

# Marriage, Death, and the Power of God -- Mark 12:18-27

by Travis Dean  
February 2, 2013

Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

*Lord, we are about to open Your Word. And as we continue our journey through the book of Mark, help us to enter into this story. May we become, as it were, eyewitnesses, and may our hearts melt under the warmth and greatness of Your love. May we leave here today better examples of healthy Christians. In Jesus' name, amen.*

Our story today highlights a class in Jewish society called the Sadducees. We're going to take a few minutes as we begin to answer the question, "Who were they?" This is a difficult question since the Sadducees left no literature whatsoever. This may seem strange for such a prominent class in society. But Ellen White in her book entitled, The Desire of Ages, reveals a possible explanation. The Sadducees viewed God as One who refused to get personally involved in human affairs. They believed that God operated out of a hands-off policy, and that this was, in fact, the only way for man to be truly free. Through our own efforts, they believed we can elevate, enlighten, and purify ourselves. Ellen White makes a fascinating connection between this theology/philosophy and how they treated each other. Just as their "God" remained disconnected from humanity, they remained disconnected from each other. The Sadducees were a very disunited group with little regard for each other. Perhaps this is why they have left us with no written literature.

So, what little we do know of the Sadducees has come from other sources. First of all, the word translated, "Sadducee", comes from a Greek root word meaning, "to be just or righteous". This description may reflect their own self-proclaimed status and/or it may refer to the Jewish people's view of them. One thing is clear: the Sadducees were the aristocrats of their society. They constituted the elite social and economic class, being very wealthy and holding prestigious positions. The Sadducees were concerned with the political success of the Jewish nation and worked closely with the Roman rulers and governors. They also professed strict belief in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, written by Moses. The Sadducees usually held the priestly offices. Their status was based on heredity.

Thanks to our Constitution, as Americans we have not been ruled by a government that appoints its leaders based on a family line. We don't have a class of leaders in our society that equates with the Sadducees. The closest example would be families who have been influential and wealthy for generations. You may have some family names that come to mind. The first one that came to my mind was the Kennedy family. There seems to be a certain status and popularity that comes simply from being a part of this family.

Let's now consider a summary of our story today:

*A group of Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. After describing a woman who had been consecutively married to seven brothers, they questioned Him as to whose wife she would be after the resurrection. Jesus responded to the Sadducees by saying that they were ignorant of the Scriptures and of the power of God. He pictured life after death as gloriously unique from this life and viewed followers of God who have died as already being alive.*

We will now examine closely what Jesus experienced in this story. If you would like to use one of our pew Bibles, you will find this passage on page 896. Our goal will be to get a sense of what it would have been like to be an eyewitness of this conversation between Jesus and the Sadducees. First of all, Jesus experienced an attempt to humiliate. The Sadducees came to Jesus with a question, and they had an agenda. They were

trying to ruin Jesus' popularity. Mark gives us a brief description of the Sadducees in Mark 12:18. He describes them as not believing in the resurrection. We often classify the Sadducees with the Pharisees. Their names certainly resemble each other and they were both enemies of Christ. However, they were significantly different as well. In Acts 23:8 Luke tells us that the Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirits. The Pharisees believed in both as well as in the resurrection. As we have considered before, the Pharisees held a strict belief in oral traditions. However, the Sadducees did not regard them at all.

In the book Desire of Ages by Ellen White on pages 602-604 we learn that the Sadducees and Pharisees had engaged in heated debates concerning the teaching of the resurrection. And at the time of this story the Sadducees had mostly won this debate. But this had only resulted in widening the rift between these two groups. Angry disputes were common. And death became an inexplicable mystery. The Sadducees hoped to have the same success with Jesus as they had had with the Pharisees.

In Mark 12:19 the Sadducees referred to a law of Moses. And remember Moses was their one and only authority in spiritual matters. "If Moses didn't say it, it wasn't so," was their motto. The law they referred to is found in Deut. 25:5-10. It is quite an interesting law if you read it in its entirety, which we don't have time to do this morning. But in the summary of this law as stated by the Sadducees you will notice several conditions. First, a man lives in the vicinity of his brothers. Second, he is married. Third, he dies before his wife. Fourth, he dies without having a son. This is not a universal or primary law. It only applies to a very specific situation. The law then states that the man's brother should take the widowed wife as his own wife in order to provide a son for the man who will carry on his name.

Notice now in Mark 12:20-22 the speculation that is built on this conditional law. (Read) The subjectivity of this situation deepens. The man who died had seven brothers. They all died in succession. They all said "yes" to taking their brother's wife. Not a single one was able to leave his wife a child. And the wife outlived them all. And now in verse 23 the Sadducees dropped the big question: "Whose wife will she be when they all rise from the dead?" It seemed to them a question that refuted the teaching of the resurrection. And with it they formed their theology. As stated earlier, they have used this question to silence and frustrate the Pharisees. Their hope now was to humiliate Jesus, who also had taught on the resurrection, in the same way.

