

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER SIXTY

MATTHEW 22:15-46

THE King is still seen in the Temple. In this section we have a radiant display of His wisdom. All that we read concerning the Pharisees and Sadducees is background, and serves to throw up into clear relief the matchless wisdom of the King.

The Pharisees now gathered themselves together for a new attack by the most despicable of methods; they descended to the meanness of attempting to lay traps for Him, to bring such problems to Him, or questions, or difficulties, as would involve Him in complications with regard to His own teaching, His own claim; or, far more to their satisfaction, which might involve Him in conflict with the civil authorities.

The Sadducees somewhat flippantly suggested a problem to Him, and when He had muzzled them using that word quite accurately, it is the word in the New Testament a lawyer, perhaps sincerely, so far as his question was concerned, and yet with unbelief in his heart, asked Him a question. Finally, the King propounded a question, which flashed its light upon all their questions, and upon them.

Examining this series of pictures, we have four groups, and four happenings. The coming of the Pharisees; then that of the Sadducees; then that of the lawyer; and finally Christ's question.

Examining them one after the other, taking picture by picture, these are the things which impress the mind:

- First, that these men did not know Him;
- Secondly, that they did not understand the very problems which they themselves suggested to Him.

By contrast to that, one cannot read these four stories, or look at these four pictures, without seeing how perfectly He knew them, and how absolutely He was Master of all the problems which they suggested to Him.

There came to Him first the Pharisees and Herodians. This was a coalition. The Pharisees and Herodians represented opposing political views, and their question was distinctly a political one. They came together in order to entrap Him in His talk; and the very fact that this was a coalition created the subtlety of their approach, and the difficulty of Christ.

How little they knew Him! They attempted to fling about Him the mist of their flattery. Reading the story carefully we find that these men had come to challenge His authority as evidently as the official deputation from the Sanhedrim, the leading Pharisees, had come on a previous occasion. These men were not leading Pharisees, but disciples of the Pharisees; that is to say, the leaders, having been answered, were in the background; but they sent up some young men, some of their disciples, with a new method of attack; not with the official dignity that challenged authority, but with the civil manner that suggested a belief in Christ's integrity.

How little they knew Him, and how very surprised they must have been when, before attempting to answer their question, He looked back into their faces and said, "**Why tempt ye Me, ye hypocrites?**"

They thought that He might be moved or at least mystified by flattery. Praise is a graver peril than blame to a strong soul. Blame a man, challenge him, and if he stands upon a bed-rock of certainty and conviction, he will win; but it is a trying moment when a man is told that he is quite perfect and upright, and knows the way of God. Jesus ruthlessly tore the veil away, as He said, "**ye hypocrites.**"

What was their problem? Its blindness is self-evident, but it was a very subtle one. The question was of the simplest, "**Is it lawful?**"

There is no meaning in this, save as we remember that they understood that He had made Messianic claims. They were not referring to Roman law, but Hebrew law, Messianic law. "**Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?**"

The subtlety of the question lay in the dilemma into which they intended to put Him. If He had said, Yes, it is lawful, then, according to their idea, He would have abandoned His claim to be Messiah and Deliverer; for the Messiah could never consent that the Hebrew people should put their neck under a yoke. If, on the other hand, He had said, It is not lawful, then they would have been able to report Him to Rome, and have Him arrested. Mark the answer.

He said to these men, "**Shew Me the tribute money.**" In that very request, and in the fact that He proffered that request to them, we see His method. If the King had Himself produced a penny, or asked one of His own followers for the denarius, the silver Roman coin with the Hebrew inscription, intended for the specific purpose of paying tribute it was the amount and coin for that purpose He still might have said all He said, but His declaration would have lost something of weight. The penny was immediately produced, perhaps handed to Him; and then He looked into their faces, and said:

"**Whose is this image and superscription?**" Without a moment's hesitation, they replied: "**Caesar's.**"

That settled it; the penny was theirs, and the image Caesar's. They were using Caesar's coinage. Let them be honest enough to pay Caesar his due; but let them not forget that there is a higher law than the law of Caesar; let them "**Render . . . unto God the things that are God's.**"

The second part of the answer led them into the inner secret of how they were to fulfil the first part.

“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s;” but while you do it, in the doing of it, **“render unto God the things that are God’s.”** When you pay tribute and you must pay tribute do not forget that the final Throne to which you owe allegiance, is the Divine Throne.

What is the principle?

