came to John as he was baptizing at the Jordan River and asked about his authority. At that time they had concluded that John's authority was merely human. When the leaders had their private discussion among themselves in the presence of Jesus and the people, it was obvious what they wanted to say — that John's baptism was from men, but they didn't have the nerve to say this in front of the crowd. Instead of honestly and openly declaring their point of view, they hypocritically refused to answer Jesus' question.

Because of their refusal to give an answer, Jesus refused to respond to their original question. He really didn't need to. The equivalence between John and Himself was obvious. The authority behind Jesus was like that behind John. God had directed the actions of both of them. The leaders had failed to acknowledge the God-given authority of John, and they were refusing to acknowledge the God-given authority of Jesus. Therefore Jesus refused to give more truth to the religious leaders because they had been unwilling to accept the truth to which they had already been exposed.

The next confrontational encounter with Jesus is described in verses 19-26.

Read Luke 20:19-26

The religious leaders kept trying to find a way to arrest Jesus. The scheme in this episode involved "spies who pretended to be honest." The leaders sent these men to try to catch Jesus between two positions they considered to be exclusive and irreconcilable — allegiance to Rome and allegiance to God.

The members of the delegation began with flattering words, "We know you speak and teach what is right, you do not show partiality, you teach the way of God according to truth." These words made it seem like they wanted Jesus, with His credibility as a godly teacher, to settle a difficult issue for them, but obviously they did not believe what they were saying. They didn't believe that Jesus "taught the way of God according to truth." Their motivation was to catch Jesus in some fault.

After their flattery, they asked their "loaded" question, "Is it right for us (Jews) to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" This was a "hot button" issue in Israel. The Jews deeply resented the tribute taxes which had been imposed on them by the Roman authorities. More than anything else, the taxes symbolized the Jewish subjugation by Rome. (One of the reasons the Jews were eager for Jesus to be the Messiah was their desire that He break all ties to Roman rule.)

The delegation hoped that Jesus would give an answer which would enable them to either denounce Him to the Roman authorities if He said "no" to paying taxes to Caesar, or alienate Him from the zealots of Israel if He said "yes" to the paying of taxes.

Verse 23 explains that Jesus saw through the duplicity of the delegation. He requested to see a particular Roman coin and then asked, "Whose image and inscription are on the coin?" Their answer, "Caesar's image." Jesus then made a profound statement, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Jesus' answer must have stunned His adversaries. In one succinct sentence, He announced that God and Caesar each had legitimate realms of authority and to each the Jews had corresponding obligations. In giving His answer, Jesus not only avoided a controversial issue, but He set forth a principle that believers have had to accept and live with throughout history. The principle is that government has the right to exist and function, and its presence does not cancel out one's allegiance to God.

There are several passages in the New Testament which give instruction about the proper attitude and behavior expected of believers in regard to human government. In Romans 13:1-2 Paul wrote "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. ... Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves."

And in later verses Paul added, “It is necessary to submit to the authorities,” and “This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (*Romans 13:1-7; see also Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-17*). Believers were urged to pray regularly for government officials.

God had allowed the events of history to unfold so that Israel was under Roman domination. Through the use of Roman money, the Jews were acknowledging Caesar as their earthly ruler, because “a ruler’s power extends as far as his coins are in use” (a quote from the Jewish scholar Maimonides). The Jews were under obligation to pay Caesar what was due to him as long as Rome remained the political authority in the land.

Jesus’ answer indicated that the fulfilling of government requirements was not antithetical to religious obligation, but a part of it. God established human government very early in human history (*see Genesis 9:4-6*). Government, even a pagan government, has the right to exist and be supported by all its citizens. Its existence is not an inherent violation of the commitment of Christians to God. The followers of Jesus are to obey government. It is not the enemy of God, but the agent of God.

Of course, the ultimate responsibility is the relationship of people to God — they must render “to God what is God’s.” God is supreme over earthly rulers. While tax monies may belong to government, people belong to God. Coins may bear the image of rulers, but people bear the image of God because they were created in God’s image.

The question asked was an “either-or” question, but the answer Jesus gave was a “both-and” answer. Thus He avoided the trap His adversaries were seeking. “Astonished by His answer, they became silent.”