Second, Jesus experienced exposing ignorance. In Mark 12:24 Jesus responded with a pointed statement describing the dire circumstances of the Sadducees. The Greek word translated, "mistaken" in verse 24 is also found in Matt. 18:12. I invite you to turn there with me. (Read) The word translated here as "goes astray" is the same word that is translated, "mistaken" in Mark 12:24. Jesus then went on to explain what had allowed the Sadducees to be led astray. First, they did not "know the Scriptures". The word translated, "Scriptures" referred to the entire Old Testament. The Sadducees had rejected all of these writings except first five books of Moses, the Torah. Their use of speculative reasoning and rejection of a large portion of Scripture had left them profoundly ignorant and vulnerable. Jesus stated a second contributing factor to their being led astray: not knowing "the power of God". The Sadducees had left out the possibility of the supernatural. They had assumed that God was not able to plan an afterlife where all would be content and happy.

In Mark 12:25 Jesus continued. He addressed the Sadducees' belief that life after death was undesirable at best. Jesus states here that in the life after the resurrection that "they neither marry nor are given in marriage". Does this description sound familiar to anyone? Where else did Jesus use this clause? Well, turn with me to Matthew 24:38. (Read) This is a description of life as we know it here on earth. It's a familiar cycle. Jesus followed this description with a word that portrays the strongest contrast possible in the Greek: "but are like angels in heaven". There is a strong contrast between this present life and the life to come. Now, does

anyone feel sorry for the angels? Do they have it pretty good? Or do you think they would trade their life for ours? I don't think so. Jesus pulled back the curtain that veils this life from the next. He shed light on the dark mystery of life after death. And what He revealed was that life after death does not only exist. It is far superior and much more desirable!

Well, Jesus was not finished yet with the Sadducees. He continues in Mark 12:26, 27 and addresses the possibility of the resurrection of "the dead". And notice His choice of reference: Moses. He was the Sadducees' authority, right? His reference is from Exodus 3, where God appeared to Moses at the burning bush. God described Himself here as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". Jesus then revealed the absurdity of thinking that God would describe Himself as a God of dead people. The opposite is, in fact, true. He is a God of living people! Well, were not Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob dead? No one explains this better than Ellen White, again in her book, Desire of Ages. Notice this quote on page 606: "God counts the things that are not, as though they were. He sees the end from the beginning, and beholds the result of His work as though it were now accomplished. The precious dead, from Adam down to the last saint who dies, will hear the voice of the Son of God, and will come forth from the grave to immortal life.... This condition, which is anticipated in His purpose, He beholds as if it were already existing. The dead live unto Him (Luke 20:38)."

Jesus ended His response to the Pharisees with a statement in Mark 12:27 that is very similar to the one He opened with in verse 24: "You are therefore greatly mistaken." Or, as we learned previously, "You are being greatly led astray." Their profound ignorance of God's Word and power had left them very vulnerable to deception and doubt.

We'll now consider a couple ways in which this story might impact our experience. The way that Jesus lived on this earth shows us how to live as healthy Christians. First of all, Jesus is revealed as our Example in this story in that He revealed the Sadducees' desperate circumstances. His first words to the Sadducee's began in Mark 12:24 as follows: "Are you not therefore mistaken?" As we have learned, a better translation would be, "Are you not being led astray?" Then Jesus' final words to the Sadducees are recorded in Mark 12:27 as follows: "You are therefore greatly mistaken." And, once again, a better translation would be, "You are being severely misled!" The Sadducees were enemies of Christ! Their goal was to humiliate Jesus, to ruin His reputation. And He speaks to them with concern! He had every right to say, "I don't care. Let them fall off a cliff! That's one less thorn in my side!" But no, He cared for their souls as a good shepherd cares for his sheep. He was free from fear, free from hatred, free from bitterness. And in this He is our Example.

When Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, "Love our enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you," it's because that's what He did Himself. That's how He treated the Sadducees. How do you treat those who have hurt you the most? I invite you to turn with me to the book of Romans.... Romans chapter 12 verses 14-21. We will not read all of these verses. But this passage is about our relationships with people who have hurt us the most. Paul's words here are very similar to Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 5. Here are two points: First of all, let go of your automatic response. Let me ask you this: When someone hurts us, what is the natural, human response? To hurt them back, right? Romans 12:14 says, "Do not curse." Verse 16 of Romans 12 says, "Do not be wise in your own opinion." Verse 17 says, "Repay no one evil for evil." Verse 19 says, "Do not avenge yourselves." These are all automatic responses from our sinful hearts. God wants us to let go of these.

