

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

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Printed in the United States of America

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MAR 5 | HARD SAYING ABOUT PRIORITIES

LUKE 20:19-26

Brands are interesting things. On the surface, they are tags that show us who manufactured the article of clothing. But, in reality, we use brands to determine status within groups. I learned this the hard way when I was in elementary school. Canvas Converse Chuck Taylor High Top shoes were all the rage. Anybody who was anybody had a pair. I wanted some so bad. Unfortunately, the popularity of the shoes caused their price tag to skyrocket. They were outside the price range my parents had set to buy shoes for a growing boy. They compromised, however, and found me a pair of shoes that looked virtually identical—same red canvas high tops, same white rubber toe, white circular patch on the side. I remember wearing them to school for the first time and being so proud and excited to be seen. I was going to be a part of the "cool kids."

Sadly, from here, the story takes a turn for the worse. As I was waiting for school to start, a person came up to me, noticed my shoes, and with derision, mocked my "knockoffs." Bewildered, I asked the person how they knew my shoes weren't the real thing because, to me, they looked indistinguishable from the ones he was wearing. That's when he showed his shoes had the official Converse patch with the Star-shaped Converse logo with the words Converse and Chuck Taylor written around it. It was also located on the inside ankle of his high-tops. The logo on my shoes, which did have a star on it, had the name of the other company that had made them. The logo was also on the outside ankle instead of the inside. He could tell that mine weren't real from a mile away. The shoes looked identical in every way except for the brand. Because they were different, I didn't belong.

It seems silly when we see such behavior in children or among groups that value something we don't. But the truth is that we long to belong and want to be included. To "fit in," we adopt the approved signs of the group we are trying to incorporate ourselves into to make them realize we are one of them. In the process, we stamp ourselves with the "brands" that signal the group's value system. These brands might include automobile types, clothing brands, hairstyles, or slang terminology. All done in an attempt to show we belong in that particular world.

Though clothing labels might be a recent phenomenon, trying to belong is not. People have always sought ways to conform to the group to find safety, security, and success.

When those groups come into conflict, or we find ourselves trying to fit into multiple groups, problems emerge. One of the hard sayings of Jesus occurs during such a competition between groups. The Jewish leaders try to trap Jesus between seeking the people's favor and obeying Rome's law. The answer Jesus gives ends up exposing the priorities of his interrogators. It also challenges us to evaluate our priorities and what kingdom we seek meaning and fulfillment in.

THE TROUBLE V19-20

A lot has happened in the previous chapters. In Luke 19:28-44, Jesus enters Jerusalem with a crowd of people shouting and praising God. Jesus goes directly to the temple (v45-48) and chases the money changers out. In chapter 20, Jesus is corned while teaching in the temple. They want him to justify his authority. Jesus turns their question back on them and then tells a parable about how Israel will kill the Messiah. The parable ends in Luke 20:18 with Jesus calling himself "The stone which the builders rejected."

Our study today starts with the Jewish leaders' response to this parable. Verse 19 says, "The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on Him that very hour, and they feared the people, for they understood that He spoke this parable against them." They were the builders who were rejecting Him, the chief cornerstone. They wanted to kill him but couldn't. They were worried that the people would turn on them if they tried. So they adopted a new tactic. Verse 20 says, "So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some statement, so that they could deliver Him to the rule and the authority of the governor." They were hoping that he would either say something that would discredit Him in the eyes of the people or would be so inflammatory that would justify them handing Him over to the Roman authorities.

THE TRAP V21-22

They start by flattering Him. Verse 21 says, "They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, we know that You speak and teach correctly, and You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth.

The following verses reveal the trap they believe they have laid for Jesus. In verse 22, they ask Jesus, "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" It's a perfect Catch-22. Caught between a rock and a hard place. Whatever analogy you want to use.

What are they asking him specifically? "Is it lawful?" What do they mean? Obviously, it was lawful to the Romans; they passed and imposed the law. They are asking him if it goes

against Jewish law. They are asking what He believes is more important: the laws of Rome or the laws of God.

The scribes and priests think they have Jesus trapped. If He says it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, He will lose credibility with the Jewish people who are groaning under Rome's oppressive taxation. If He says it goes against Jewish law to pay taxes to Caesar, then He is speaking against the Roman authorities, and the chief priest and scribes can get him arrested for being a revolutionary.

THE TURN V23-25

Jesus masterfully gets out of the jam they are trying to trap Him in and turns the tables on them. Before he answers a question, He first asks for a prop. This was a common teaching technique. The crowds that gathered to listen to teachers in the temple could get easily distracted. Using a visual aid helped keep people's attention. By asking for it from the crowd, it also invited audience participation. Verses 23-24a say, "23 But He detected their trickery and said to them, 24 "Show Me a denarius." We learn from Matthew's account why Jesus asks for a denarius. Matthew 22:19 says, "Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius." A denarius was the main Roman coin. It was worth one day's wage.

After asking to see a coin, he asks at the end of Verse 24, "Whose likeness and inscription does it have?" They said, "Caesar's." Asking whose likeness and inscription is the equivalent of asking whose picture and signature are on it. Money in Ancient Rome was more like the modern money in England than in America. American coins have the faces of former presidents and other famous Americans. English coins carry the face of the current English monarch. Once a new monarch comes to the throne, new coins are produced that bear the new monarch's likeness. Another difference between modern and ancient coins was where the worth came from. Modern coins don't have intrinsic worth. A quarter is worth 25 cents because we all agree to it. Ancient coins had value because they were made of specific amounts of precious metals. Caesar's image was on the coin because it guaranteed that the coin had not been tampered with and was made of a certain amount of gold or silver.