The third controversy endured by Jesus was initiated by the Sadducees. They were members of the priestly aristocracy in Israel. However, they were very secular in their views and mostly involved in the political affairs of the nation, whereas the Pharisees were mostly concerned with religious matters. The Sadducees associated themselves with the Roman rulers because it was to their advantage to do so.

The Sadducees also held some unique theological opinions. They limited their understanding of Scripture to the writings of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. They refused to accept the oral law and traditions on which the Pharisees based much of their teachings. The Sadducees were in conflict with the Pharisees over certain matters of theology. The Sadducees did not believe in the existence of angels, resurrection from the dead, and the afterlife. The confrontation between Jesus and the Sadducees is in verses 27-40.

Read Luke 20:27-40

The basis of the Sadducees' question was the law of levirate marriage, which was part of the Old Testament law. Its purpose was to perpetuate the line of descent for a married man who died childless. According to the law, the brother of the deceased would take the widow as his own wife and raise their children in the name of the deceased brother (*Deut 25:5; Ruth 4:1-12*).

The Sadducees had two objectives in asking the question. They hoped to show the foolishness of resurrection teaching and, because they knew that Jesus believed in the resurrection, they hoped to discredit Him in the eyes of the many people who were gathered around.

In His response to the question, Jesus pointed out that the assumptions of the Sadducees were incorrect. They assumed that life after death would be just like life on earth. They incorrectly assumed that people in heaven would be able to reenter into marital relationships with their earthly partners. Based on their assumptions, the widow and the seven brothers would be in an unsolvable dilemma, and, in the opinion of the Sadducees, the absurdity of the woman's dilemma revealed the absurdity of resurrection.

In verse 35 Jesus compared the customs of the present age with those of the future age. In this present age, people marry and are given in marriage, but Jesus declared that those who go into the future age — those who experience resurrection from the dead, will neither marry nor be given in marriage.” So first of all, Jesus stated that the earthly kind of human existence would not continue. Circumstances in the future would be different.

Secondly, Jesus indicated that not everyone would be worthy of the future age — only some would be “considered worthy.” In the context of Jesus’ teachings, only those who placed their faith in Him would be qualified for heaven and experience the resurrection from the dead.

In verse 36 Jesus declared that those who had gone through the experience of resurrection would not be any more subject to death. In this they would share some characteristics of angels. This could refer to the absence of the sexual aspect of marriage among angels, or it could mean that worthy people who experience resurrection would be immortal. They would live eternally. (The latter interpretation is better because the general theme here is resurrection.) Furthermore, those who have had the experience of resurrection are declared to be God’s children. They would be with God eternally. This is the future identity of those who are “considered worthy.”

Jesus next referred to Moses, the individual most revered by the Sadducees. According to the Sadducees, Moses had never made any statements about life after death. Jesus pointed out that Moses had indeed accepted as true the possibility of resurrection in the words he chose when describing the Lord as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” This statement did not mean that God was identifying Himself with men who were dead and had disappeared from history. Rather, since God was God of the living, and Moses referred to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as living beings, it was a clear reference that they were alive and with the Lord. Their existence, therefore, did not lie only in the past, but post death and post resurrection, they were alive in the Lord. If these patriarchs were not alive, God could not have referred to Himself as the God of those who were living.

So convincing and so original was the answer of Jesus that “some of the teachers of the law” had to acknowledge His answer as excellent. Jesus had succeeded in silencing all His inquisitors, and from that point on, no one dared to ask Him any more questions.

What is the application of this message? It should be apparent from our studies in the Gospel of Luke that people cannot be successful when challenging God. No one can get the “best of God” through argument. Satan tried to tempt Jesus with promises, but he failed. Unbelieving people tried to trick Jesus with questions, but they failed. Demons and vicious mobs did not have the power to overcome Jesus.

The verbal challenges of religious leaders then and the arrogant challenges of agnostic people today are symptomatic of a greater spiritual problem — their unwillingness to believe the truth about God as revealed by God's Word and through God's presence and activity.

There is no excuse for people's lack of faith. Jesus said, "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:37-38).

People become blinded to the reality of God because they have hard hearts. They are unwilling to do what God wants them to do. They try to escape the influence and authority of God over their lives. They are vain enough to challenge the authority and power of God, but there is no way they will succeed.

Read Psalm 2:1-6

"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. 3 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.'

4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. 5 Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, 6 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.'"

Humans cannot challenge God and succeed.