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ETERNAL MATTERS TODAY

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Eternal Matters Today

Do you ever feel intimidated as a Christian living in Silicon Valley, where the workforce is composed of brilliant engineers, scientists and scholars from around the world, most of whom have multiple degrees? During my freshman year at Stanford I will never forget being constantly ridiculed by an English professor for my faith. It's easy to feel out of your depth when sharing the gospel with intellectual giants, who demand scientific proof for their beliefs and scoff at our faith as antiquated myths. They are astounded to think how we, living in this scientific age, can actually believe that Jesus gave sight to the blind, healed the sick, and raised the dead. So how do we engage our colleagues with the gospel? How do we convince our friends that the Messiah we follow was indeed raised from the dead and reigns at God's right hand as Lord? Our text today offers us some very helpful clues.

I. Rationalists Ridicule the Resurrection (Luke 20:27–33)

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 the seven had her as wife." (Luke 20:27-33 ESV)

After the Pharisees and Herodians failed to trap Jesus with a politically sensitive question, the Sadducees arrive on the scene with a theological question. This is their first appearance in the gospel. Cranfield summarizes their background for us.

The Sadducees were the aristocratic party, made up of the high priestly and leading lay families of Jerusalem. They were wealthy and worldly. Their arrogance and their harshness in the administration of justice were notorious. Conservative in doctrine, they rejected what they regarded as pharisaic innovations; but their main concern was for the maintenance of their privileges, not for doctrinal purity.¹

Luke tells us that they do not believe in the resurrection and their question is designed to discredit Jesus and undermine his authority as a teacher. What prompted the debate was the fact that Jesus had predicted his death in the parable of the tenants and concluded by announcing that after his death he would become the foundation stone for a new temple. The doctrine of the resurrection was a late development in Judaism. As R. T. France explains,

Probably only two passages in the Old Testament clearly express a belief in resurrection and life after death (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2), though several poetic texts (notably Pss 16:9-11; 49:15; 73:23-26;

Job 19:25-26) may be seen with hindsight to be pointing in that direction. From the second century B.C. onwards such a belief becomes increasingly frequent and explicit especially in apocalyptic works and in the traditions concerning the martyrs of the Maccabean period. For the Pharisees, with their openness to new developments in religious thought, it was therefore an attractive idea. But the Sadducees could find no basis for such belief in the Pentateuch...for them...Sheol was a final resting place, and any continuity was to be understood in terms of reputation and posterity, not in terms of personal survival.²

Tom Wright notes that their disbelief is typical of those who are wealthy and powerful. The idea of resurrection is revolutionary, and "people who believe God is going to do that sort of thing are more likely to take drastic political action without fearing the consequences."³ Given their position of power and privilege, it's no wonder that, as the Jewish historian Josephus tells us, they had "the confidence of the wealthy alone, but no following among the populace."⁴

For the Sadducees, the thought of a new temple built around the risen Christ shatters every vestige of logic and good reason. To demonstrate how preposterous Jesus' view is, they spin an imaginative scenario based on the term "raise up," which Moses used to describe the practice of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-6; cf. Gen 38:8; Ruth 3-4). If a woman's husband died with no male heir, the husband's brother was required to marry her in order to "raise up" a son for him, so that his name would not be blotted out forever from Israel. Bruce Waltke explains that to lose one's name in Israel was "equivalent to losing social immortality (see 1 Sam 24:1; 2 Sam 14:7)."⁵ This, reason the Sadducees, is the real meaning of resurrection—"to continue the name of the deceased, to give him, in a sense, an afterlife."⁶ The continuation of the family line is the only kind of "resurrection" they can envisage.

If, on the other hand, Jesus' view of the resurrection is true, consider the conundrum facing a family of seven brothers, where the first takes a wife, but suddenly dies with no children to carry on the family name. Then a second, in faithful obedience to Moses' command, marries his brother's widow but tragically, he also dies leaving no children; he is followed by a third, and then a fourth, and so on until all seven brothers have died attempting to fulfill their sacred duty. Afterwards the woman dies.