Jesus concludes by saying in verse 25, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The meaning of this phrase is a little tricky to unravel. I am sure the person whose coin it was thought to himself, "but it's my coin. His picture may be on it, but it belongs to me. I earned it." What does Jesus mean? I don't think He means that everything with Caesar's picture on it belongs to Caesar. I think He is saying that things with Caesar's image on it belong in Caesar's world or realm. Jesus is

saying that there are things that Caesar cares about, and there are things that God cares about. Caesar concerns himself with money, so he puts his image on it. In the same way, God puts his image on what He cares about— us. Genesis 1:27 says, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

Jesus is telling his questioners that complaining about unjust taxation reveals more about where the complainer's focus, attention, and treasure are. Jesus asks his followers to believe that there are greater things at stake and to dedicate themselves to seeking those things instead. Jesus has already staked out His's position in the Sermon on the Mount: His followers are not to be concerned with the things of Caesar's world. God knows their needs and promises to provide. Because of this, they are to refocus their life and "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (Matt 6:33)."

THE TAKEAWAY V26

As we conclude this study, it is essential to realize that Jesus is doing more than trying to wow and silence his accusers. He does do that. Verse 26 says, "And they were unable to catch Him in a saying in the presence of the people; and being amazed at His answer, they became silent." But this was more than a clever answer. This was a window into the real priorities of Jesus and His followers. If we aren't careful, we will miss it. We will end up stumped like His challengers or awed like His audience, but essentially unchanged.

We need to ask ourselves if we are you like the Scribes who tried to trap Jesus, thinking they were religious but still seeking success according to the world's categories? During His Trial, Jesus tells Pilate in John 18:36, "Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." In Romans 12:2, Paul tells us "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The analogy is with coin making. To make a coin, you take a lump of moldable metal and squeeze it into dye or mold that has the pattern you want to imprint on it. Paul is begging us not to allow ourselves to be pressed into the mold of this world. That is what Jesus is trying to get us to see as well. Has the world left its mark on us? Have we been pressed so completely into its mold that we accept its categories about where meaning, fulfillment, and purpose come from?

We also need to ask ourselves whether we see the image of God in ourselves and others. We are created in the image of God; He longs for us to seek meaning, purpose, and righteousness in Him. That is what He made us for. St. Augustine once wrote in a prayer to God, "You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Do we realize that God has made us in His image? Do we see the image of God on us? Do we show the image of God on us? He invites us to seek Him first. He calls us to love Him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our hearts will be restless until we do.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. What does "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" mean? How does this apply to our lives today?
- 2. What does "render...to God the things that are God's?" What is Jesus referring to?
- 3. What does it mean to be conformed to the pattern of this world? What pattern does the world try to press us into?
- 4. What does it mean that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world? How should we change our perspective because of it?
- 5. What does it mean that we are created in the image of God? How can understanding this change our perspective?

MAR 12 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT FAMILY

LUKE 20:27-40

Have you ever tried to explain something to someone who didn't have the frame of reference to understand? They missed the point entirely because they hadn't experienced the thing yet. All they could see were negatives.

I felt this way, contemplating the birth of my first child. I knew I wanted kids. I also knew that having kids would change my life. But all I could see was the negative. In my mind, I saw the sleepless nights, dirty diapers, crying, spilled milk, messes, and all that extra equipment. I was convinced that I would never be able to do anything fun ever again for as long as I lived. Every person I asked about it assured me that I wasn't wrong about any of it. Everything that I thought was true. But they also assured me that it was worth it. I didn't see how that was possible. I had scales out. I could see clearly everything that went on the negative side of the balance. I was having a hard time making sense of anything to put on the positive side.

That all changed the moment my daughter was born. I was right about all the noise, mess, sleepless nights, and equipment. They were right about it being worth it. The reason I couldn't see it beforehand was because the joy that made it all worth it was beyond my experience. Once there, I realized that my understanding wasn't wrong, just incomplete. All those negatives were real, but they paled in comparison to the joy that was even more real.

I remind myself of that experience of transition to fatherhood when I come across challenging ideas, especially those pictures given to us about what heaven will be like. You perhaps know of someone who jokingly says that heaven sounds boring and that hell is where the party is at. They don't realize that the reality towards which these images point is more than we can comprehend, not less.

Today we are going to look at a hard saying of Jesus that deals with heaven specifically as it regards the family. Jesus is confronted with a controversial question by people trying to disprove His idea of resurrection and make Him look foolish along the way. In response, Jesus makes some statements that are both hard to understand and hard to accept about who we are in heaven and how we relate to each other. Will my family cease to exist in

heaven? As we study this passage, may we find humility and hope as we try to understand what Jesus promises awaits us in heaven.

THE SADDUCEES CONFRONT V27

A new group of people approaches Jesus to try and make Him lose face in front of the people. This time it is the Sadducees. The name comes from Zadok, the high priest during the reigns of David and Solomon. The Sadducees were members of the priestly class. The central place of their activity was in the temple. They were the aristocracy of Jewish society and cooperated with the Romans to stay in power. Christians often mention Pharisees and Sadducees together as the opponents of Jesus. But the truth is they were equally opposed to each other. The Pharisees thought the Sadducees and the temple were corrupt. They were centered in the synagogues and focused on studying Torah.

