

# Religious mis-steps

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 30 January 2022

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[ 0 : 00 ] Our readings this morning is from Luke chapter 20, starting at verse 20 to the end of the chapter, and then chapter 21, just to read four verses.

So starting at Luke chapter 20, verse 20. Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies who pretended to be sincere.

They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.

So the spies questioned him, teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth.

Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not? He saw through the duplicity and said to them, show me a denarius, whose image and inscription are on it.

[ 1 : 31 ] Caesar's, they replied. He said to them, then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. And to God, what is God's.

They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.

Some of the Sadducees who say there is no resurrection came to Jesus with a question.

Teacher, they said, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.

Now they were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her.

[ 2 : 50 ] And in the same way, the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too.

Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be? Since the seven were married to her.

Jesus replied, the people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage.

And they can no longer die. For they are like the angels. They are God's children.

Since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise.

[ 4 : 09 ] For he calls the Lord. The God of Abraham. And the God of Isaac. And the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead.

But of the living. For to him. All are alive. Some of the teachers of the law.

Responded. Well, said teacher. And no one dared to ask him. Any more questions. Then Jesus said to my Lord.

Sorry. Then Jesus said to them. Why is it said that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself declares in the book of Psalms.

The Lord said to my Lord. Sit at my right hand. Until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

[ 5 : 19 ] David calls him. Lord. How then can he be his son? While all the people were listening.

Jesus said to his disciples. Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes.

And love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. And have the most important seats in the synagogues. And places of honor at banquets.

They devour widows' houses. And for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.

Chapter 21. As Jesus looked up. He saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury.

[ 6 : 21 ] He also saw a poor widow put in two very small coins. Truly I tell you he said.

This poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth.

But she out of her poverty. In all she had to live on. Amen. Perhaps you remember last Sunday we had Phil Stogner here.

And he was helping us to slow down. To slow down when we approach God's word. And to plumb the depths of a particular parable. Rather than being content with having found a single relatively superficial idea.

To keep going deeper. To keep looking for more. To see what God has to show us there. He's absolutely right. There is more than enough depth in God's word to repay. Lengthy study on just a few verses.

[ 7 : 31 ] And I hope some of you did take him up on that challenge. To pick a parable. And to give it some time to dwell with it. Perhaps over the course of a number of days. And churn it around and ask questions.

Until you get more from it. This week however we are taking a somewhat different approach to that. We're not digging in deep to a few verses. But rather in order to understand what Jesus is doing in each of these sections of today's reading.

To understand that we need to have kind of the overall picture of what Luke is presenting here in this section. Why is Luke choosing to record these particular incidents and conversations?

Now in Luke's gospel there's kind of an overall trajectory. That over the course of these chapters. Particularly moving towards the increasing antagonism and aggression towards Jesus.

Especially towards the end of the gospel. Verse 20 records that they are deliberately trying to catch Jesus. The religious authorities want to trap him.

[ 8 : 34 ] They're already upset enough that they want to be rid of Jesus. And the question is only really whether they're going to catch him out soon. Or whether the tension is going to build and build and build. Until they end up moving even without any evidence of official wrongdoing.

So that's kind of one perspective on the story that Luke is presenting. We have these authorities with their objective to trap Jesus. That's their plan. But what does Luke present us as Jesus' plan? What's Jesus' objective in these interactions? What is Jesus trying to achieve here? Because Luke is less interested in what the religious authorities want. And more interested in showing us what Jesus wants.

Now of course this building tension is part of Jesus' plan. Jesus wants that to increase because he is heading deliberately for the cross. But he's not quite there yet.

And whilst in some senses his life is but a prelude to his death and resurrection. In some sense that is not the whole story is it? And I think what we have laid out for us here in this second half of chapter 20.

[ 9 : 40 ] I think what we have is Jesus taking aim at false religion. He takes these opportunities that he's given. And he uses them to critique a number of kind of misguided or erroneous approaches to the religious life.

And he's not so much aiming at false religion in a sense of kind of a completely different religion. But rather he's aiming at the sort of false religion that's missteps.

Kind of mistaken ideas, twistings, modifications of true religion. This is corruptions of real faith rather than something completely other.

