“WHOSE SON IS THE MESSIAH?”

Matthew 22:15–46

Key Verse: 22:44

“The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’”

Happy Easter! It so happens that this Spring we’re going to be finishing our study of Matthew’s Gospel. We’re now in chapter 22, and we’ve got to go all the way to chapter 28. Chapters 21–28 cover the last week of Jesus’ life on earth. So in a sense, we’ll be studying Easter passages until mid-June! You know how hard it is for us to actually remember anything we learned at church at a holiday? Going at this pace, hopefully something will stick with us!

So what’s the Easter holiday supposed to be about? At Easter advertisers tell us about bunnies and eggs and chocolates and dressing up and family get-togethers and big meals. But Easter is supposed to be about the death and resurrection of Jesus. At Easter Christians try to remember that Jesus was crucified then raised from the dead to give us forgiveness and new life. In fact, Jesus’ death and resurrection are the core of the gospel, the good news. It’s the one time of year we can directly really think about what this means.

Today’s passage takes place on Tuesday. Just two days earlier, on Sunday, Jesus had entered Jerusalem. Just three days later, on Friday he would be crucified. Now the religious leaders are trying hard to discredit Jesus so that they can finally find a way to get rid of him. Jesus has been telling parables to explain his authority. The religious leaders knew he was challenging them to repent, but they refused. Now they come with various tricky questions to trap him. In today’s study we especially want to think about Jesus’ final question to them, “Whose Son is the Messiah?” What does it mean that he is David’s Lord? How could that happen? And what does it mean to us? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Read verses 15–17. Taxes are always a tricky issue. Many religious people have gotten caught cheating on their taxes. Basically, the Pharisees and Herodians mentioned here were enemies, but in attacking Jesus they became friends. They thought they could use flattery to tempt Jesus. If he said, “Yes, pay taxes to Caesar,” he’d seem weak to many Jews who wanted him to deliver them from Roman oppression and would lose his popularity. If he said, “No, don’t pay taxes to Caesar,” they could have him arrested as a rebel against Roman rule.

How did Jesus answer? Read verse 18. Jesus could see right through their flattery. He called them out and called them “hypocrites” because their nice words didn’t match their evil motive. Then what did he do? Read verse 19. A denarius was a Roman coin commonly used among people at that time. It was actually a valuable coin, worth an entire day’s wages—today, about $100. That’s an expensive coin! Then Jesus asks his own questions. Read verse 20. On a denarius there was the image of Tiberius Caesar. Underneath were the words “Divine Son of Augustus.” On the other side of the coin there was a Roman goddess of peace, “Pax,” with the words “High Priest.” To Jews, this coin, these images and words were idolatrous and blasphemous. Jesus was using this coin to make a powerful visual statement without using any words: Why would good Jews want to hold onto such a coin, such dirty, contaminating money? Why would they want to compromise with such a godless government?

And he didn’t stop there. Read verse 21b. He’s making two powerful statements here. First is, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” Since that money has his name and picture on it, it belongs to him, so give it back. It’s such a simple answer, even a child can understand, yet it’s loaded with deeper meanings. Giving it back implies, “Don’t steal it—it’s not really yours.” In a sense, Jesus is saying that not paying taxes to any government is like stealing. In a sense he’s also saying, “Don’t get too involved with it.” Once we start getting involved with money, it’s like a slippery slope. We start worrying and calculating and rationalizing. Then our hearts are stolen from serving God: “You cannot serve both God and money” (6:24b). Jesus gives a simple directive: “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” Whatever taxes the government asks from us, don’t try to get out of it; just pay it and be free of it. Apostle Paul wrote: “This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Ro12:6,7). The Bible tells us to pay our taxes and be good, law-abiding citizens, not rebels.

But Jesus goes on to say, “…and to God what is God’s.” Give to God what is God’s. What’s *that?* What does Jesus mean? In the context of that coin, he means don’t ever give your worship to Caesar; give your worship only to God. Don’t ever give your worship to money; give your worship only to God. Give to God your heart, your loyalty, your full obedience, your life. We Christians have two citizenships: one is in this world, and the other is in the kingdom of heaven. We have to fulfill duties of both citizenships. We should vote in elections. We should pray for government leaders. We should serve in the military when called. But we should also love God, live for his glory and honor, and make it our priority to advance his kingdom. Read verse 21b again. To really practice this teaching we need to live a giving life, not a getting life. Give to Caesar, and give to God. How did they respond? Look at verse 22. In modern terms, they were “treated.”