The King recognized man’s place in the State, and his obligation to the State; and declared that if men be in the State, it is their business to pay tribute to the State. He does not take men out of the State, and put them as separate from it; but He does say, that the deepest and the final thing in the life of men who are supposed to represent the Kingdom of God in the world, is the Kingdom of God. Such men are to be in the State, recognizing its responsibilities, fulfilling their obligations, but all the while they are to act under the one master-passion and principle of loyalty to the Throne of God.

This was a political problem, and in it we see the King’s relation to politics for all time.

He reveals the principles which bind the State to the Throne of God. He declares that the Throne of God is final and supreme; and a man in the State is to pay his tribute, and do his duty to the State; but always under the guidance and inspiration of his loyalty to the Throne of God. No man can interfere with what any other man does in that respect. We have no business to tell each other what we ought to do. It is by individual loyalty, and not by an association or resolution of crowds that we affect the State. The Church affects the State toward God in no other way than by the individual conscience; and its absolute freedom to God.

Next there came to Him the Sadducees, the rationalists in religion.

The Sadducee denied angel and spirit and resurrection; that is to say, he attempted to be religious without any reference to what people speak of as supernatural things. They came to Christ and first of all quoted to Him the Mosaic command, that if a man die, his brother should take his wife, and raise up seed. Then they gave Him an illustration, a grotesque illustration. We can almost see the self-satisfied air with which they said:

“In the resurrection therefore, whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her.”

And yet notice when our Lord answered these men there was an utter absence of the severity which characterized His answer to the Pharisees. He did not speak to them as hypocrites, and it may be that if their illustration was grotesque, and their method was flippant, they were yet stating an actual difficulty in their thinking.

First of all He answered their illustration by declaring to them that they were ignorant of the Scriptures. But further, He answered their philosophy by declaring that they were ignorant of the power of God.

He answered their illustration. They were ignorant of their Scriptures, and in one quiet dignified sentence He declared to them, **“In the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels in heaven;”** you are imagining a condition of affairs that cannot, and will not exist. In a moment their illustration was swept on one side as being not applicable to their argument or their philosophy.

But He did not so leave them.

“But” said He, **“as touching the resurrection of the dead.”** By that phrase He touched the underlying philosophy that had made the difficulty and suggested the illustration. Not ruthlessly, not with the severity which characterized His answer to the Pharisees, but quite as surely, He stripped them of all disguises.

He said to them in effect, “Your difficulty is this difficulty concerning resurrection. Your difficulty is the difficulty concerning the supernatural in religion. You are rationalists concerning resurrection; **‘Have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying’** do not miss the apparently trivial things in reading your New Testament, they said, **“Moses said;”** He said, **“spoken unto you by God” “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”**

This answer of Jesus was a most remarkable one. He went beneath the surface to the underlying fact of God. **“God is not the God of the dead.”**

The difficulty as to the bodily resurrection of a man is no difficulty at all when the question concerning God is settled. When a man understands the truth that the Bible reveals concerning God, the difficulties that the Bible presents concerning man, and what we call the supernatural, melt into thin air.

He said to these rationalists in effect, You are building your view of the impossibility of resurrection upon a misconception of God. Ye neither know the Scriptures, nor the power of God; which does not merely mean God’s power to do this one thing, but God’s essential power, the truth concerning God. God is the God of the living.

In that great word of Jesus we have a declaration of the immortality of the soul. He is not the God of the dead. These men are not dead. Christ did not say a word about a bodily resurrection, but He affirmed that these men were alive. He declared that the God, Who is the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, is the God of the living; and what He said, indicates the fact that through all ages He is their God, and that they are living still. If we once recognize the truth of the immortality of the soul, the question of the bodily resurrection is very simple.

Just as in the mysteries of the original economy of God a man who is a spirit and not a body, is clothed in a body by certain processes, some little of which we understand; so that selfsame man, that spirit, can presently be clothed in a body again, and it will not be the body that was, but a new body, yet in some mystery beyond our comprehension fashioned out of the old body.

An actual resurrection is in this way conceivable when we believe in God, as to His power, and His relation to all souls who put their trust in Him.

So, not answering their difficulty concerning bodily resurrection, but by declaring the true philosophy of God, new to them, He corrected their rationalistic speculations. This was a rationalistic problem, and the King's answer was clear, as it revealed the fact that the degradation of human thinking about man, is due to a degraded conception of God.

The third questioner was a lawyer, a Pharisee lawyer.

He came, as we have seen, with a sincere question.

“Which is the great commandment in the law?” This does not mean, Name one of the commandments which is greater than the rest. The particular word translated **“which”** is qualitative; and therefore the meaning of the lawyer was, What is the principle which makes any commandment great? In that day men were teaching the relative importance of the commandments. There was a school of interpretation which taught that the third commandment in the Decalogue was the supreme commandment, and that all the rest were minor ones; and so this particular question grew out of the differences of opinion concerning which commandments were greatest, and they asked Christ to decide what was the real principle by which they might test the greatness of a commandment.