The Sadducees are sometimes said to only believe in the first five books of the Bible. There isn't any clear evidence for this. What is clear is that they were much more conservative, literalist, and narrow compared to the Pharisees, who, in addition to the Old Testament, also placed great value on the oral tradition passed down on interpretations of the law. What we know for sure is what Luke records here for us. He describes this new set of accusers in verse 27 as "Sadducees, who say that there is no resurrection."

We aren't sure why the Sadducees rejected the resurrection. Perhaps they thought it was one of those "new-fangled" ideas the Jews picked up in Persia during the Babylonian Exile. For whatever reason, they concoct a far-fetched scenario designed to show that the laws of Moses were incompatible with belief in the resurrection.

THE SADDUCEES QUESTION V28-33

The source of the question revolved around the idea of "levirate marriage." In Deuteronomy 25:5 and Genesis 38:8, laws are established to prevent a man's family name from dying out. If a man died without an heir, his brother was expected to father a child with the widow to provide an heir. This is also a central theme in the book of Ruth (see Ruth 4:5).

The scenario the Sadducees propose is that seven brothers each marry a woman and die without fathering a child. They finally propose what they believe to be the ultimate proof of the absurdity of the resurrection. In verse 33, they drop the bomb, "In the resurrection, therefore, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had married her." They believed that an answer was impossible and that this situation proved that belief in the resurrection was incompatible with belief in the Law of Moses.

THE SAVIOR CORRECTS V34-38

Starting in verse 34, Jesus answers the Sadducees' question. But it must be added Jesus is more than answering an honest question. He is responding to people who are trying to trap him. One thing missing in Luke's account is the stiff words Jesus gives at the beginning of his response to the Sadducees. In both Matthew (Matthew 22:29) and Mark's version (Mark 12:24) of the story, Jesus also adds a severe rebuke of the Sadducees. Matthew 22:29 says, "But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God." Mark ends his account with Jesus telling the Sadducees in Mark 12:27, "you are greatly mistaken."

The correction Jesus offers centers on a mistake that the Sadducees are making about the age to come. Jesus tells them they mistakenly think that life in the age to come is the same as it is now. In Verses 34-35, Jesus says, "34 "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage."

He tells them that marriage won't be a part of the age to come because the reasons for marriage will be done away with. In verse 36, He says, "for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection." The question the Sadducees asked was about children. Jesus says that in the age to come, people no longer die and that family order is rearranged so that we are all "sons of God" directly.

God created marriage to fulfill two purposes in creation. One purpose is mentioned in Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." Another purpose comes from Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for the man to be alone." In heaven, these two functions won't be necessary. Because we can longer die, the need for procreation will be removed. Because we will all be children of God, the need for companionship will be removed.

Jesus concludes his response by quoting God's words spoken to Moses in the burning bush. The passage Jesus quotes comes from Exodus 3:6, which says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." God says, "I am the God of Abraham, etc." not "I was the God of Abraham...." The conclusion Jesus draws is contained in verse 38, "Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him." Abraham is alive with God. Jesus says something similar in John 8:56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad."

THE HARD SAYING V35-36

Up to this point, the study reveals some important information about the basis of our hope in life after death, but you may be wondering what the hard saying is in this passage. This may not be a hard saying for everyone, but it is for me. It is found in verses 35-36: 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; 36 for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.

This is hard for me. Why? It is hard for me to think that something so valuable and precious to me now won't exist in heaven. I love my family. I invest in my family. I believe that my home and family is a primary place where God wants me to live out the Gospel. Why would God create this amazing thing called the family only to dissolve it? It feels like something that matters so much to me doesn't matter to God.

So, what's the answer? Looking back at the passage, I see that Jesus grounds His answer in how we all will relate to God in Heaven. Jesus says in verse 36 that we will all be "sons of God." Though we are used to saying it, we sometimes don't think about what this means in relation to our own parents and children. God doesn't have any grandchildren. Each one of us is invited into a direct relationship with Him. He is the father, and we are all children. That means, in heaven, we will all be on the same rung of the family tree. It's not that my family will be dissolved. It will be absorbed into a larger family. Hopefully, my parents feel about my sisters and me the same way I do about my children. And their parents felt that way about them. And at the top of it all, God feels that way about all the children He has. The feeling I have toward my family is the feeling God has toward his whole family. What I feel for my family is a window into what God feels for his family and a foretaste of what we will experience in heaven when my family won't be done away with but will be expanded.

This answer gives me reason both to continue to invest in my family now and to look for ways to experience the expanded family God has waiting for me in heaven by investing in his family here on earth, the church.

Above all, this answer gives me hope and reminds me that when I don't understand how it all fits together, I can rest in the fact that God's reality is more, not less than I can conceive. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND which HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Who were the Sadducees? What was their center of power? What was their place in Jewish society?
- 2. How did the Sadducees differ from the Pharisees? What does the fact that these two groups team up to condemn Jesus tell you about how they felt about Jesus?
- 3. What was the Sadducees' objection to the resurrection? What was the answer Jesus gave? Do you find it a satisfying answer?
- 4. Do you find this hard saying challenging to accept? How does understanding our relationship with God help us make sense of it?
- 5. Have you ever been frustrated at some aspect of heaven that doesn't make sense? How can we rest in the hope that God's reality is more than we can conceive, not less?

MAR 19 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT GIVING

LUKE 21:1-4

Leftovers. Some people love them. I know that some foods taste better as leftovers. One of them is pasta. We don't cook our pasta sauces long enough. So the flavors in the sauce don't usually come together until the second time we heat it. Another leftover good is Thanksgiving dinner. I know people who look forward to eating the leftovers more than to the actual dinner. Pizza as well has a great life as leftovers. For some reason, cold pizza goes well with coffee as a breakfast food.

