



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 20:19-40  
Mark Mitchell  
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## Drop Your Agenda

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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This past week I got a phone call from a writer for the *SF Chronicle*, asking for an interview about the sermon I did a couple of weeks ago on *The Da Vinci Code*. He's noticed that many churches are devoting a lot of time to responding to the book and preparing for the movie. Somehow, he found out about my sermon on Easter Sunday and wanted to interview me about why I did it. My first reaction was to be skeptical. I wasn't sure I wanted to talk to him. I don't get asked a lot to do this kind of thing, but in the past when I've been interviewed, especially for a newspaper article, I've found that there is a vast difference between what I thought I said and what ends up in the article! And sometimes I've realized too late that there were ulterior motives in the writers, which I couldn't see because I was so flattered to be interviewed and get my name in the paper! So I was pretty careful and it turned out he was a good guy. But the article hasn't come out yet, and I don't get the *Chronicle*, so when the article shows up this week maybe someone here can let me see it, and if I sound like a weirdo, it's his fault!

I think Jesus felt a lot like this in the last week of his life. The opposition to him is mounting among the religious leaders, but he's very popular with the people and so they're afraid that if they arrest him or harm him it will incite a rebellion. So, instead, they come to him with a series of questions in which they're trying to catch him in some kind of misstatement that would discredit him either with the people or the Roman authorities. On the surface it seems like these guys are sincere, but they have ulterior motives; they have their own agenda. They have their own set ideas of what the Messiah was supposed to do and what it meant to be a part of his kingdom.

Sometimes we come to Jesus with our own agenda and our own set of assumptions. None of us comes to Christ with a blank slate. We come to him with our own opinions and causes formed by a lifetime of experiences. Sometimes we come to him like the people who come to my door asking me to sign their petition for some cause I know little about. Perhaps our agenda is political. Perhaps it is theological or intellectual. Perhaps it is racial or social. Whatever it is, we expect Jesus to buy in. If he doesn't, we're not so sure we want to follow him.

In Luke 20 Jesus has two encounters with two different groups of people that force us to ask the question, to what degree have I come to Christ with my own agenda? What dotted line am I trying to get him to

sign? What box am I trying to fit him into? What cause am I trying to get him to endorse? How does this reveal my own distorted view of what he is all about and what he came to do?

### I. We come to Jesus with a political agenda 20:19-26

Jesus has just finished telling a parable that was very indicting to the religious leaders. So Luke says in vv. 19-22,

**“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. 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 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. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’”**

The scribes and chief priests were running kind of an undercover operation. They sent some of their own to Jesus under the guise of righteous motives to catch him in some statement. It's worth noting that in the same incident recorded in Mark's gospel, he tells us more about these spies—that they were a combination of Pharisees and Herodians. That's interesting because those two groups had completely different agendas. This would be like being approached by a group consisting of liberal democrats and the religious right. Normally, these two groups despised each other. The Pharisees seethed under Rome's occupation of Palestine and dreamed of revolution. The Herodians, on the other hand, had sold out to the status quo. But here these two groups are brought together by a mutual hatred of Jesus. Notice how they come to him with flattering words. They praise him for being a teacher of truth and no respecter of persons. The irony is that although they didn't mean it, they were right! He WAS a teacher of truth and he was partial to no one.

They come to him with the perfect set up. If there was ever a question to put a person between a rock and a hard place, it was this one. “Is it in keeping with the law of Moses to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” How do you answer that question? If he said they should pay the tax,

the Jewish people would brand him a traitor to Rome. The Jews hated this tax. It had to be paid in Roman coinage stamped with the idolatrous image of Tiberius, proclaiming him as “the son of a god.” It was a constant reminder to them of their own subjection to pagan idolators. I mean, no one likes taxes, right? Even if you love your government, you don’t want to pay taxes. That’s why 18% of Americans admit they cheat on their taxes. “Death and taxes...” it would be nice if they came in that order! On the other hand, if he said not to pay the tax, he would have been branded as an insurrectionist. You can believe that these spies would have immediately tattled on him to the Roman authorities because Rome didn’t tolerate people like that.

How will Jesus get out of this one? Before he says anything, Luke says in v. 23 that **“he detected their trickery.”** He saw through the whole thing. And then he asks them something. Look at vv. 23–24. **“But He detected their trickery and said to them, ‘Show Me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?’ They said, ‘Caesar’s.’”** He asks them to produce a coin and tell him whose image it bears. I find it kind of funny that they of all people were able to produce one. It doesn’t appear that Jesus had one himself, but they did. If they were so righteous, why were these little idols jingling in their own pockets?

