

## Authentic Spirituality

### Luke 20:27-21:4

This passage is from a larger section, 20:1-21:38, in which Luke records Jesus teaching in the temple. The entire section holds together not only by venue, but also by content: each of the vignettes addresses topics related to temple activities. First, from two weeks ago, the Jewish leadership challenges Jesus' authority to act and teach prophetically (20:1-8), and he reciprocates by challenging their spiritual faithfulness (20:9-19). Then, from last week, the religious leaders play the political card, daring Jesus to call for insurrection against the hated Roman occupiers (20:20-26). After the political challenge fails, in the first vignette of this week, his opponents pose a theological riddle about marriage and eternity (20:27-40). After solving their riddle, Jesus again reciprocates in kind, posing one of his own (20:41-44). Luke then appends another pair of accounts: in the former, Jesus criticizes inauthentic spiritual living (20:45-47); in the latter, he lauds its authentic counterpart (21:1-4).

What does true spirituality look like? Arguably, Luke 20:27-21:4 distinguishes authentic from inauthentic spirituality by means of two criteria: one theological, the other, practical. The first criterion involves theological acumen: Who is the more skillful Bible interpreter, the Sadducees or Jesus? The second criterion is practical: Who is the more consistent Bible applier, the religious leadership or an impoverished widow?

#### Day 1: Luke 20:27-40 A theological riddle

Resurrection was the focus of an intense first-century controversy between competing Jewish groups, Pharisees and Sadducees. The roots of the debate lay in the role of the Bible as the Word of God. Sadducees accepted only the Bible; the Pharisees also upheld the authority of oral tradition. As a result, the Sadducees rejected any doctrine not explicitly endorsed in the Old Testament, including both resurrection and angels/demons, while the Pharisees affirmed both (Acts 23:8). So this argument that the Sadducees try out against Jesus was likely ready at hand from their previous debates with Pharisees.

The point of the argument is that resurrection cannot possibly exist because otherwise it could conceivably run up against other Old Testament teachings, e.g., regulations regarding levirate marriage. Since Mosaic law required a man to marry his brother's childless widow, what would happen if a widow went through an entire string of seven husband-brothers: which of the seven would be her husband in heaven?

Jesus does not need to solve the riddle, because it is predicated on a false assumption: marriage and children last only so long as life; in heaven, neither

the husband-wife nor the parent-child relationship persists. Instead, our resurrection bodies are angelic (in the two senses of eternal and genderless), and instead of siring children, we are children of God. Jesus then refutes their denial of the resurrection, cleverly employing their same sort of argument against them: since Moses refers to Jehovah as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the latter three must still be alive in his own time, centuries after their deaths.

For Luke’s audience, as for us, the lessons of this debate are two. For one, Jesus holds his own with the best trained theologians of his day. For the other, there will, indeed, one day be a resurrection of the dead: the godly, to life, and the ungodly, to judgment.

### **Day 2: Luke 20:27-40 A theological riddle: its practical implications**

It is possible to draw more lessons from yesterday’s reading, though Luke assumes them, rather than explicitly intending them. For one, marriage and parent-child relationships cease at the resurrection (or at death), and not before. God intends for marriage to be life-long, and for children to care for their aged parents (1 Tim 5:3-4). We violate these commands at our peril.

For another, given that heaven is *summum bonum* (the highest good), then the cessation of marriage and the parent-child relationship gives a clue to what heaven will be like. Lifelong singleness or childlessness often leaves people longing for what they have missed. Yet no one in heaven will be lacking any good thing. So clearly there is a level of connection in heaven, at least with God, and likely also with others, which exceeds the best that family can provide in this age. That connectedness will make up for any deficiency suffered in this life, whether through the lack of a family life or in the low quality of it.

The third observation is a lesson not to take away from this passage. Some in Corinth appear to have taken Jesus’ point too far, or, rather, applied it too early. That is, they concluded that if we are one day to be like angels, then the truly spiritual should live like that even now (including not engaging in sex) (1 Cor 7:1-5). No, says, Paul, that’s for a future era, after our resurrection (1 Cor 15:35-55).

### **Day 3: Luke 20:41-44 A theological riddle in return**

After disarming the Sadducee’s riddle, Jesus challenges them with one of his own: the Messiah is meant to be a descendant (‘son’) of David; yet, in Psalm 110, David refers to the Messiah as ‘his Lord’. Given that a son shows deference to a father, and not a father to a son, how can the Messiah be both son of David and Lord over him?

This is more than a riddle designed to stump his challengers. Here Jesus implicitly affirms his identity. Twice, in fact. For one, in referencing Psalm 110:1, both he and his opponents would be aware of the rest of the Psalm, “The Lord

says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet... You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek... The Lord is at your right hand ... he will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.'" For the other, if the Messiah is both descendant of, and Lord over, David, then he cannot be a mere mortal.