I tend to be in the group that views leftovers negatively. Maybe because I always cleaned my plate growing up. I don't remember if I was forced to eat everything or if I just had an appetite. But either way, I think the reason I don't like leftovers is because if there was anything leftover, it means that I already didn't like it. Maybe I was bad at reheating leftovers. I know I hate the gloppy sound of scooping cold meals out of a Tupperware and onto a plate and stirring it before you put it in the microwave.

Whatever your opinion of leftovers, we all agree that leftovers aren't the pinnacle of our eating experience. It's a practical necessity. Some enjoy it; others endure it. But no one would serve leftovers at a wedding or celebrate a significant event by pulling stuff out of the fridge.

The truth is that though we would be hurt or insulted if someone served us leftovers and pretended it was a special meal, we frequently do that with God. Instead of our first and best, we give God the leftovers: our leftover time, our leftover energy, our leftover money. We schedule our time. We make commitments. We pay our bills. We buy our stuff. Then, if we have anything to spare, we give to God whatever happens to be left in our calendar, our energy tanks, and our bank accounts.

Today we will look at a hard saying of Jesus that challenges our notions of how we give. It encourages us to consider what portion we give to God. Is it the first or the last? And it invites us to live courageously and dependently on Him.

THE CONTEXT V1

This story happens during the final week of Jesus's earthly ministry. If you go back a few chapters, you see that the Triumphal Entry happened in Luke 19, along with Jesus Cleansing the Temple. Chapter 20 has been called "The Day of Controversy." Though Jesus spent all that final week preaching and teaching in the Temple, one day, probably Tuesday, was spent in a series of arguments with his enemies.

Most teaching done in the Temple would have happened on the large porch or steps on the southern end of the Temple. This is, no doubt, where many of the interactions in Luke 20 occurred. Afterward, Jesus withdraws a little bit to catch his breath. In Mark's version of the story, Mark 12:41 says, "And He sat down opposite the treasury." After it was over, Jesus probably needed a break. He sits down ear near the Treasury and watches people give their money. Luke 21:1 says, "And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury."

The Treasury was the name given to thirteen trumpet-shaped collection boxes. Each box had an inscription indicating the use to which its contents would be put. They were in the Court of the Women, a large area in front of the Temple. It was called that not because it was reserved for women but because this was as far as women could go. Lest you think this was unfair or sexist, the area men who weren't priests could go wasn't much bigger. The Court of Women was the largest area of the Temple reserved for the exclusive use of Jewish people.

THE CHARACTERS V1b-2

As Jesus watches the interactions in the treasure, he sees the rich people giving their gifts. Luke is kinder than Mark in his choice of words. Luke 21:1b describes "rich people putting their gifts into the treasury." Mark and Luke use the Greek word "to throw" instead of "put." But Mark uses the word "copper" as well, whereas Luke simply says "gift." The rich people were walking up with their huge sums of metal money and throwing them into these trumpet-shaped treasuries. The sound must have been cacophonous.

Then, in the midst of this noisy show of wealth, someone sneaks in who looks like she doesn't belong. Verse 2 says, "And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins." Each word used to describe this woman reveals just how impoverished she was. "Poor widow" was another way of saying "poorest of the poor." Women in the ancient world had few ways to make money. An older woman had even fewer. But she is more than a woman; she is a widow. She has no one to take care of her. The word Luke uses for "poor" is more accurately translated as "someone who has to work for a living." At a time in

her life when she should be honored, surrounded by family, and taken care of, this woman is having to scrape together a hard living for herself.

Even what this woman earned wasn't very much. Luke says, "two copper coins," literally, "2 lepta." A lepton was the smallest coin in circulation in that day. It took 128 lepta to make one denarius. A denarius was the standard monetary unity for "a day's wage." To translate that into a modern equivalent. Imagine working a minimum-wage job all day. That would earn you a denarius. If the minimum wage is \$7.25, an 8-hour workday earns \$58. Divide that by 128. 1 lepton is worth about 45 cents in today's money. So this woman walked up to the Temple amidst the loud clanging of other people's gifts and threw in less than a dollar. This wasn't the pocket change a parent gave a child to put in the offering plate as it passed. The gift was as hard-earned as it was insignificant compared to the other gifts.

What is more, it may be that this woman had had to save up even to give this gift. According to some Jewish text, two lepta was the smaller gift you were allowed to give. Worshippers were not allowed to make gifts of less than two lepta, so this was the minimum offering. Who knows how long it took her to save up enough money to be able to give the smallest possible gift allowed?

THE CONCLUSION V3-4

After seeing this demonstration, Jesus tells his disciples the point they should learn from this story. In Luke 21:3-4, He says, "3 Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; 4 for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on."

Again, the Greek is emphatic. She didn't just put in more than any of them. What Jesus means is that she put in more than the rest of them combined. What on earth does this mean?

On the surface, it seems demonstrably false. But the truth is God doesn't need our money as much as we need to give it. In Psalm 50:10-12 God says,

"10 "For every beast of the forest is Mine,
 The cattle on a thousand hills.
11 "I know every bird of the mountains,
 And everything that moves in the field is [d]Mine.
12 "If I were hungry I would not tell you,
 For the world is Mine, and]all it contains.