When He gave the answer He did not name one of the commandments in the Decalogue, but went outside them.

Both of the passages that He gave are to be found in the Pentateuch. The one is in the book of Deuteronomy, and the other is in Leviticus.

First, **“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.”**

The man had asked the Master to tell him the principle of greatness in a commandment. **“This is the first and great;”** and it is great because first, great because fundamental, great because underlying all the others. **“This is the first and great commandment.”**

The article is emphatic. **“And the second”** - something coming out of the first, related to the first, not standing even in distinction from it, **“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”** Then He declared: **“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”** The principle of greatness is the recognition of the fundamental law which includes the whole. This is great and first, and these two are the strength of all the rest.

This was a problem of conduct. It was the King's revelation of His understanding of the meaning of law. What is law? Relation to God, expressed toward the neighbor. **“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.”** The second is like it, kin to it, belonging to it, the outward expression of it, **“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”**

John afterwards wrote about love, and unfolded this great philosophy of Jesus Christ, teaching us that if a man say he love his brother, and leave him hungry, he is a liar. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. The principle in law is love.

Notice the words introducing the last picture, **“While the Pharisees were gathered together.”** That is, when the Pharisees had done, when He had muzzled the Sadducees, when the lawyer had gone. Probably that had been a concerted movement and these men had come one after another by arrangement. The Pharisees were still there, and for a moment Jesus arrested them, and asked them two questions.

The first was startling, **“What think ye of Christ?”**

Let us understand that. He was not saying to them directly, What do you think of Me? If we change the word Christ to Messiah, we find the meaning. What is your opinion, your conception of Messiah? He asked their opinion of Messiah in one particular only: **“Whose Son is He?”**

Their answer was ready and accurate, **“The son of David.”** That He did not deny. He asked the question in order to receive that answer. He knew that would be the answer. It was the only answer possible. It was true, absolutely true, according to all prophecy, according to the inspired expectation of the nation.

Then He asked His second question: **“How then doth David in Spirit call Him Lord?”**

Christ was quoting from Psalm 110.

He said three things about that psalm.

- He said David wrote it. We are told to-day that he did not.
- He said in the second place he wrote it by the Spirit. We are told it is not inspired.
- He said in the third place He wrote it about the Messiah. We are told it is not Messianic.

Let us stand with Christ, and maintain that David wrote Psalm 110 by the inspiration of the Spirit, and concerning Messiah.

What He asked these men was; **“If Messiah was David’s Lord, how was He also his Son?”**

They were silent. The silence is a revelation. This question of Christ was a revealing question. Their conception of Messiah was a wrong conception. Moreover, the bearing of His question on all their questions is a very interesting one. They came to Him about their politics, they expected a Messiah who would lead an army, and break the yoke and set them free; but He said, “You do not know your Messiah. You think of Him as coming in David’s line, but He is more than David’s Son, He is David’s Lord. Account for that, and if you do, you will have all your political problems solved. He comes for the interpretation of a spiritual Kingdom, which is not to be powerless, but which is to be an inward dynamic, correcting all things from the center.”

In the next place, if the Messiah is David's Lord, His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and the doctrine of resurrection is not a difficult one. If the Ruler that was to come, of Whom David sang in the Psalm long ago, is his Lord, Son of God as well as Son of David, then all your difficulty about those who have passed on, as to whether there is to be resurrection, is solved.

And once again, your wrong conception of your Messiah has meant the materialization of your ideals concerning greatness in law. Realize that when Messiah comes, He will be, not merely son of David, but David's Lord, and you will understand the abiding authority and supremacy in law.

Take that word of Christ and examine it more carefully.

We have only touched upon the outlying truths, attempting to reveal the structure of the argument in all its delicacy of application.

Here is His problem, Who is Messiah? David's Son? Then why does David call Him Lord? If He is only David's Son, He cannot be David's Lord. The inferential claim of Christ is that He is David's Lord, as well as his son, descended through the flesh from David, yet before David.

If you cut out the first part of your Gospel, the story of a virgin birth, you must cut out this also, for they are intimately related. As in the beginning we saw Him coming through the line of the flesh, yet not by the act of the flesh; so here we find Him claiming that His Messiahship is based, not merely upon His Davidic descent, but upon His absolute supremacy and Lordship, as David had long ago foreseen.

~ end of chapter 60 ~

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