Look at verse 23. In Greek, “that same day” literally means “in that hour” or “at the same time.” Sadducees were rich, highly educated, aristocratic people. They thought they were much better than everybody else, including the Pharisees and Herodians. They thought they had a much better challenging question to Jesus. What was it? Read verses 24–28. Basically, they were trying to make fun of the resurrection, because they didn’t believe it. They were using an exaggerated example, but they thought it showed that the whole notion of the resurrection was absurd. How could a woman, trying to have children with several brothers, then be raised from the dead with all of them and choose one as her husband? The Sadducees were strongly influenced by Greek rationalism, which denied that there’s a spiritual world or anything invisible and only emphasized this literal, physical, material world. Today we’re still influenced by a rationalistic view of the world. Such people think, “If you can’t measure it, it can’t be real.” With this way of thinking people still deny spiritual realities. They mock the Christian faith and say there’s no such thing as the resurrection or heaven.

How did Jesus answer? Read verse 29. Though the Sadducees were supposed to be religious leaders, they were in great error. It was a stinging rebuke. Sadducees prided themselves on knowing a lot. But they failed to know two most important things: the Scriptures and the power of God. So many people today still claim to know so much. But without knowing the Scriptures or the power of God, all that we know can lead us to a completely wrong conclusion. Why do we need to know the Scriptures? Because in the Scriptures we have God’s own revelation of himself and all the truth he wants us to know. Ignoring the Scriptures is like trying to put something complicated together without reading the instruction manual. The Sadducees thought they knew the Scriptures, especially the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. But Jesus shows them that they don’t really know it as well as they thought.

We also need to know the power of God. What does that mean? Essentially it means to know God himself. The Bible begins, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Ge1:1). Who is this God who created the heavens and the earth? He’s God Almighty. With his incomprehensible power he created this entire universe out of nothing. We can’t even fathom that! But it means that nothing is too hard for God. God Almighty who created all matter and all life in the first place can certainly raise the dead. God Almighty has raised the dead several times in history, and he has promised that one day he’s going to raise all the dead who ever lived, both good and bad (Jn5:28,29). Even death or cremation are not a hiding place from him. As those who claim to believe in him, we need to start our thinking not with the cold realities around us, but with the even greater reality of God Almighty.

Then Jesus goes on. Read verse 30. It’s another truth the Sadducees didn’t know. To be like the angels doesn’t mean we’ll have wings; it means we won’t have any gender. There will be no more gender because there will be no more procreation. In this world money and marriage are the hope of many people and they can become obsessions. But in heaven, money and marriage won’t even matter. At the resurrection, we won’t just be eternal, gender-neutral beings like angels; the Bible says we will bear the likeness of the man from heaven, our Lord Jesus (1Co15:49). We’ll share in his glory and character. We’ll be totally satisfied in his presence, worshiping and sharing eternal fellowship with him.

Then Jesus uses Scripture to prove his point. Read verses 31,32. It’s a quote from Exodus 3:6. God told Moses he forever wanted to be known as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, down through all generations. Jesus is saying, “Do you really think God would want to be known as the God of dead people?” No, our living God is the God of the living! It means Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are all living with God in his eternal kingdom right now. And not only them, but all who went before us and lived by faith are living now living with the living God in his kingdom. Jesus’ words mean that when we believe, we too have a living hope in his kingdom (1Pe1:3,4). We believe in the living God and have hope in him; we pray to the living God; and someday, by faith, we will go to the kingdom of the living God. The living God promises that when we believe in Jesus who rose from the dead, we too will live forever in his glory in his kingdom (e.g. Jn11:25,26; 14:19b). He promises to give us a resurrection body, glorious beyond our imagination (1Co15:42–44). We hold onto this faith and hope, and with this faith and hope we celebrate Easter.