The hypothetical scenario prompts the question: "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For all seven had her as wife." How does one negotiate and sustain such a complex web of relationships in the life to come? Gundry remarks, "This would make a shambles out of the Mosaic Law. A man might practice polygamy, but a woman? In the resurrection? Out of the question!"⁷ Now that the Sadducees have pushed the "ridiculous" into the "absurd," they rest their case.

II. Resurrection Transcends Reason (Luke 20:34-36)

A. Faulty hermeneutics

In Mark's gospel Jesus wastes no time with niceties, but comes right out and calls a spade a spade. If the Sadducees build their case around the word "resurrection," then Jesus frames his rebuttal around the word "deceived."

Is this not the reason you are *deceived*, because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? You are greatly *deceived*. (c.f. Mark 12:24, 27)

"You have been led down the wrong path because of your faulty hermeneutics (their method of interpreting Scripture), which have prevented you from knowing the God for whom they testify." These are wounding accusations to those who prided themselves on their strict adherence to Scripture and fierce rejection of human traditions. As in the earlier question regarding the poll tax, Jesus doesn't play to their hand with a simple answer, but instead exposes the false assumptions on which their question is based.

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." (vv. 34-36)

The Sadducees failure to accept the doctrine of resurrection comes from their lack of spiritual insight regarding their own law. For if they truly understood the Scriptures, they would see the power of God everywhere, a power that brings life out of Abraham's dead body, raises the needy out of the ash heap, rescues helpless Israel out of Egypt, and is able to change the very conditions of life itself. Even one of their own prayers known as the *geburot* ("powers") describes God with the words, "You quicken the dead with great mercy and keep faith to them that sleep in the dust."⁸

So, says Jesus, do not attempt to project your narrow categories of life into the resurrection. It's a brand new world! When the dead are raised, they are spiritual beings like the angels, insofar as they no longer face death. Thus there is no need procreate, and therefore no need to marry, rendering levirate marriage obsolete. Not only are they like the angels, the resurrection marks them as "sons of God," partakers of the divine nature, infused with a love that transcends the most intimate of human relationships. Joel Green points out that a subtle shift in the voice of the Greek verbs hints that the transformation we are destined for has already begun to impinge on the present.

Although typically represented as passive verbs, the instances of the two verbs translated "are given in marriage" actually appear in the middle voice: "to allow oneself to be married." The focus shifts from a man "taking a wife" (vv. 28, 29, 31) to include the woman's participation in the decision to marry. This is important because the basic concern here is with a reorientation of human relations *through a reorientation of eschatological vision*...No longer must women find their value in producing children for patrimony.⁹

On that day we shall all be the bride of Christ. Instead of one woman with seven husbands, there will be one husband with one corporate bride from all nations! By undermining their presuppositions, Jesus has exposed the absurdity of their question. Because of their faulty hermeneutics they have a distorted view of the age to come, and no clue that the future age is already breaking in on the present.

The greater question that Jesus challenges them with is, "Who is considered worthy to attain to that age?" Who are the "children of God" and the "sons of the resurrection"? Jesus has just struck a low blow, insinuating that the Sadducees are focused on the wrong question and, as such, may in fact miss the party. What difference does it make whether your eschatological views are right or wrong, if you're not invited to the party? Who then is worthy? Who will be saved?

B. Moses' testimony

But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him. (vv. 37-38)

Instead of answering the question, Jesus continues on the offensive, decimating his opponents. If the Sadducees rely on Moses as their authority, Jesus chides them that they have failed to grasp the implications of what he wrote. For the fact of the resurrection is built right into the fabric of God's name. In the first encounter Moses has with God at the burning bush, God introduced himself to him in relational terms as, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God Jacob" (Exod 3:6). Once he introduced himself to Moses, he announced that the wonders he was about to perform in rescuing Israel from hand of the Egyptians were in fulfillment of the covenantal promises he made to the patriarchs.