After they produce the coin and tell him it bears Caesar’s image, Jesus says in vv. 25–26, **“And He said to them, ‘Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ 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.”** This, of course, is one of the most well known things Jesus ever said. Think about what this means. “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” The coin has Caesar’s name and image on it, so give it back to him; it obviously belongs to Caesar.” Jesus implies that since the Jews were enjoying some of the benefits of Caesar’s government, they should give him his due. As God’s people, they still had a certain obligation to the ruling government, even if it was evil and pagan. It’s clear that Jesus really didn’t have a political agenda insofar as it meant overthrowing Rome.

What about us? We’re to avoid the extreme of the Pharisees who were hostile to the secular government. That doesn’t mean we always have to agree with it, but even if we don’t agree with it, we have a certain obligation to it. We enjoy some of the benefits of the state, so we should support it through our tax dollars. In the book of Romans, Paul says that the governing authorities have been established by God. He says it is **“a minister of God to you for good”**

(Rom. 13:4). So we should obey the laws of the state insofar as they don’t force us to disobey a direct command of God. I think this also implies that we shouldn’t withdraw from the state in passive protest. We should participate in the political process. We’re blessed to live in a democracy where we can do that. So we should vote and stay informed and pray for those God has placed in authority over us.

But Jesus doesn’t leave it at that. He also says, “Render to God the things that are God’s.” By saying this, Jesus makes a subtle yet powerful protest against the idolatrous claims of Caesar. Caesar is not God. He doesn’t rule over all of life. He can regulate our conduct to some degree, but he can’t control our spirit. The government has a certain domain over certain aspects of our lives, and Jesus is fine with that, but its domain is limited. Give God his due. What is that? Think of it this way—Caesar’s image is on the coin; whose image is on the heart and soul of human beings? You and I are created in the image of God, we have his stamp and inscription on us, so we belong to him. He deserves our deepest affections and ultimate loyalty. Our worship is directed only to him. Early Christians were martyred because they wouldn’t say “Caesar is Lord.” We don’t give worship to any political leader. We don’t put our ultimate hopes in anyone but God.

So we have to also avoid the extreme of the Herodians who so completely invested themselves in the system that they gave Caesar much more than his due. They built their lives and their hopes around him. Their security was invested in his government. In America, the land of the free, a nation founded upon many Christian principles, we have to be careful of this. Our hope, our security, our ultimate allegiance is NOT to America, it’s to God.

Here’s what to remember: It doesn’t matter what your political agenda is, Jesus doesn’t buy into it. If you think we need a political revolution, he doesn’t buy in. If you think we need put our hope in maintaining the status quo, he doesn’t buy into that either. You see, Jesus will establish his kingdom not through politics but through the cross. When you come to Jesus with your own agenda, he never cooperates, he never signs your petition; instead he invites you to follow him to the cross.

## **II. We come to Jesus with a theological agenda 20:27-40**

In the second encounter, Jesus is approached by a group of men called Sadducees. This was kind of an aristocratic group, made up of priestly families of Jerusalem. They were worldly and wealthy. They were also different from the Pharisees because they didn’t believe in life after death or in the resurrection of the dead. Now, of course, Jesus had already predicted his own resurrection, so this was a problem. If they were right, Jesus was a crock. Even though they were religious, they were kind of the rationalistic intellectuals of their day. They were like

Thomas Jefferson who once published a copy of the Bible with all the references to miracles and the supernatural taken out. He wanted the ethics of the Bible without the miracles of the Bible. So, just as the Pharisees and the Herodians had a political agenda, these guys had a theological/philosophical agenda.

They come to Jesus with a hypothetical case designed to make anyone who believed in the resurrection look ridiculous. Listen to what they say.

**“Now there came to Him some of the Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection), and they questioned Him, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that IF A MAN'S BROTHER DIES, having a wife, AND HE IS CHILDLESS, HIS BROTHER SHOULD MARRY THE WIFE AND RAISE UP CHILDREN TO HIS BROTHER. Now there were seven brothers; and the first took a wife and died childless; and the second and the third married her; and in the same way all seven died, leaving no children. Finally the woman died also. In the resurrection therefore, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had married her’” (vv. 27–33).**

Notice that they quote from Moses here in the book of Deuteronomy. They go back to a law which said if a man died before he and his wife could produce a child, then his brother had an obligation to marry that widow. Then when the two of them produced a child that child would take his father's name so that his name wouldn't be erased. I have one older brother. So, if he died without a kid I would be obligated to marry his wife and then when we had a child that child would take his name. It makes you think twice about who your brother marries! But that was how Israel worked. We have a hard time getting this. We're so individualistic in our society, but God's people were to think beyond themselves to what was good for the whole nation.

Now in the wild scenario that the Sadducees painted for Jesus a woman gets married and her husband dies before they have a child. So she married his brother, but he also dies without producing an heir. This goes on through seven brothers, all of whom die before they have a child. Finally the woman dies, probably from exhaustion, and the Sadducees want to know whose wife she will be in the resurrection.