So that's kind of the broad overview of what he's aiming for. And I found Michael Wilcox's analysis very helpful. He says that in this section from the start of chapter 20 through to those opening verses of chapter 21.

He sees Jesus addressing first a man-centered religion. Then he takes aim at religious religion. Third, unbiblical religion. Then thoughtless religion.

[ 10 : 48 ] And finally, showy religion. So five different religious missteps that Wilcox identifies Jesus correcting, taking aim at, and critiquing.

And the Bible is very consistent, isn't it, in its portrayal of the dangers of an incorrect understanding of religion. An invalid approach to worship.

We're going to come very soon to one of the most clear-cut of these examples of religious missteps and false religion. We'll come to that in Leviticus in a week or two with Nadab and Abihu who are killed instantly for getting it wrong, for coming with the wrong approach to worship.

The results of these missteps here in Luke are a bit less immediate. But actually, they're not any less serious. Verse 47 carries a warning. These men will be punished most severely. So we have these five different missteps. And we actually looked at the first of those, the man-centered religion of verses 1 through 18. We looked at that a couple of weeks ago, whenever it was.

[ 11 : 54 ] That sense of desire to have authority in our own lives. Remember, you have the parable of the tenants, the vineyard workers who want to claim it for themselves, who want to be in charge.

So we looked at that previously, and that leaves us with four more missteps to consider. So let's take a look at religious religion, verses 20 through 26.

Verse 20, the teachers of the law, the chief priests, they've been humiliated by that parable of the vineyard workers. They're humiliated by that parable that Jesus had spoken against them, we're told, in the preceding verses.

And so in their humiliation, in their anger, they set out to catch him, hoping they might be able to hand him over to the civil authorities to deal with. They don't want to have to face up to it themselves.

They don't want to use a religious approach to deal with him. They don't think their arguments can stand up against him. They can't win the people round by, you know, organizing a debate between these competing philosophies.

[ 12 : 55 ] No, they need to bring in the long arm of the law, trap him in something so they can hand him over to be dealt with by other people. So they pick one of the hot-button topics of the day.

Is it right to pay taxes or not? Now, I imagine that in most societies, taxation is unpopular.

Supporting paying more taxes is rarely a route to increasing popular appeal.

But it's also true that, in general, most of us, when we do think things through calmly and sensibly, we do see the sense in a sort of reasonable, proportionate taxation. We do want to pool our resources to pay for the roads to drive on and the police officers and the firemen and whatever.

Tax is not popular, but not usually terribly controversial. But why is this paying of tax to Caesar then? Why is this a cunning trap?

How are they scheming to ensnare Jesus? Because it's clear that is their intention. It is a trap. Why does it work? Well, for two reasons.

[ 14 : 01 ] One, the Romans are conquerors. The Romans are invaders. This isn't an elected government. This is not, you know, popular decision that has put the Romans in power.

No, they've come with an invading army and imposed their will by force. So, arguably, to pay taxes is collaboration. It's surrender.

Second, second is the coin in question, this denarius. It has an inscription on it that attributes divinity to the emperor, that calls the emperor, Caesar, God.

And therefore, potentially, for these Jews, potentially paying this tax, handing over this coin with this image on, potentially to pay that is blasphemous, dishonoring to God.

A good Jew, surely he can't even handle such a coin, let alone use one to work with these hated imperial oppressors. So, it works as a trap.

[ 15 : 05 ] They're hoping either, well, he'll side with the oppressors, he'll side with the Romans, and say the tax should be paid, and that will bring Jesus low in the court of public opinion.

Or, alternatively, he'll say it's wrong to pay the tax, and then they can bring charges of treason in the imperial court. They think they have him on the horns of a dilemma.

He's scuppered whatever he does. But Jesus is not so easily trapped, is he? But you see what they're actually doing here.

These religious authorities. The payment of this tax is really only in question because of the religious dimension. It's only because the Jewish people are God's chosen people.

It's only because of that that there's really any question of refusing to cooperate. It's only because of God's laws about, you know, making images of rival gods and so on.

[ 16 : 04 ] It's only because of those dimensions that there's really any possible grounds for rejecting using coins with the emperor's image and divine title. It's a religious question.

But for these religious leaders, their question isn't genuine. This isn't, you know, a tender conscience wondering, is this really okay? Or are we in danger of crossing a line?

