

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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God of the Living

Mark 12:18-27

"He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." That's how Jesus closes out his discussion with the Sadducees. And then he adds, "You are badly mistaken!" In other words, "You're wrong." That's what these types of religious debates were about. They were designed to sort things out and get things right. Things about doctrine. Things about teachings. Things about application of the law. Things about holy living. And most of all, things about God. After all, what you preach and practice is grounded in what you think about God and believe about God. The reason Jesus tells the Sadducees they're wrong is because it's important to get God right.

Pastor and author A. W. Tozer wrote:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. ...

For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. ... Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.¹

Once again, on this Sunday morning, the primary subject is God. What we think about God. What we believe about God. What we think God is like. What we believe God is doing. We're here today because knowing God is the most important matter of all.

And during the sermon I certainly try to do my part. One preacher tells about a friend in seminary who was overwhelmed by the prospect of composing two sermons a week for the rest of his life. So he mustered up the boldness to go ask his preaching professor his sad question, "What should I preach about, sir?" His teacher's answer was simple: "About God and about 20 minutes."² This morning, I won't make any promises about the 20 minutes part, but I can assure you that I'll try to keep God as the main thing.

That's what Jesus does in today's text from Mark. In his response to the Sadducees' question, Jesus uses the word for "God" six times. In fact, our text is the last of three debates in this chapter of Mark in which Jesus consistently refers to God as the key to handling these controversial topics. These aren't just discussions about the application of religious law. They're discussions about the nature and character of God.

But that's not where the Sadducees are focused. Their aim isn't to explore the nature of God but to embarrass Jesus as he teaches in the temple. Before we get further into the question they put to Jesus, keep in mind that the Sadducees were probably the most conservative group among the religious parties in first century Jewish life. Their Bible contained only the books of Moses, the first five books of our Old Testament. They didn't accept the Prophets or the Writings as Scripture. They rejected the authority of oral law. The Sadducees' other major characteristic was that they denied the doctrine of the

resurrection. They viewed resurrection as an unnecessary innovation, a late addition to Jewish thought and belief.

In our text, the Sadducees confront Jesus with a contemptuous question, an absurd case of applying the law called levirate marriage. According to this tradition, if a man died and left no children, his brother was obligated to marry his widow and raise up a child for him, thus continuing the deceased brother's family line. This practice presupposed the concept, held by many within Judaism, that your offspring were the way that you survived beyond death. Your seed, your heritage were the way that you "lived." Otherwise, death essentially had the last word about human life.

So the Sadducees ask Jesus what would happen if a man who had six brothers died, leaving a wife without any children. Suppose that all six brothers fulfilled the obligation of levirate marriage. Each of them, one after another, married the same woman, but died without leaving any children. After the resurrection, whose wife would she be?

Hmm. On the surface, the problem does seem impossible to solve. But that was the Sadducees' point. Belief in resurrection doesn't make any sense in light of the law about levirate marriage. If the resurrection can't be reconciled with what's clearly taught in the books of Moses, then this new teaching about people being raised from the dead should be tossed aside. What do you think, Jesus? Where do you come down on this issue?

In good rabbinic fashion, Jesus responds to their question with a question of his own. "Are you not in error," he asks, "because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?" (v. 24). Jesus counters their absurd scenario with two arguments. First, he asserts that in the heavenly world, the life of the world to come, our bodies and relationships will be radically transformed, in ways that are fitting for God's eternal kingdom. Now this doesn't necessarily mean that relationships such as marriage, family, friends, and so on, have no place in the realm of the risen. But it does caution us against taking the structures, arrangements, and orders of life that we know and experience here and now, projecting them onto the future, and saying that's what heaven will be like. I think Scot McKnight has captured it well when he says, "As the resurrected body was both like and more than Jesus's earthly body, so our relationships—friends, family, marriage—will be both like and more than they are now."³

And I would add, way more. For the people of God, life in the new creation, as part of the new humanity in Christ, will be similar to but incomprehensibly different from, the conditions of this present world and this present life. Until the one who is already risen returns to complete the saving work he has started, we're called to live on the basis of God's faithfulness and God's promises, trusting, as Paul says in quoting Isaiah, that "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

That's the problem Jesus has with the Sadducees when it comes to their denial of the resurrection. They seem to expect the future to be largely like the past, with death having too much say and holding too much sway. In other words, the Sadducees are inhabiting a world of business as usual, rather than recognizing and receiving the saving, life-giving power of God that's on the move in the world through Jesus.

And it's not as if God's desire to be God of living persons, not dead ones, is something entirely new. In his second argument, Jesus interprets Scripture. He points to Exodus 3:6, part of the story of Moses' encounter with God through the burning bush. This was part of the Scripture that the Sadducees accepted, so it should carry some weight and authority for

them. God said to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Mark 12:26). At that point, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been dead for hundreds of years. How could God still declare himself to be their God, unless death had not ended their relationship with him? God had called them, and claimed them, and held firm to his covenant with them. Even in death, they belong to God and are in God's presence. The grave didn't end their relationship with God or thwart God's purposes. That's because God is the God of the living. Giving life to the righteous, saving the faithful, is God's very character. It's who God is and what God does because of his loving mercy toward the world.

This is the God who raised Jesus from the dead and has promised to do the same for all those who belong to Christ. In fact, the life-giving, saving power of God is already at work, here and now, in the lives of those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. When by God's grace, through faith, you're joined to Christ, you're joined to his death and resurrection. You die with him and rise with him into newness of life. This is one of the reasons why we continue our reflections on the resurrection beyond just Easter Sunday. As others have noted, every Sunday is a little Easter, a gathering generated by the resurrection, an occasion to worship the God of the living.

Near the beginning of today's sermon, I quoted A. W. Tozer. Let me draw upon something else he said that sheds light on why we're gathered here today. Tozer wrote, "I cannot give in to the devil's principal, deceitful tactic which makes so many Christians satisfied with an 'Easter celebration' instead of experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection. It is the devil's business to keep Christians mourning and weeping with pity beside the cross instead of demonstrating that Jesus Christ is risen, indeed."⁴

This doesn't mean that the cross is minor or insignificant. Far from it. As I just emphasized, our relationship with Christ includes our dying with him. But as our Lord himself, on his way to death, said to religious leaders who were closed off to the possibilities of what God can do, God "is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

Tim Keller tells a story about the power of Christ's resurrection. He says:

A minister was in Italy, and there he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had inscriptions put all over the slab saying, "I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don't believe in it." Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave. So a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the grave and split that slab. It was now a tall towering oak tree. The minister looked at it and asked, "If an acorn, which has the power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that magnitude, what can the acorn of God's resurrection power do in a person's life?"⁵

In your life. In my life. In the life of our church. In the life of the world, especially as you and I bear witness to the resurrection by pouring ourselves out in conformity to Christ's own dying, so that his life will be more fully displayed in us. By doing so, we offer the world our definition of God. He is the God who works to save and to give life. The God who raises the dead. The God of the living.

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961) 1.

² David H. C. Read, "Dodging God." *The Living Pulpit* (January-March 1997) Inside cover.

³ Scot McKnight, *The Heaven Promise: Engaging the Bible's Truth About Life to Come* (New York: WaterBrook, 2015) 170.

⁴ A. W. Tozer, *Renewed Day by Day* (Vol. 2). *Christianity Today* (Vol. 38, no. 4).

⁵ Tim Keller, "Knowing the Power of His Resurrection." In *Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross: Experiencing the Passion and Power of Easter*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009) 136.