Look at verse 34. The Pharisees were very happy that Jesus silenced the Sadducees, because the Pharisees believed the resurrection and the Sadducees were their rivals. But the Pharisees were still self-righteously opposed to Jesus. They brought forth their best expert in the law to trap him with what was to them the most tricky question. Read verses 35,36. Why did he ask this question? Most likely it was because the Pharisees perceived Jesus as a lawbreaker. They thought he didn’t keep the Sabbath and didn’t keep their traditions like fasting or washing hands because he thought he was above the law. Pharisees, on the other hand, had so many laws they loved to emphasize and keep. Over the years they’d built up an elaborate, complicated, legalistic religious system. It must have seemed so daunting to pick which commandment was the greatest. It could spark so many controversies and debates. Whichever one Jesus picked, they thought they could prove him wrong and thereby diminish his status.

How did Jesus answer them? Read verses 37–40. Notice that there was not even a response from the Pharisees. Jesus actually kept the spirit of the Law, which is love, and it was this spirit of the Law that the Pharisees had totally lost. They had so many rules about loving God, but in their hearts they didn’t really love God. They had so many moral, ethical and ritual rules, but in their hearts they didn’t really love people, either. It was all for their own glory. By emphasizing the law of love, loving God and loving other human beings, Jesus was showing that all their rules had turned out to be pointless and hypocritical. When he talked about love, they became quiet.

Jesus said loving others is like loving God. It’s because when we love people, it’s the evidence that we love God (1Jn4:20). If we claim to love God but have no love for the people around us, we’re deceiving ourselves. At the same time, if we really want to love people, then we have to love God most. It’s a kind of paradox. But only when we love God most can we really love other people.

Finally, Jesus goes on to ask his own questions. Read verses 41,42. He starts off with a very easy question. Everybody knew the Messiah would be the Son of David. But then Jesus asks a much harder question. Read verses 43–45. Here Jesus mentions three times that the Messiah is actually David’s “Lord.” What does that mean? It means the Messiah is actually superior to David or outranks David. Obviously the Pharisees weren’t thinking like that. They were thinking of the Messiah as a man, a descendant of David. But in Psalm 110:1, David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him “Lord.” How could the Messiah be David’s Lord? Apostle Paul explains: “…regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord” (Ro1:3,4). Jesus became David’s Lord through his resurrection from the dead. He’s not only David’s Lord; he’s King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev19:16). He’s our Lord as well. When Jesus the Son obeyed God the Father even to death on a cross, God raised him from the dead and exalted him to the highest place, to his own right hand, as Lord of all (Php2:8–11).

The Risen Jesus is our Lord. He’s worthy of our worship. He’s worthy of our obedience. He’s worthy of our very lives. He’s worthy to be at the center of our lives. To believe in him means to believe in his resurrection and to live with him as my Lord. It’s at the core of real Christian faith. Romans 10:9–13 says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” We call on Jesus our Lord not just for salvation, not just to avoid shame, but to surrender control of my life to him. To call Jesus “Lord” means to put him first, above everything and everyone else in our lives.

Read verse 44 again. Jesus quoted this verse while he was surrounded by enemies questioning and attacking him. He knew that in a few short days they would have him crucified. But he wasn’t afraid. He was holding onto this promise of God. He was sure of God’s promise to raise him from the dead and exalt him to his own right hand. He was sure that God his Father would put his enemies under his feet someday. He held onto this verse and depended on the living God to fight for him.

Jesus our Lord wants us to share in this faith. As his followers, we too will be persecuted. We too will be despised and rejected. We too will be opposed and criticized. We might feel totally overwhelmed in this world. But when we follow Jesus as Lord and surrender our lives to him, we will share in his victory. Even if we’re defeated now, we’ll share in his eternal glory. This was the faith of the early Christians who were facing public martyrdom. Whenever we stop trying to fight enemies with our own strength and just depend on Jesus, God himself fights for us. God himself gives us spiritual victories. It’s in surrendering and submitting to Jesus as Lord that we win.

Let’s read verse 44 once more. This Easter may God help us newly confess that the Risen Jesus is my Lord. May God bless us to hold onto the glorious hope we have in his resurrection. And may God help us to depend on and submit to Jesus our Lord in our daily lives, so that we can share in his spiritual victory.