The measure of a gift is not how much we give but how much it costs for us to give. One example of this comes at the end of the Book of 2 Samuel. David goes to a man named Araunah to buy his threshing floor so that he can build an altar to the Lord. This area would one day be where Solomon would build the Temple. When Araunah learned why David wanted to buy the land, he offered to give it to the king for free. In 2 Samuel 24:24, David responds, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." David knows that his offering is meaningless unless it costs himself something to give it.

This is what Jesus is telling his disciples. The rich people gave what they didn't need. They gave the leftovers. So, in reality, they gave nothing. The poor widow gave out of her need. Because of that, her gift was worth more in the sight of God.

APPLICATION

As we look at this event, hopefully, it has made you uncomfortable. The reason Jesus teaches on this subject is because money is close to our hearts. We love it. It is one of the chief rivals for true devotion and dependence on God. Jesus tells his disciplines in Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Teaching like this reveals the master we are genuinely clinging to. But if we are willing to humble ourselves and learn from this nameless widow, she will teach us some important lessons about giving.

Give Secretly - The rich people came up and made a show of how they gave. They wanted the attention and positive opinion of others that comes from being a public benefactor. They didn't just want to give; they wanted to be seen giving. But the woman sneaks up. Her small gift probably barely made a sound. She almost escapes notice if it weren't for Jesus, who pointed out her sacrifice. Giving secretly is how Jesus tells his followers to give in Matthew 6:2-4:

"2" So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

To "sound a trumpet" might be a reference to the trumpet-shaped collection boxes in the Treasury. Jesus is telling people to stop trying to make a big noise with your giving.

Give Sacrificially - This story also shows us that God wants us to give sacrificially. The rich gave God their leftovers. The widow gave God her first, her best, her all. What does it mean to give sacrificially? As David said to Araunah, it should cost us something. It should be hard for us to do. That is what a sacrifice is. A good Bible guideline for giving is the "tithe," which means "ten percent." This makes people uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. But it should be pointed out that this is the one area where God tells us to test Him. Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows."

Give Surrendered - There is one aspect of this story that has always troubled me. If Jesus knows the woman has given everything she has to live on, how come he doesn't stop her? He could have told her she could keep her money because she needed it. But he didn't. Why? The reason is because the reason she gave was valid. She gave as an act of worship. She gave as an act of surrender. When we hold on to our money, we are telling God that we are trusting the money first. When we give even the money we need to God as an act of surrender, we are telling God that we know everything comes from Him and that it is HE and not the money that is the source of provision.

Paul says in Philippians 4:19, "And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." We become tight-fisted in our blessing and desperate in our need when we think we are the source of everything. There is great freedom in realizing that God is the true source of everything good in our lives. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" Everything we have is a gift from God. Giving is a chance to show God and ourselves that we are depending on Him and not His blessings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What are some ways we give God the leftovers? How do we excuse it in our own minds?
- 2. What is the chief difference between the gifts of the wealthy and the widow?
- 3. What does it mean to give secretly? How do we give in a way that draws attention to ourselves? How can we learn to give secretly?
- 4. What does it mean to give sacrificially? How much should we give? How does the story of David and Araunah inform this discussion?
- 5. How does the widow give in an attitude of surrender and dependence on God? How can we learn to do the same?

MAR 26 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT THE END TIMES

LUKE 21:5-38

Prophecy is a controversial topic for a variety of reasons. Some people love talking about it. Some avoid the subject altogether. I think I tend towards avoidance. The reason is that there always seems to be someone new popping up who thinks they have figured out how, when, and where something will happen. When it doesn't, everyone shrugs their shoulders and moves on until the next prediction.

Prophecy can become a distraction. Instead of wondering how to love their neighbor, people become consumed in geo-political world events wondering if this or that is a sign of the end times. Prophecy can become divisive. When one person disagrees with another about some detail, tempers can flare, names can be called, and friendships can be damaged.

If the previous paragraphs sound inflammatory, please forgive me. For years, I have avoided teaching or writing on prophecy because the only thing that ever happened was that people would argue with me, with each other, and with random strangers who disagreed with them. I assumed that perhaps I wasn't gifted or called or trained to teach on the subject, and so I should leave it alone.

But talking about prophecy is unavoidable, especially when talking about the hard sayings of Jesus. But also, There comes a time that we have to face the passages of the Bible that we find uncomfortable and deal with issues we sometimes try to skirt or avoid altogether. We must humbly submit ourselves to read those passages and be open to the possibility that our positions need to be modified. We should never equate our theories of how things may work with the things themselves. We follow Jesus first and theories second.

So as we read this passage in Luke, try to do so with an open mind, an eager mind. Try to see if you can't try to hear it again for the first time. Try to imagine yourself listening to Jesus speak it for the first time. What did it mean to the first hearers? What was Jesus trying to teach them? What can we learn to help us follow Him better?

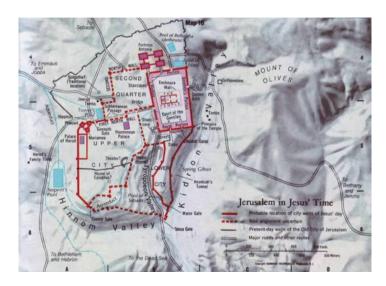
THE QUESTION JESUS IS ANSWERING V5-7

In the last week before Jesus was crucified, He and His disciples came and went from the city daily. One day, as He was going out of the Temple, His disciples were marveling at the amazing architecture of the Temple, which had been beautifully and painstakingly restored by Herod the Great in a renovation that, according to John 2:20, took 46 years to complete. Jesus startles them by prophesying the Temple's destruction. Verses 5-6 say,

"5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, 6 "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down."