That would be a valid question to ask, but that's not their concern, is it? They're using a religious question for their own duplicitous purposes. Their religion is a means to an end.

They want to use this religion to achieve their own objectives. It's a tool to secure their power and prestige. Their concern isn't, how do we best know and please God?

Their concern is with their own comforts, with holding on to their position. And so we can and we should hear the instruction in these verses to give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

[ 17 : 06 ] Absolutely, we should take that principle and apply that again today. We see the distinction, we see the legitimacy of paying what's due in any given sphere. That's well and good.

That's a valid application that would be worth diving into if you were spending your time on a few verses. But when we see this interaction in its wider context, when we see it in this flow of different antagonistic discussions, we're forced also to recognize this underlying danger, this danger of using religion as a tool for manipulation, using religion as a means to an end.

My friends, we should be very wary of using religion as a tool for control, whether we're doing that as parents or in a more kind of general social pressure.

Perhaps we've lost some of that general sense of religion as a means of social control. Karl Marx, religion, the opiate of the masses.

Perhaps that's not quite so prevalent today. But that idea of religion as a means of enforcing correct behavior, of achieving our objectives that aren't actually anything to do with the religion, but is just a means of getting what we want, a means of exerting our authority.

[ 18 : 31 ] Well, these verses speak against that kind of religious religion, religion as a tool. Second misstep. The Sadducees, verse 27, those who say there is no resurrection.

Now, the Sadducees question this is not completely without merit. They have correctly characterized what's recorded in the law of Moses. The purpose of this process, this is called lever at marriage, where the man marries his dead brother's wife.

The purpose of this is to provide descendants to carry on the name of the deceased. It's tied up with land and inheritance and how the promised land is shared amongst God's people.

It's important laws for God's people. There are legitimate questions to ask. But we're not going to dive into the whys and wherefores of that particularly, partly because this week of all weeks I really don't want to, but more importantly because it's not actually the point of this encounter.

This isn't really about those laws back in the Old Testament. Again, that's not the purpose with which the Sadducees come with this question. They're not asking Jesus a genuine question.

[ 19 : 43 ] This isn't a spirit of honest inquiry. This isn't, you know, they've been faced with a tricky pastoral situation and they want some advice from another teacher on what to do. No, they are employing this most beloved of rhetorical devices, the hypothetical situation.

Now, there's a time and place for hypotheticals. Sometimes it's good to think things through in the abstract, in a less emotionally charged situation. But this hypothetical is an attempt at ridicule. A serious inquiry wouldn't require seven brothers, would it?

Their intent is to make the doctrine of the resurrection look ridiculous, seem absurd. And Jesus' response is twofold.

First, he does actually directly address the point they raise, even absurd as it is. He says they're making a fundamental category mistake. They're assuming that the resurrection is going to be like this life, but longer.

Well, Jesus says no. Those worthy of the resurrection life will live a different life, neither marrying nor being given in marriage. Maybe that sits slightly uncomfortably for some of us.

[ 20 : 55 ] Maybe we're not all that keen on the idea that one of the best features of our lives now will no longer be part of our lives in the new earth. Maybe for some of us missing a much-loved spouse and feeling concerned that when that reunion comes, that it will somehow be second rate because we will no longer marry and be given in marriage.

Well, I think there's a clue to the reason why there's no marriage in verse 36. Verse 36 says they no longer die.

Now, if there is no longer death, then it is very likely there is no longer any birth either.

Commentators certainly seem to agree on that implication, and hence, no birth means no need for marriage, for the raising of children is certainly a major purpose of marriage in God's created order.

Now, that does not provide a perfect answer, not least because children are certainly not the only purpose of marriage. We haven't got a full picture here, have we? But if we're feeling concerned about this, here is what we can be absolutely certain of.

We will not be worse off. We will not be any the poorer for the absence of marriage in the new creation. In the resurrection, we are not going to be worrying about something that we now think we might be missing.

[ 22 : 18 ] Instead, we'll be enjoying something greater by far. And to inquire too far beyond what God's chosen to tell us of the nature of resurrection life, it is to make the same mistake of those Sadducees in heading into fruitless speculation.

What we can be confident of is the glorious hope, the immense joy that that day will be filled with, whatever its nature.

