

What's the Real Question?

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Luke 20:27-38

As most of you know, I spent part of my sabbatical visiting my friend, Bishop Jean Mweningoma, in the central African nation of Burundi. St. James has, through its outreach ministry, generously supported several of the infrastructure projects Bishop Jean has spearheaded since he assumed leadership of the Muyinga Diocese a little over two years ago. At every turn, the people who are benefitting from those projects, which include supporting the music ministry at the Cathedral and putting the roof onto an education building, said, "HERE is what you helped us to do – please tell your people thank you."

Everyone I met was eager to share, and show, everything about their lives and work in the Church. It's much the same as it is here: worship; teaching and learning; visiting people in hospital and making sure their children are fed and get to school; and building new churches out of bricks they had made themselves. While the smaller children just stared – they'd never seen a white person before – their older siblings and parents asked so many questions in return. What's your parish like? How many children are there? What kind of music do you have in your church? What kinds of things are you doing to help your community? Will you please pray for us? And (from my translator, a brother priest who went to seminary at Sewanee), what's the difference between snow and ice? Their innocent curiosity was endless, as was their enthusiasm for being God's people in that place. Despite the abject poverty in which so many of them live, they are deadly serious about making things just that much better for their children in any way they can. They do it with a kind of sheer joy, gratitude, and love that

we don't often get to experience in our established, sometimes cynical, and well-off part of the world.

That kind of innocent curiosity was definitely not a characteristic that the Sadducees in today's gospel lesson shared with my new friends in Burundi. Anytime someone who's part of the temple leadership walks up to Jesus and asks him a question, there really ought to be a flashing red warning sign telling the questioner not to do it. That's doubly so if their intention is to try to trap Jesus into giving an answer that defies any sort of logic (as far as "logic" goes in that circumstance).

One would think that this latest group of questioners would have figured that out by now, especially since Jesus has been teaching in the temple for at least a couple of days. In that time, he's taken every question asked of him and turned it into something else, instead of falling into the trap his questioner has set for him. He first refuses to tell the Pharisees by what authority he is able to do what he's doing. He follows that up with the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, which Luke tells us is really about the scribes and chief priests, and the longer term consequences of what Luke considers their collective failure to do what they're supposed to. What finally silences these leaders is Jesus' answer to the question of whether it is lawful to pay taxes to their Roman overlords with the famous line, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

That was enough to silence most of the crowd. Maybe this group of Sadducees just wasn't paying attention to what was going on. Maybe they thought there was no way Jesus would manage to avoid falling into THEIR trap... and so they propose what is kind of an absurd scenario to try to get Jesus off his game. Of course, it doesn't work.

It just makes the people who are listening off in the background appreciate what Jesus is saying all that much more. We can make that assumption from the two verses at the very end of this episode which the lectionary has chosen to leave out: "Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.' For they no longer dared to ask him another question" (Luke 20:39-40, NRSV).

This is one of those cases where the presenting issue isn't the real issue. That is, the Sadducees' question is a thinly disguised attempt to get Jesus to agree with their position that the very idea of resurrection is crazy. They try to make that case in terms that wouldn't have been all that unusual within their patriarchal society. As they spin it, it's at least partially about who gets to maintain control over the poor woman who has outlived her husband's entire family. The surface level of this ridiculous case study also points to an almost paranoid concern about protecting the ideal of a family as its own self-contained social welfare system – a system which could be put at risk if it were to be tainted by outsiders. Within that system, "Marrying outsiders or having children by outsiders produced unstable offspring... Women must be guarded. They bore the children, which was a blessing if they belonged and a curse if they came from outside."¹ It's a very old idea, going back at least a few hundred years before Jesus' time. It also appears in some of Paul's writings, and is still a part of the fabric of some communities today. So it is definitely not out of the ordinary for Jesus to be asked a question which seems to be about preserving some so-called "traditional values."

¹ William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 22." <https://billloader.com/LkPentecost22Ord32.html> [accessed November 3, 2025].

More importantly, that the Sadducees chose to ask this in the first place tells us something about their thinking on the topic of resurrection. If we understand "the resurrection" to be a continuation of life exactly as we know it, then we can reasonably expect that our families are going to be there, intact and with the same kind of relational structures.

Hold onto that thought for a moment.

To dwell only on the social aspect of the Sadducees" question is, I think, to head down a proverbial rabbit hole. That is not what's really at stake. Jesus knows that, and so instead of addressing these family issues, he jumps straight to the three actual questions they are asking: If there is in fact a resurrected life, as you keep saying there is, what will it be like? Is it the same as what we understand this life to be like? How does it fit with what we think we understand about the concept of immortality?²

An Australian professor frames the issue this way:

"Perhaps Jesus' original answer was quick and sharp: 'God is not God of the dead but of the living' (20:38a; Mark 12:27). It is so like Jesus' responses elsewhere in form and style. It is enigmatic. At one level it is no answer at all, if you think the dead remain dead. At another level it is saying that to claim God is god of the living must include that God's care extends to those who have died in a way that they cannot really be dismissed as dead. Jesus is operating with a theology of God which says: even in death God is with us and therefore we must be with God and so: we must be going to exist! His thought is in the context of resurrection: we will be raised to life."³

² David Lose, "Questions about the Resurrection." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/questions-about-the-resurrection> [accessed November 3, 2025].

³ Loader, "First Thoughts."

And what that life looks like, Jesus says, will be nothing like it does right here and right now: "those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of the resurrection" (Luke 20:35-36). This is where hope begins – hope that there is something else out there waiting for us, that the struggles we face are all worth it in the end and will be vindicated, and that our loved ones will be there with us in some form when it's all said and done.

Jesus never says that the present time doesn't matter – that it does, he makes crystal clear whenever he is asked about it. The present time requires us to act with urgency. It might not literally mean that we must, as Jesus tells the young man who wants to know how to get access to this resurrection life, sell everything we own and give it to the poor. But it does ask us to look outside of ourselves and do good for others. Getting to a resurrection life is a team sport, not an individual one. It's a game my friends in Burundi play at a professional level. What they know, and live every day, is helping one another makes us all better. In their context, something like building a clean water access point, or teaching an adult to read, makes all the difference. Just like with everything our community does to help our neighbors, it too provides a glimpse at what a resurrection life might look like when we get there.