How absurd it would be for God to broadcast a covenant relationship with individuals who are no longer living and who will never receive the benefits of those promises. The fact that Moses recounts the story of the burning bush, Jesus infers, is evidence that he believes in resurrection life, for "all live to him" (God). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still being given life by God and one day they will meet their spiritual seed, including you, face to face. As the author of Hebrew testifies,

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth... But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Heb 11:13, 16)

C. Shamed and defeated

Then some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well." For they no longer dared to ask him any question. (vv. 39-40)

Jesus' brief rebuttal is so effective it elicits praise from several scribes in the crowd. Their verbal applause affirms Jesus' mastery over his opponents, who slink away shamed and defeated. The fact that they have been silenced, however, doesn't necessarily mean they are about to repudiate their positions of wealth and power and humble themselves to embrace the inbreaking kingdom of God. Corporate power seldom relinquishes the reins without a hostile takeover.

IV. Modern Day Rationalists

I would imagine most of you feel free from the temptation of rationalism that plagued the Sadducees. Everyone believes in the resurrection, correct? Well, yes and no. As evangelicals, we believe we will be raised from the dead at the end of the age, but like the Sadducees, many of us—if not most—still project the categories of our world into the age to come, and are blind to the glory of what God is doing in this age. We read the promises made by the

prophets to Israel with a rationalistic lens and reconstruct them with a literalism that denies the death and resurrection of Jesus, not to mention the transcendent new dimensions of his new temple, where everyone is a priest with direct access to the Father through the blood of Christ. And we fight over the holy land, ignorant of the fact that through the resurrection of Christ, we are heirs of a new and greater land with no geographical boundaries, which even Abraham understood (Isa 54:1–2; Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13). The author of Hebrews tells us that “Abraham lived in the land of promise, as in a foreign land... For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:9–10). And lest I forget, there is the new humanity, where there are no national, racial, or gender distinctions.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? Do we really believe in the power of God? That the conditions of all life are forever changed? If we did, we would no longer seek our identity from human relationships, but from our union with Christ, being his beloved bride. This means that there is something at the core of our humanity that runs far deeper than our sexuality. Despite what Hollywood screams at us, sexuality cannot be the driving focus of our life. Though it the creator’s grand gift—those exhilarating hormonal sparks that make us feel so alive and gloriously human—ultimately it is designed to point us to our longing for God, to an intimacy that transcends all physical and psychological dimensions, something the Bible calls worship.

Do you really believe in the resurrection? If we did, we would then see singleness not as second-class fallout, but as a sacred calling equal to marriage. For the single person is already living out their total devotion to Christ as his or her bride. In recent months I have been nurturing my soul on the life of St. Francis and Clare in a captivating biography by Gerard Thomas Straub. Straub was a former Hollywood television producer of popular soap operas. He was Catholic by upbringing, but after his intense research for a book documenting the work of several televangelists, he “swallowed a double dose of poison: materialism and skepticism”¹⁰ and became an atheist. But somehow God reached into his heart through the writings of St. Francis. His new quest to write a book on the saint took him to Italy, where the love of Christ invaded every ounce of his being. What makes the book so compelling is that he not only makes Francis and Clare come to life, but alongside their stories he traces the pilgrimage of his own soul with such vulnerability that I felt as if I was reading the musings of a close friend, someone I could trust like a spiritual director.

In an age when the church was tremendously rich and powerful, Francis abandoned his life of luxury and adopted a life of poverty to devote himself fully to Christ. Given Francis’ rigorous discipline of devotion, outrageous acts of mercy, contagious joy, rapturous love for nature and all God’s creatures, passionate preaching and countless miracles, he is a premier example that the resurrection life of the age to come has indeed invaded the present.