So Jesus' first answer to their hypothetical is to correct that mistaken assumption that the resurrection life is like this but more. Second answer, second response, he then goes on the offensive precisely because he knows this is not honest curiosity.

And so Jesus goes on the attack, he shows them just how unbiblical their religion is. He demonstrates to these Sadducees that they have disregarded key information in God's word. He is not the God of the dead but of the living. And if that's true, how can you argue there's no resurrection? It doesn't make sense.

[ 23 : 34 ] In other words, they've made an attempt at religion. They have some kind of half-formed, ill-considered, unthought-through ideas of what God says in his word. But they haven't actually worked it through.

They've taken one surface-level idea and failed to consider the depth of God's word. How many people, how many people in churches and certainly in the world at large, how many people dismiss as ridiculous the key doctrines of Christianity without actually having taken them seriously as a possibility?

This possibility of bodily resurrection is certainly one, but there's others too, aren't there? Miracles can't possibly happen. Therefore, there must be a scientific explanation for this account.

Or failing that, well, we'll dismiss people as credulous nutjobs. Preconceived ideas force us to incorrect conclusions. How many people do you know who will speak airily of all the contradictions in the Bible, but actually if you put them on the spot, they probably couldn't point to a single one. They just know that they're there. On the other hand, how many of us would actually be equipped to help them to understand, to answer if someone actually did point out a situation where there appear to be differing accounts of the one event?

[ 25 : 01 ] Perhaps that's worth thinking through as well. Step three. Having taken the initiative in response to questioning about the resurrection, Jesus is now continuing with a question of his own.

And this is the third misstep. He's now leveling his attack against thoughtless religion. Verse 41. He starts with a point on which everyone is agreed. The Messiah has to be the son of David.

This is known. This is established. We all agree on this. Everybody who claims to be a Jew of any stripe, Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, chief priests, teachers of the law, Jesus, Jesus' disciples, John the Baptist, John the Baptist, everyone agrees Jesus, sorry, the Messiah is the son of David. Everyone agrees. So, the question is, how can that actually be the case? Does that really fit, asked Jesus, in verse 42, does that fit with the fact that David addresses this Messiah as Lord?

Because that is not how fathers address their sons. Fathers don't call their sons Lord. That's not how it goes. However many generations there are in between. That is not how it works.

[ 26 : 17 ] The younger looks up to the elder. This is the system. This is how life goes. So, we have here a situation where they're all agreed on a good and true thing.

They're all agreed the Messiah is the son of David, well and good, but why do they believe that?

Nobody has an answer for Jesus. Nobody's able to put two and three together.

Nobody can figure out how David calls the Messiah Lord and the Messiah is his son. It's interesting, isn't it, that here, Jesus isn't afraid to kind of disturb a correct belief that lacks foundation.

He's happy to show people that this belief has no foundation in hope of putting in its place a fuller understanding. They've reached a correct conclusion but they don't know why and Jesus shows them that they don't know why which risks that correct conclusion but he has a better explanation to give them.

I'm always dismayed when somebody's attitude to an apparent contradiction, whether that contradiction is between God's word and a scientific experiment or an apparent contradiction between two parts of God's word or between God's word and what we might call an intrinsic sense of right and wrong.

[ 27 : 45 ] When somebody's reaction to an apparent contradiction between any two things is just to kind of shrug and say, oh well, never mind. I'm dismayed by that not because I want people to doubt God's word for one moment but I'm dismayed by that because Jesus models for us here the fact that we should be looking for a deeper, fuller understanding.

See, if we are confident that it does fit together, that God's word does all hang together as a cohesive whole, that it doesn't contradict himself and if we're confident that God made the world and that therefore rightly understood the world does fit with God's word and if we're confident that God has given us consciences for a reason, then it's not ultimately threatening to dig in and say, well it doesn't look like it fits so what is going on?

And to keep digging and digging and digging until finally you can figure out how these things do fit together. Jesus is not afraid to disrupt a correct belief without a proper foundation.

He doesn't want to overturn their understanding that the Messiah is the son of David but he isn't afraid to ask them why they think that. How does that fit with this over here?

Too many people, too many content with the faith of a five-year-old. Now there is nothing wrong with the faith of a five-year-old. There is a commendable dimension to it in many respects.

[ 29 : 20 ] God's word is very clear on that but it's not the only thing that's commendable, is it? The implicit trust of the five-year-old is to be valued. We shouldn't lose that inherent trust and obedience but God's word is also robust enough to stand up to the honest inquiry of university professors with multiple postgraduate qualifications.

The five-year-old and the people with three PhDs, all of them, God's word is sufficient. So to be scared of an intellectual analysis of God and his word, I think is to betray a lack of faith to suggest that there isn't enough to stand up to that scrutiny.

So we do our children, we do ourselves a disservice if we try and insulate ourselves from those who would question or even attack our faith because sooner or later those questions will come and it's better to examine them carefully with the help of others in a spirit of genuine investigation, better to examine them in safety than to be faced with them in a hostile world, better to be ready to give a reason for the hope that we have.

Paul seemed to think so, Jesus seems here to think so, so let's be done with thoughtless religion. But Jesus' harshest critique in this section, his harshest critique is reserved for those who have a showy religion.

This is verse 45 and following. Having critiqued their teaching, Jesus turns now to their way of life. Is it fair that he attacks how they live instead of their ideas?

[ 31 : 06 ] Well, yes, yes it is because how they live and how they think and how they teach are intrinsically linked and to suppose that there is a disconnect between them is the rankist hypocrisy and it seems to me a very peculiar disease of our modern era to imply that character and ideas ought to be somehow viewed separately.

Yes, in God's gracious providence reprehensible people do sometimes do have good ideas and do good things but I don't think that's what we're supposed to expect. Certainly it's not what we're supposed to expect of those who lead in a religious context like those who Jesus is critiquing right here.

The Bible's very clear character is what counts. the most erudite arguments the most sesquipedalian vocabulary it is of no avail if the heart is in the wrong place.

And the teachers of this law are certainly failing on that account. They can tell you all the different tithes you ought to be paying without any compassion for the widows who those contributions ought to have been serving to support.

The scribes thought their learning made them special it entitled them to the best of everything. They thought they were important and they wanted everyone to know it. And in response Jesus looks up. Verse 1 He looked and he saw the temple treasury.

[ 32 : 27 ] He saw people's approach he saw the rich with their presumably substantial gifts certainly those gifts more than the two copper coins placed in by this certain poor widow. Certainly more because these copper coins are the smallest unit of currency you have.

So unless we suppose these rich people were putting in literally one copper coin clearly they are putting in more than the widow. Luke's already been very clear earlier in his account that our attitude to Jesus affects our attitude to wealth.

That one's response to the gospel will certainly encompass one's wallet. It's not about the amount. Taken literally the widow has not put in more than the others for all that Jesus says she has. Now Jesus' comment that she's put in more than the others is interpreted here by verse 4. It's about what's in their hearts. Howard Marshall he says what matters isn't the amount one gives but the amount one keeps for oneself.

we worship a God who doesn't need our resources who isn't dependent upon our giving to achieve our purposes he does not need the extra one pound a week and therefore he doesn't need to curry favor with those whose contribution will be large hoping to achieve much with their resources no instead Christ reserves his approbation for the one who gave well the least precisely because at one and the same time she gave the most.

[ 34 : 05 ] See her two small copper coins they don't only represent total commitment and unreserved love they also represent complete dependence she gave says verse four all she had to live on she throws herself on God's mercy no other hope she keeps nothing for her own purposes she depends on God so in this sequence of encounters in this series of vignettes only one person comes off well so then the question is will we walk this path of man-centered religion asserting our authority the path of religious religion perverting the things of faith for our own purposes the path of unbiblical religion ignoring the truths that God has given us in favor of our preconceived notions thoughtless religion failing to engage on a meaningful level with what God said show you religion what can religion do for me how can I be impressive through my religious behavior are these the paths we will walk or will we walk the path of that poor widow totally completely dependent on God always in everything let's pray

Lord keep us from these missteps we ask guard our hearts and minds that we might love you more walk more in your ways give us the character of this widow this character of total dependence upon you completely sold out in worship perfect perfect love for you increasing in our hearts daily to your glory amen control■ maybe more poems than ton or can be far at PittCs along King her why