It's amazing to me that Jesus even took this seriously, but he did. He actually gave them a very carefully thought through answer. First, he corrected their theology. Look at vv. 34–36. **“Jesus said to them, ‘The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.’”** The Sadducees imagined that if there was an afterlife, it would be an extension of this life. So if you were married on earth you would be married in heaven. If you had kids on earth you would have kids in

heaven. But Jesus says it doesn't work that way. This is actually helpful for us because sometimes we wonder what heaven will be like and the Bible doesn't tell us a whole lot. But Jesus says that in that age (in heaven) there is no marriage. He says that part of the reason there is no marriage is that we will be like angels in that there is no death, so there is no need for procreation. That's not the only reason people get married, but that's part of why God instituted marriage. God said, “Be fruitful and multiply,” Jesus says people are different in heaven. Instead of being husbands and wives, we'll all be sons of God. The focus will be not on our earthly families, but on being children of our Father God. That will be all we need.

It's like when my kids were young. They all went through that stage where they would say, “I don't want to grow up. I don't want to live somewhere else. I want to live right here with you guys the rest of my life.” That didn't last very long, but it was nice for awhile. It made me feel good. But that's what it will be like in heaven. We'll be so content being children of our heavenly Father that all other relationships will pale in significance.

But that's not all. Jesus also corrected their understanding of the Bible. Look at vv. 37–40. **“But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB. Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him.’** Some of the scribes answered and said, **‘Teacher, You have spoken well.’** For they did not have courage to question Him any longer about anything.” Now Jesus goes back to Moses—to one of the most famous passages in the OT where God appeared to Moses at the burning bush. He uses very simple logic: God's statement to Moses was in the present tense: “I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.” That doesn't make any sense if they're not presently alive. If someone comes to you and says, “I WAS your mother's best friend” it may be because your mother is dead or somehow the relationship has changed. But if they come to you and say, “I AM your mother's best friend,” the assumption is that she's still alive. That's why Jesus says, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

I know that some people really have a hard time with this. If you have a good marriage and you really love your wife or your husband, it's hard to think you won't have that kind of relationship in heaven. My wife and I have been married for almost 28 years. We've been married a lot longer than when we were ever single. It's funny how you begin to really think of your lives as inseparable; as one. Recently we've been doing some premarital counseling for a couple in our body, and we were preparing to talk to them about

appreciating their differences and how they were designed to complement each other, which would be impossible if they were the same. So Lynn and I tried to think of some areas where we're different and how that's been a good thing. But to be honest, we had a hard time coming up with much. It's like we've blended together so much you can't tell us apart. It's kind of scary! People even say we look alike! That's really scary!

But do you know what this does? It really makes you think how amazing heaven is going to be, because it will be greater and deeper and better than even the best of marriage and sexuality. Hollywood makes us think that romance is the end all. Even movies about heaven often have some kind of ongoing sexuality or romantic relationship. But Jesus says your vision of heaven is too small. You think romance is great. You think sex is great. I have something even greater. So whatever joy or pain you have experienced in marriage or in having or not having children, there is something that transcends all of that, and that is your relationship with God in heaven. Maybe that's why we're called the bride of Christ. It's good news for those who struggle being single or those who have gone through a painful divorce or have been unable to have children. This is not all there is. You have a future in heaven that is bigger than all of that. You will be a child of God in a way you never dreamed of.

It makes you realize how important your relationships are here in the family of God, because these relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ will last forever, but you can have a wife or a husband or a child who doesn't know the Lord and they won't share that experience with you. We tend to think these relationships aren't as important. Maybe we don't like someone or we're in a conflict with them and they leave the church or they move away and we think, "Good! I hope I never have to see them again." Well, think again. You're going to spend eternity with that person. You might want to work it out!

Do we really believe in the resurrection? Do we really believe it enough to let it reframe our lives now? Or will our lives be framed by misconceptions about what will really last forever? I can't help but think of the Mormons. These are dear people who have been hoodwinked into thinking that marriage and childbearing are the keys to the kingdom. Jesus rejects that idea and says the kingdom of God is so much bigger and so much better than that.

## **CONCLUSION**

We come to Jesus with our own agenda. We want to put him in our little box; sign our petition; endorse our cause. How does Jesus respond? Well, he loves us enough to engage with us. But he won't sign up because our concept of what he's doing is way too small. Our view of his kingdom is at best a human remake of life on earth. It might be a political remake; it might be a family remake. But the bottom line is he offers us something so much better. He wants us to be part of something that transcends our own agenda—a kingdom without end, created not through political power, but through the cross; not through marriage or sexuality, but through the power of the resurrection.

The question is, will we drop our agenda and surrender to him?