The teaching Jesus gives in answer to this question is referred to as "The Olivet Discourse." The reason why is because according to Mark 13 and Matthew 24, that is where this teaching occurred. Luke doesn't specify where the teaching occurred, only that Jesus was in the habit of leaving the Temple and going towards the Mount of Olives. Luke 21:37 says, "Now during the day He was teaching in the Temple, but at evening He would go out and spend the night on]the mount that is called Olivet. Matthew 24:3 says, "He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying...."

A brief geography note: The Temple is built on a mountain called Mt. Moriah. Just east of it is a steep valley called the Kidron Valley. On the other side of the Kidron Valley is the Mount of Olives. If you keep traveling east over the Mount of Olives is Bethany, where Jesus was staying.



The disciples continue out of the city down into the Kidron Valley, then stop on the Mount of Olives and perhaps, while taking a rest, look back over the valley and the Temple. Four

disciples pull Jesus aside and ask Him privately to explain His statement in the Temple. Luke 21:7 contains an important but often overlooked verse: "They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the [f]sign when these things are about to take place?"

The disciples ask Jesus to tell them when the Temple will be destroyed. What follows is the answer Jesus gave to that question. It cannot be underlined enough times. Most (but not all) of what follows is about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 AD.

THE PROMISE OF PROBLEMS V8-23

The first thing Jesus says is that all kinds of terrible things will characterize the run-up to the destruction of the Temple. He focuses specifically on three trials: deception, persecution, and tribulation. In verse 23, the last verse of this section, Jesus tells His disciples the point, "But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance." He doesn't want his followers caught off guard by the difficulties they will experience.

Deception V8-11 - The disciples are told to be on their guard against deception. People will try to convince them of things that aren't true in an attempt to mislead them. He actually commands his disciples in v8, "See to it that no one misleads you." He gives His disciples a similar warning in Matthew 7:15 "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." We must be on our guard. We sometimes think bad guys will be easy to spot, like in movies. Jesus promises us that they will be deceptive. We must realize that this is an issue and be ready.

Persecution V12-19 - He then tells them that in addition to being attacked from within by deceivers, they will be attacked from without by persecution. Jesus didn't promise us an easy life. In fact, He promised us the opposite. In John 16:33, during the Last Supper, He tells His disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world, you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." Peace comes from Jesus, not from circumstances. That seems to be what is going on here. Jesus tells his disciples to realize that they will have trouble. He doesn't want them anxious or worrying. He wants them to be aware so that they aren't caught off guard. It is all part of the plan. Persecution will speed the gospel throughout the world (v13). Jesus promises to be with them by the power of the Spirit and help them as they defend themselves (13-15).

Tribulation V20-24 - Jesus then describes a terrible tribulation. The main points of this section are that it will be terrible, it is okay to seek safety, and even in the midst of it,

God hasn't forgotten you. Sometimes we think that God calls us to march headlong into trouble. That is not the case. He calls us to be faithful and to trust Him in the midst of trials. But He also calls us to be wise. One of the ways persecution spreads the gospel is by people leaving who are able to leave. If you have a way out of a difficult situation, you are not being a coward for taking it. Perhaps God has a different plan for you. One famous example of this is an early Christian named Origen. During a persecution of Christians in Egypt around 200 BC, he was planning on turning himself in to demonstrate that He wasn't ashamed of the gospel. His mother prevented him from carrying out his plan by hiding all his clothes. He ended up staying home and becoming a great early Christian writer and teacher.

THE PROMISE OF VICTORY V25-28

Jesus doesn't end his answer to the disciples with tribulation. After telling them the evil that will follow, He prophesies that He will return and gather His people from all over the earth. The prophecy concludes with confirmation that the story of God ends in victory, not defeat.

This is where the interpretation becomes complex. If v8-24 were about the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, then don't v25-28 refer to the same thing? Is Jesus saying His return will come on the heels of that event? If that is the case, He was wrong.

Many Christians try to resolve the issue by making everything starting in verse 8 about the return of Jesus (which hasn't happened yet) and not the Destruction of the Temple (which has in 70 AD). The problem with this approach is verse 7. Jesus is answering the disciples' question about when the Temple will be destroyed.

One possible solution is that this is an example of "telescoping," which refers to how a more distant event in prophecy is merged with a nearer event to become closely connected with it. Jesus does this with the prophecies of Jerusalem's fall and his second coming to give the disciples confidence and hope. The destruction of the Temple would seem like a cataclysmic event to the Jews of Jesus' day. It would have seemed like the end of the world. Jesus is saying the destruction of the Temple won't be the end of the world: His return will be. The world won't end in defeat but in victory.

THE PROBLEMATIC PASSAGE V29-37

It all seems fine until you get to verse 32, which says, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place."

What does this refer to? What does Jesus mean? Is he saying everything He is prophesying will take place within his listeners' lifetimes? Is He saying that it will only take a generation to accomplish everything once the signs start? What is the resolution?

There are a couple of good possibilities. One possible interpretation sees that generation not as a time but as a people. Luke 21:24 refers to the "time of the Gentiles." Maybe Jesus is saying that His return will come after that time is over. Another view sees generation as referring to the people of Israel. Jesus is saying that the Jews will endure until His return. Both are possible, but they stretch the language a little too far.

In my mind, the best possible resolution comes from this verse in Mark's account. Mark 13:30-32 says,

30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.