So what are we supposed to do? Our second point, then, is to let your heart be filled with God's forgiveness. What does this look like? Paul provides some very specific instructions. He says to bless them (Rom. 12:14), rejoice with them (Rom. 12:15), weep with them (Rom. 12:15), live peaceably with them (Rom. 12:18), feed them (Rom. 12:20), and give them a drink (Rom. 12:20). After you've chosen to forgive them and spent time

blessing them in your prayers, how do you know if you've forgiven them? All these things listed above will flow naturally out of our hearts. When you hear that they are in desperate circumstances, your automatic response will be to weep with them and to help them. This might take days, weeks, months or even years for this to happen. But here's some good news: God will set us free. He will fill our hearts with His forgiveness.

Verse 21 of Romans 12 provides some more good news. (Read) Isn't that what we want? Don't we want to do everything in our power to keep from being overcome? Don't we want to win? Here's the great news: good is more powerful than evil! Good will always win! Last Thanksgiving I shared a sermon in my mom and dad's church in Stuart, VA. I spoke on Romans 12. The message was about having healthy relationships. I left time at the end to give people the opportunity to share about their own relationships: perhaps one that they had invested in and reaped some blessings or one that they had neglected and were convicted that they needed to invest in. For the next fifteen minutes or so all around the room people began to share their relationships with people who had hurt and wounded them. My response was, "Wow!" God's people have been wounded. And so many times this is a weight on the church today. And if we respond with evil, evil will cripple us. But if we respond with good, we will overcome!

Secondly, Jesus is revealed as our Example in that He offered hope in death. When the religious leaders of Jesus' day looked into the face of death, all they could see was an inexplicable mystery. They saw no hope of life beyond the grave. And, quite frankly, even if there was a resurrection, they didn't see anything attractive about this life after death. But notice how Jesus instilled hope. In Mark 12:25 Jesus referred to the destiny of those who rise from the dead as being "like the angels". And then in verse 27 of Mark chapter 12 He revealed a hope so strong in death that it was as if the dead were already "living".

I invite you to turn with me to John chapter 11. We will read verses 23-27. Lazarus has died. His sisters Mary and Martha are grieving their loss. And notice how Jesus offered hope to them in the face of death. (Read) Jesus assured Martha that her brother would rise again. She responded with a remarkable faith considering the example she had received from her religious leaders of the day. She spoke very confidently: "I know that he will rise again...." But to her that seemed a long way off. Jesus made a powerful point to her in verse 25-26. He declared that the Resurrection was standing right in front of her in bodily form. Jesus then looked for a confession from Martha that she believed that HE was the life that Lazarus would receive at the resurrection. Martha didn't quite make that confession. But she did express the faith and understanding she had. What a lesson that is for us. Even if you can't find the faith that you think you need, express the faith that you do have.

As a hospital chaplain I have often visited with families who have lost their loved ones in death. And truthfully most of the time there is a lot I don't know about the patient and his/her eternal destiny. So what can I do? I can express the faith and the truth that I do know. I know God is there when we need Him the most. I can commit the deceased patient and the family to God's loving care. I can surrender them into the strong and gentle arms of Jesus. I can assure the family that their deceased loved one is now at peace. Sometimes the family will express hope that their lost loved one was a believer in Jesus Christ. And when they do, I claim the promises in God's Word, promises such as John 3:16. I might say, "As surely as Jill has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, she will not perish, but have everlasting life." This is the example that Jesus gives us in our story today. And because of Him, we can speak hope to people in the face of death.

In closing, we would do well to ask ourselves, "Could it be that we too have become 'greatly mistaken'?" Notice these four points that will surely lead us down the same path as the Sadducees: (1) Deny parts of the Bible as inspired. Pick and choose for yourself what is truth and what is foolishness and error. (2) Question

and reject what you do not understand. (3) Doubt the goodness and power of God. (4) Attempt to be/appear wise through speculation.

So, how can we keep from being freely misled? First, take all of God's Word as inspired. Second, see in God's mysteries His power and presence. When you encounter something in God's Word that appears mysterious, settle it in your mind that that very place is where God's power and presence dwells. Third, believe in God's infinite goodness and power. Jesus came to show us just how good God is. He also revealed that God is more powerful than any other force on this earth. Last of all, base your faith on what God has clearly revealed. What are the things in God's Word that your faith has firmly grasped and rejoiced in? Focus on those things. May God keep us all from being led astray. May our faith grow as we confess the faith we already have been given.