Of course, Jesus' opponents would miss much of this, and could not have accepted it had they grasped it. But we – like the disciples in Acts 2 – live after the resurrection, and its confirmation of Jesus' claims. On the day of Pentecost, Peter (and Luke) quotes Psalm 110:1 again, explicating the meaning of this text: "God has raised this Jesus to life ... Exalted to the right hand of God... Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32-36). We not only solve the riddle; we also join the disciples and the heavenly host in worship of the exalted Lord.

#### **Day 4: Luke 20:45-47 Inauthentic spirituality: a case study**

Having rebuffed their theological conundrum, and stumped them with one of his own, Jesus shifts gears from theological debate to character. The transition is not as abrupt as it may first appear. These Jewish leaders refuse to honor him as exalted Lord, all the while seeking maximum honor for themselves in the public eye. Perhaps their issue with him is less theological, and more egotistical.

Though these theologians have the law, they use it for self-aggrandizement rather than as a guide for their own lives. They love the celebrity that their position affords: special attire, respect, public prominence not only in their own venue (the synagogue), but even in social situations (at banquets). Yet, while all this acclaim derives from their claim to be expert interpreters of the Bible, they actually violate the most basic tenets of Scripture: instead of sincere devotion, they engage in showy, pretentious prayer; instead of rescuing the widow, they defraud out of house and home.

Public pretension is a temptation not only for professional clergy, but also for all church leaders and longtime Christians. As we learn what a Christian *should* act like, then it becomes all too easy to *act* like that, or at least, to ensure that we *appear* like that. Even if others do not see through us, though, Jesus does.

#### **Day 5: Luke 22:1-4 Authentic spirituality: a case study**

At first glance, the narrative may appear to make an abrupt shift, as the focus moves from Jewish leadership to a humble widow. But, on second glance, Luke clearly connects this new vignette with its predecessor. He has just accused the temple leadership of abusing widows (20:47), and now he introduces a widow (21:2). The particular form of abuse he had in mind was financial (20:47), and this widow's chief attribute is her financial situation (21:2). Jesus has just faulted the

religious elite (21:46); now he introduces someone doubly on the fringe of society, as both a widow and poor (21:2). So just as the religious leadership serve as a negative spiritual role model, the widow serves as a positive role model.

If we take Luke 21:1-4 out of context, it still provides a legitimate spiritual lesson: “The test of financial generosity is not how much we give to the work of God, but how much we keep for ourselves.” Yet there is also considerable risk in taking this passage – or any other – out of context: it could be read to advocate total divestiture of all assets to the church (as the widow gave all to the temple). So Luke 20:45-47 provides an essential safeguard, with its condemnation of spiritual leaders who ‘devour widows’ houses’. So the widow is more a case study than a replicable model: the passage is about pure and total devotion, in contrast to public pretense. That devotion can – and likely must – be expressed in a variety of ways, in sacrificial, serving, and caring for others, etc.

### **Day 6: Luke 20:45-21:4 Authentic Authenticity**

Given the mood of our times, and the vocabulary we use to capture that mood, a final reflection on ‘authenticity’ may be appropriate. The contemporary value placed on authenticity is both a virtue and a failing.

‘Authenticity’ often places greater emphasis on admission of failure than on pursuit of genuine holiness, on acceptance of one another with all our faults than on calling one another to follow Jesus. While confessing sin and foibles is certainly more honest than hiding them, it is no remedy. Our choice is not between admitting that we are sinners, or hypocritically covering up our failings. Dissolute honesty is not a significant improvement over deceptive pretense.

The third option is to become as holy as we portray ourselves publicly.

Jesus does not call us to honesty, as though admitting our sins while doing nothing about them is somehow commendable. Jesus calls us instead to holiness. He does not call us to be the same on the outside as we are on the inside, but to be the same on the inside as we pretend to be on the outside. In other words, the problem is not with the outside pretense, but with the inside corruption. Public disclosure of inner filth merely feeds the lust for scandal and gossip. Jesus is looking for change, not for scintillation.

Jesus died for our sin, to be sure. But to free us from our sin, not to condone remaining in it. He frees us not only from its guilt and consequences, but also from its power. We not only die with him, we also rise with him: just as he was raised by the Spirit, so he gives us his Spirit to resurrect us to new life. Jesus does not call us to drop pretense; he calls us to take up holiness (and he empowers us to do so). This is authenticity: not the public confession of our inner corruption, but the disciplined, determined pursuit to live genuinely as children of God, inside and out.