Mark includes the teaching in verse 32, which isn't in Luke's account. Notice the phrase "all these things" in verse 30 and the phrase "of that day" in verse 32. It seems like Mark is differentiating between the two events of the Destruction of Jerusalem and The Return of Jesus. In this view, "all these things" refers to the Destruction of the Temple, which did happen within a generation after Jesus spoke. The phrase "all these things" calls to mind the question the disciples asked Jesus in Mark 13:4. "What will be the sign when 'all these things' will be fulfilled?" Verse 32 changes the subject, "but of that day (i.e., the return of Jesus) or hour no one knows."

APPLICATION 34-36

Whatever the correct interpretation of this hard saying turns out to be, the primary function of this passage isn't to disclose secret clues to a hidden mystery but to promote faith and obedience in a time of distress and upheaval. Jesus ends His discourse by telling His disciples that our focus should not be on unraveling the mystery. Not even He knows the answer. Our focus should be on obedience. This is an important note to end on. Though the reconstructions offered above are one possible way to make sense of a very difficult passage, we misstep when we allow disagreements over these issues to divide us or distract us from obedience. The main point remains: Jesus is Lord, and He is calling us to continue His work whether He comes now or in ten thousand years. With that in mind, let's end by considering the opportunities of obedience Jesus has called us to in the midst of this prophecy. Opportunities we might miss if we get wrapped up in arguing about details:

- 1. Be Careful Who You Follow
- 2. Be Steadfast in Persecution
- 3. Be Wise in Tribulation
- 4. Be Confident in Victory
- 5. Be Focused on Following

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why is prophecy such a controversial topic? Have you ever been tempted to avoid the subject? Why? What are some ways we can study prophecy without making it divisive or distracting?
- 2. What is the main question that Jesus is answering? What event is He referring to? When did it happen?
- 3. How does Jesus tell us to handle deception? How can we be ready for persecution without being worried? What does it mean to be wise in the midst of tribulation?
- 4. What does prophetic "telescoping" mean? How does it apply in this situation? How does the promise of the return of Jesus give us confidence?
- 5. How can we learn to heed Jesus's commands and focus on obedience? How can we learn to be on the alert?

APR 2 | HARD SAYINGS ABOUT HEAVEN

LUKE 23:39-43

Have you ever met somebody determined to do the absolute bare minimum required? I remember meeting someone like this when I was a teaching assistant in graduate school. We had just handed back some exams. As the students filed out at the end of class, I overheard one student tell another that she was disappointed in the B that she got on the exam. My ears perked up. I thought, "here is a student looking for pathways of improvement." Perhaps I should tell her about our review sessions and study groups. But before I could interject, she finished her thought, "All I needed was a C...I wasted all that extra time studying stuff I didn't need to know." Like many others, this student was on the "C's get degrees" plan at college. She was determined to the bare minimum to get the grade she needed to keep living the life she wanted in college.

We sometimes approach Christianity like that. We forget that Jesus calls us to love God and our neighbor with every fabric of our being. We have turned the invitation of Jesus into the "basic minimum requirements for missing hell." Sometimes that is behind questions people ask like "what about those who have never heard about Jesus?" or "What about people who are born before Jesus?" Though these are good questions that are worth asking, some who ask them are not genuinely wondering. They are simply trying to figure out what is the least that God will accept to be excused from Hell and do I qualify for that.

Today's hard saying is one that Jesus utters from the cross in response to a question from one of the criminals crucified with him. It offers hope to those who are honestly seeking. It shows us that there is nothing we can do to earn salvation and nothing we will need to do after we die to pay for our sins. Jesus has done all that. But it is not designed for those who want to live in sin, hoping for a deathbed confession. It is not for people who are still comfortable in a life of sin. It is hope offered for those who are stuck in sin, long to be delivered, and know there is nothing they can do. As we look at this interaction on the cross, may we see ourselves in the thieves on the cross, and may we hear the hope that Jesus offers to those who long for it.

THE CRIMINALS V33

Jesus was crucified along with two others. Luke simply calls them criminals or wrong-doers. In Matthew 27:44, they are referred to as "robbers." This might sound like an excessive

punishment for petty theft, but that is where the word can be misleading. There are two Greek words to describe people who steal. One, normally translated as "thief," refers to someone who tries to take what isn't his by stealth, breaking and entering, etc. The other terms, normally translated as "robber," means something more closely to "bandit" or "pirate." It refers to a person who uses violence and intimidation to take what isn't theirs. Though motivated by greed, such acts often result in injury and even death. That is evidently what happened to these men. That is also why one criminal will say that he suffers justly. He had done something even he believes is worthy of the penalty he received.

THE CONFLICT V39-40

During the crucifixion, an argument breaks out between the criminals. Luke tells us that one criminal joined the crowds mocking Jesus, while the other responded favorably to Jesus. This event has its own problem because Matthew 27:44 says, "The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words." So which is it? Did one criminal or both mock Jesus? Who is right, Mathew or Luke? Well, the obvious answer is that they both are. Jesus was on the cross for 6 hours. During that time, evidently, one criminal had a change of heart. He began mocking but realized his mistake, leading to the exchange that Luke records in Luke 23:39-40:

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" 40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

THE CONFESSION V41

The second thief's words contain a rebuke of his actions, which could equally be classified as a confession. In verse 41, he says, "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." This thief is acknowledging that what he and the other man have done merits this punishment. He also reveals that he believes Jesus to be innocent. We aren't told how he came to this conclusion. Perhaps he had been able to overhear some of the trial. Perhaps he had witnessed some of how Jesus endured the suffering inflicted on him. Perhaps he has remembered some of the bible lessons he was taught as a kid and realized that the man suffering next to him was fulfilling many of the prophesies he had heard quoted.