Machiavelli said, “Christianity was dying; St. Francis resurrected it.” ...Francis, in a sense, rediscovered Christianity, which had lost its luster and was seen as merely a lifeless formula... For Francis, an ounce of transcendence was worth more than a ton of reasoning... Francis was the first saint to smile, at least in the Christian communion of saints... Francis was filled with a holy joy, a joy that infected all who came in contact with him.¹¹

Clare was 18 she was infected with Francis’ joy. Like Francis, she fled the clutches of a rich father and took vows of poverty dedicating her life to God. “Saint Bonaventure said Saint Clare ‘was the first flower in Francis’ garden, and she shone like a radiant star, fragrant as a flower blossoming white and pure in springtime.’”¹² In every sense, she became Francis’ counterpart and equal. Sister Frances Teresa describes their special kind of love,

They exemplified in their relationship what they most deeply believed in, namely the Incarnation of Christ, as if, singly and together, they each personified God’s union with humanity. When we look at them now, we see them glowing with the fire of love, God’s love for them, theirs for God and their love for each other... They are like the three young men, themselves tossed into a furnace, walking about in the heat of it, glowing re-hot and yet not destroyed, and the presence of God walking with them. It was not a godly substitute for marriage, but something altogether beyond marriage, something nearer to the union of Christ and humanity, of which marriage is an analogue.¹³

Do we really believe in the resurrection? If we did, we would view barrenness differently—barrenness not only in the sense of not being to produce offspring, but barrenness of every kind. Rather than being a stigma of shame, the resurrection puts a new lens over our tears, transforming our grief into a gateway to fertility. For as Isaiah wrote,

**Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than the children of her who is married,” says the Lord.**

(Isa 54:1)

The poet describes Zion with three images. First she is barren. Like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah, her womb is shut, which makes the dream of children impossible. But Zion is not only described as barren, she is also one who has never travailed in labor, in contrast to the one “who is married.” This suggests she is either divorced or widowed, and as such has no husband or children to care for her. Finally the word “desolate” takes her pain to the limit. The root *shamam* means “to lie deserted, become stiff (with fear), be terrified, to be cut off from life.” The verb takes on violent connotations. It describes a life that is torn to pieces and mangled by a bear (Lam 3:10–11). The only woman in the bible who is described as desolate is David’s daughter, Tamar, who was raped and then abandoned by her half-brother Ammon (2 Sam 13:20). It comes as a shock to us that the first word to this broken woman is “sing.” The verb *ranan* is better translated “give a ringing or resounding shout of joy,” a term that is used in response to the most remarkable events, when fortunes are suddenly, dramatically and unexplainably reversed.

Given God’s promise, we should not be surprised when the first announcement of salvation in the gospel of Luke comes to a woman who is barren, Elizabeth. It is a retelling of Sarah’s story—a barren woman who, through divine intervention, will give birth at a ripe old age. This is followed with a second announcement to a young virgin, who never has had the opportunity of experiencing labor, because she isn’t yet married. She will conceive life by the Holy Spirit. When these two women meet, Mary’s song of praise—a recapitulation of Hannah’s song centuries earlier—resounds to the glory of God (Luke 1:46–55).

When we search the gospel for Tamar's *desolate* counterpart, we wonder what new twist will the new story bring? Whose body will be ravaged like Tamar's? Whose life will be shunned in isolation and forsaken in shame? Who will never marry because of the sins of others, and as a result never know the joy of bearing children or seeing their grandchildren? Who is the *desolate* one in the New Testament? We don't have to look to the New Testament, because the prophet himself supplies the answer.

Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness— (Isa 52:14 TNIV)

Isaiah uses the term to describe the reaction the Servant's appearance evoked when he was beaten beyond recognition. Onlookers were "*appalled* at him" (*shamam* — speechless with horror). Yet after he is "cut off from the land of the living," Isaiah pronounces that "he will see his offspring; he shall prolong his days" (53:10). This is one of the clearest professions of resurrection in the Old Testament, not to mention the transformation of the people of God. What is true of the Servant who never married will be true of all God's people. Every new birth will appear to be miraculous since it is indeed life from the dead. But what is more, not only will the new seed be supernatural in origin, its fertility will be greater than Israel's physical seed. "For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married," says the LORD. (Isa 54:1)

It is the very place of brokenness and pain where, in the Messianic age, you become fertile. In John's gospel Jesus goes to Samaria and there he finds a woman who has been married not just once or even twice, but five times! And the man she is with now living with is not even her husband. She is shunned by the women of the town and has no community. She is old, she is used, and she's very likely childless. What does Jesus offer her? He offers her living water at the very moment that she must address her deepest pain: "I have no husband." She drinks deeply of that living water and, unable to contain herself, she goes into town and in one day she has a community of children—the whole town receives Jesus based on her testimony.

Do you really believe in the resurrection? Are you satisfied that the resurrection gives you a secure future, or do you feel the call of Jesus' resurrection summoning you to new and outlandish, dangerous tasks? I find it is so easy for my faith to shrink and my world to get small, to operate on autopilot and merely carry out the tasks at hand with little vision of the age to come. And then God sends one of his servants who are living resurrection life to ignite my floundering faith and make my world large again. Recently I was privileged to have breakfast with Connie Fortunato, the founder of Music Camp International. For over twenty years she has worked with the orphans and handicapped of Romania, and in one week's time she transforms them into a choir, performing classical pieces with the most outstanding orchestras in the country. Connie is one of those people who believes God can do the impossible and has no fear facing Goliath-like opposition. While the rest of the world seems paralyzed by government bureaucracy and small mindedness, she believes God's kingdom of raising the poor from the ash heap has already invaded the present and is available to any who will lay hold of it.

I was already familiar with her work in Kiev, where she labored relentlessly for refugee children while war was raging in the East Ukraine. She was named "Honorary Ambassador of Peace for Ukraine," the only non-Ukrainian to ever receive this award. But this fall she did the impossible. On the outskirts of Cluj-Napoca, Romania is a garbage and chemical waste dump, which has now become home to several gangs of Gypsy children. In 2010 local authorities forcibly evicted families from the center of the city, and relocated many of them in makeshift shelters with no water, sanitation or electricity adjacent to the dump. Despite human rights violations and pleas from organizations like Amnesty International, local officials prefer to turn a blind eye to the squalor these families live in.

Enter Connie. She met with the city officials and the mayor, who seemed paralyzed by the Romanian "way" of doing things (or better said, "the way of *not* doing things" handed down to them by their Communist heritage). When one official protested, "You can't assemble a choir from those children, they are run by four rival gangs." Connie firmly but politely asked, "Well has anyone ever talked with the leaders before?" Soon Connie is on her way to the dump with a civic leader in tow. The meeting takes place and within no time the children (all of whom are illiterate; and some who have never been out of the dump or sat in a chair) are assembled, daily washed, organized and taught to sing in English. Connie writes,

The final concert of the Pata Rat project was a "miracle." For these children to stand (moderately still) and sing with power and passion was astonishing to all. One official told me, "In all my life if you had told me this was possible, I would have never believed you." Now their community and municipal government have first-hand evidence that they are talented and can learn. The question is, "Do we have the ability and care to teach them?"¹⁴

Perhaps it was no coincidence that the song they sang was "You Raise Me Up," which left not a dry eye in the house. Fifteen of those children are now attending school in Cluj. This is how we are to engage our culture with gospel. Don't ever forget that an ounce of transcendence trumps a ton of reason.

1. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (CGTC; ed. C.F.D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 373.

2. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 470-71.

3. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 245.

4. Josephus, *Ant.* XIII 298.

5. Bruce K Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology; An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 459.

6. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 719.

7. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark; A Commentary His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 702.

8. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, 374.

9. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 721.

10. Gerard Thomas Straub, *The Sun and Moon Over Assisi, A Personal Encounter with Francis and Clare* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000), 15.

11. Straub, *The Sun and Moon Over Assisi*, 42-43.

12. Straub, *The Sun and Moon Over Assisi*, 344.