THE QUESTION V42

The criminal then turns and addresses Jesus. Verse 42 says, "And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" He knows his name probably because he had heard it shouted in anger by his enemies and because it is written on the placard above his head. This criminal realized that Jesus was more than a martyr. He recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah. Maybe he realized that he was suffering in fulfillment of Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. He knows that death won't be the end for Jesus but will be a stepping stone for entering into the kingdom He was destined for. The thief doesn't ask for deliverance. He simply asks to be remembered when Jesus is enthroned in his kingdom.

There is some debate about whether the phrase should be "when you come in your kingdom" or "When you come into your kingdom?" The difference between the two meanings is slight but important. "Coming into a kingdom" means inheriting it. We sometimes say, "come into some money." "Come in your kingdom" refers to Jesus coming to rule as king. He came the first time to teach, to suffer, and to die. He will come again as a king and in his kingdom.

I lean towards the second meaning being more accurate. The criminal sees how bad things are now but knows they will not always be this way for Jesus. He asks Jesus to remember him when he returns, not as a suffering servant but as a ruling king. He knows he doesn't deserve it. Still, he asks.

THE CONSOLATION V43

In response, Jesus utters powerful words of consolation and hope. They begin with "truly" or, in Greek, "amen." This is a phrase that reveals an important announcement, a royal decree is following. What follows is both a comforting word for the thief on the cross and a hard saying for us because it challenges some of our preconceived notions about Jesus, death, salvation, and Heaven. The statement breaks down into three parts: Today, you will be with me, in paradise. All three are challenging, so we will look at each in turn.

Today - Jesus tells the criminal He will be with him today. You wouldn't think one word would be so challenging, but it is. The reason is because of what some people think happened to Jesus between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Some Christians believe that Jesus "descended into Hell." This is based on passages like Ephesians 4:9, which mentions Jesus "descended into the lower parts of the earth." But this is a reference not to Jesus descending into Hell, but Jesus descending from Heaven to Earth in his incarnation. Another passage is 1 Peter 3:19 which mentions Jesus "went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison." But this doesn't tell us when Jesus did this or how long it took. Some are so convinced that Jesus wasn't in Heaven on Good Friday that they try to

make the word "today" modify the verb "say." They want it to reason, "Truly I say to you today...." Though this might be plausible in English, the Greek is clear. "Today" is part of the pronouncement, not a part of the introduction.

This word reveals that the man won't have to wait to experience the blessing of Christ's kingdom. There is no intermediary stage where he will have to go to be purged of his sin before he is fit for the kingdom. There is no delay he will have to endure to make himself worthy of admission. His trust in Jesus, no matter how rudimentary and raw, ensures that on the same day that he was killed for his sins, he will enter the kingdom of Christ's salvation.

This is an important word for many people who ask what happened when I die. Some traditions teach that we will go to an intermediary place to be purified of our sins. Some say we will enter a period of soul sleep until we rise again at the resurrection. We will talk later in this lesson about the resurrection and how it relates to this question. The most important thing we can see from this word, though, is that there is no delay. As 2 Corinthians 5:8 says, "to be absent from the body" means "to be at home with the Lord."

You Will Be with Me - Jesus's second promise to the criminal is that he will not be abandoned or alone. He will be with Jesus. Sometimes we define Heaven as where we get to do all our favorite things or where all our dreams come true. But the most accurate definition of Heaven is simply "where God is." That, perhaps, is something some people might not want. But that is what Jesus offers. He told his disciples in John 14:2b-3, "2I go to prepare a place for you. 3 If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." Jesus is preparing a place for us, and it is right next to his place. The goal is so that we can be together. Jesus doesn't abandon us until we are good enough to enter his presence. He promises that His work on the cross makes us good enough and promises that there is a place waiting for us that will enable us to be with Him.

In Paradise - The third section of this promise is as problematic as the first. What is Jesus referring to? Most people assume it means Heaven, but is that right? Some people point out that "paradise" is not just an uncommon word in the Old Testament; it is actually Persian in origin. The word originally referred to an enclosure, garden, or royal park. Some argue that Jesus is referring to an "intermediary place" where we go to await the future resurrection. But this is not the case. The term paradise does come from Persian, but it was adopted by the Jews to refer to the Garden of Eden. From there, the term is used by Christians in the New Testament to refer to Heaven. In 2 Corinthians 12:2-5, Paul uses the terms "heaven" and "paradise" to refer to the same place. In Revelation 2:7, Jesus promises the Church at Ephesus, "To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the

tree of life which is in the Paradise of God." So the classical understanding of paradise as referring to Heaven is correct. So, in a few verses later, in Luke 23:46, when Jesus says, "Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT," that is where He went. He went to be with the father...and He took with Him the thief on the cross next to him. There will come a day when Christ will return, and the final resurrection of the dead will occur. Until then, those who have died in Christ are with him in Heaven.

CONCLUSION

These words of Jesus on the cross are hard to understand, but they offer tremendous hope to those who are weighed down by the burden of sin. They promise that it's never too late to turn back to God. They remind us that we don't have to pay for our own sins. Jesus has done that. They encourage us to believe that Jesus has prepared a place for us with Him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. How do Matthew and Luke differ in their stories of the criminals crucified with Jesus? How do we reconcile those accounts?
- 2. What do the words of the second criminal reveal about what he understands about his own sin and the identity of Jesus?
- 3. What does the promise of "today" mean?
- 4. What does the promise of "you will be with me" mean?
- 5. What does the promise of "in paradise" mean?

NOTES:

