

THE NAIVETE OF NATURALISM (1): UNDERESTIMATING GOD'S MIGHT

(Luke 20:27-40)

February 19, 2017

Read Luke 20:27-36 – In 1971, former Beatle John Lennon released one of the most popular rock songs of all time. *Imagine there's no heaven / It's easy if you try / No hell below us / Above us only sky / Imagine all the people living for today.* Probably popular bc it expresses perfectly the naturalistic (Godless) philosophy that dominates modern culture. Forget the afterlife, live for today in peace and harmony. Lennon gave it new expression, but it's as old as mankind. And it is a nearly *perfect fit for the 1st century Sadducees.*

The Sadducees were the aristocratic, priestly party in Jerusalem. Blue bloods. They'd collaborate with anyone, including Rome, who would not upset their *status quo*. The 71-member Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body, was a contentious collection of both Sadducees and Pharisees. The *Pharisees* were popular with the people; the Sadducees were not.

They were *naturalists*. They believed God created, and accepted the Torah. But they rejected "*the immortal duration of the soul.*" They *did not believe in heaven, hell, resurrection, an afterlife or angels.* In other words, *nothing supernatural.* Jesus is going to show how naïve that position really is.

these last 3 days of His life, Jesus has been using the temple one last time for its intended purpose, teaching. People have flocked to hear. But all of the religious elite – scribes, Pharisees, Herodians – have been *coming at Him in waves* to try to trip Him up. Every attempt has gone down in flames. Jesus has taken on all comers and sent them packing -- tails between their legs.

So, in 1 last attempt, here come the Sadducees – the aristocracy out of hiding. They're sure their naturalistic presuppositions will succeed. Jesus wins again. And we learn a lot about the Bible, resurrection, heaven and the afterlife. It's a *spell-binding* encounter. **I. A Diabolical Ruse** and **II. A Dazzling Response.**

I. A Diabolical Ruse

Their trap involves a Levirate marriage described in **Deut 25:5-10**. If a man died childless, his surviving bachelor bro was obliged to marry the widow and produce a son to carry on his brother's name on pain of disgracing the family. This was intended to continue the name of the deceased. The Sads, wanting to *poke fun at the idea of an afterlife* say, "*Imagine that this happens to the same unfortunate woman 7 times (real or imagined we don't know. Doesn't*

matter). *Whose will she be in the resurrection?*” That, of course, ignores the possibility that numbers 5-7 might choose disgrace rather than being married to a black widow, like this one! They thought they had an unanswerable question that would have Jesus backpedaling clear to Galilee!

They’re making a joke of heaven. It’s a grotesque scenario – a woman with 7 husbands. *How’s God going to handle that?*?! So like naturalists. Poke fun to justify rejecting God. The idea is as old as Jesus Himself. At His arrest: **Lu 22:** ⁶³ *Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him.* ⁶⁴ *They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, “Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?”* They thought inaction meant inability.

Moderns do it, too. The theologian Rudolf Bultmann in *Kerygma and Myth* says, *“It is impossible to use electric lights and the wireless, and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”* Lots of people doing the impossible! He goes on: *“I use an electric razor. No man who uses an electric razor can believe that Jesus walked on water.”* Using mockery to discredit the supernatural, just like the Sads. But does using an electric razor really nullify miracles? Does the fact a woman had 7 husbands mean they could not co-exist in heaven? Seriously? Jesus didn’t think so.

II. A Dazzling Response

To get the full impact of Jesus’ response, you need the longer version in **Mt 12:29**. They ask, *“So whose wife will she be since all 7 had her?”* And Jesus answers: *“You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”* Wow – what authority! Jesus has the crème de la crème of the priestly class in front of Him. He’s on their ground. They’re determined to make a joke of Him. He looks them straight in the eye and says, *“Gents – you’re wrong! And let me tell you why. You may be priests – but you don’t know the Scriptures and you don’t know the God behind them.”* You could have heard a pin drop. *“You don’t know God’s might and you don’t know God’s message. You may have titles, but you are God illiterate!”* Here’s why!

A. You Don’t Understand God’s Might

This is common to all naturalists. They deny God’s power. Dangerous thing to do. God warned long ago in **Isa 55:** ⁸ *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.* ⁹ *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts*

than your thoughts.” Guess they missed SS that day. They thought God was **powerless**; actually He’s just **different**. Jesus shows God’s power in 3 ways.

1. **He has the power to save** – The first problem with naturalists is they are not even saved. Jesus points that out in a kind of footnote: ³⁴ And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵ but **those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead** neither marry nor are given in marriage.” So who’s worthy to attain that age? Those doing the best they can? Those who have the right credentials – leaders of God’s people the Jews? Those who are blessed by God with riches. They had all of those. None of those would do.

So what will? Jesus had told them. **Mt 5:20**: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness **exceeds** that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” To the Jews, no one’s righteousness exceeded the Pharisees. They topped that list. Yet Jesus says, “**Not enough. It won’t do. You’ve got to be better than that!**” But how?! Jesus answered that one, too? **Jn 6:28** Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, [do the best you can! Is that what He said? No!] This is the work of God, [join the temple and bring sacrifices. Is that what He said? No!] “This is the work of God [keep the 10 commandments! Is that what He said? No!] No! What He said was, “This is the work of God, that you **believe in him** whom he has sent.” Believe in Jesus.

How does that give you greater righteousness than the Pharisees? Paul answers. **II Cor 5:21**, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him **we might become the righteousness of God.**” It’s God’s righteousness we need. And we get that 1 place – **at the cross** where we trade all our sin for all His righteousness – bc He paid for our forgiveness there. What a trade, right? What no one else has the power to do – to save from sin – not the Pharisees, the Sadducees, you, me, or the most righteous person who ever lived apart from Jesus – what no one else can do, **God can!** He has the power to save. The Sadducees missed that; but you don’t want to miss that!

When I attended Biola it was located in the suburbs of LA. But originally, it was in a downtown high rise with a great sign on top, lit bright at night – **Jesus Saves**. The naturalists of my generation had fun with that. **Jesus saves – where – First national bank? Jesus saves what – green stamps?** Oh, they had fun with the sign. **But the sign was right and they were wrong.** and someday their **naivety** will be their condemnation. No one else can save you from the guilt of your sin – not Mom or Dad or the Church or pastor or priest or

yourself. But Jesus can save. God can save thru and because of the death of Christ. But the Sads didn't understand God's power. And they missed eternity.

2. He has the power to raise – Resurrection is mentioned twice (35, 36). What the Sads denied, Jesus assumed. Because resurrection went against the normal, ***natural*** way of things, they denied it. Because they'd never seen it, they denied it. Because it didn't ***normally*** happen, they denied it ***could ever*** happen. But they didn't understand God's power.

Jesus' own resurrection soon blasted the idea that God could not raise the dead. That was still a few days in the ***future***. But what thoroughly condemns them is that less than a week ***earlier***, Jesus had raised His friend Lazarus from the dead not 2 miles away. He raised Him after four days in the tomb. Jewish law stipulated that death was official after 3 days. Jesus had purposely delayed coming to Lazarus' home for 2 days to counter any doubt that he was really dead. Then, on arrival, Jesus had the stone removed, ***called Lazarus forth, and forth he came*** – as alive as a newborn baby. ***The very thing the Sads denied had happened in their own backyard.***

And they knew it, too. ***Jn 11:46-47*** says news of Laz immediately filtered back to the Sanhedrin, of whom the Sads were part. So did they check it out? Did they investigate? Did they interview Lazarus or the throng of witnesses? Not on your life. They did one thing. ***Jn 11: 53 So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.***” And when they heard that others were going to see Lazarus and believing, ***Jn 12: 10 So the chief priests (Sads) made plans to put Lazarus to death as well.***” ***Unbelief turned them into a killing machine*** – determined to cover the truth without so much as investigating. Naturalism is so naïve that it will not even believe the evidence right in front of it. It denies the power of God for the simple reason that it is not on display every day.

Tho, the irony is, the power of God ***is*** on display – ***every day***. ***Rom 1: 20*** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal ***power*** and divine nature, have been ***clearly perceived***, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” Ironically, naturalism itself is a supreme evidence of God's power. What else could create and sustain this universe? There is ***no naturalistic*** explanation. The Big Bang theory? That just pushes the big question back -- ***where did the matter and energy come from and who caused the Bang?***! No observable natural process can explain that! God's power is displayed every day in every seed that miraculously grows just because you put it into the ground, in every fertilized egg, in every feeling of shame and every act of love. Naturalism can't explain any of it!

And the same God who controls the natural also controls the supernatural. The resurrection is not an everyday event, ***it is completely within His power*** – as He has shown! That’s why Jesus raised Lazarus. That’s why the moment Jesus died we read in **Mt 27:51**: “**And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.** ⁵² ***The tombs also were opened.*** And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were ***raised***, ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.” That was a sad day to be a Sadducee. That’s why God raised Jesus from the dead. And that’s why Paul says in **I Cor 15:20**, “**But *in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.***” The Sads got it all wrong because they ***chose*** not to believe God could raise the dead. ***He can, and He will.***

3. He has the power to change – All naturalists subscribe to the theory of ***uniformitarianism*** – the idea that everything ***has and always will*** operate according to the same observable, uniform processes. To the Sads, that meant no life after this life. But even if there were, in their limited minds, ***it would have to operate on the same principles as this life.*** That was the main assumption behind their mocking image of some poor woman arriving in the afterlife, facing 7 men who had been her husbands and wondering, “***What now?***” It assumed the same rules there as here to mock the possibility of there.

But again they drastically overstepped. Jesus had long existed in the afterlife before He entered this life. He knew something they didn’t. ***The rules are different there.*** God has the power to change. Marriage as we know it in our fallen world will not exist in the world to come. Why? ³⁶ ***For they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.***” Now, there are several things to note about this verse.

First, this pulverizes the idea angels don’t exist. Jesus doesn’t even argue the point. He assumes it, and He ought to know. ***He’s been there!*** John says of Jesus in **Jn 1**:³***All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.***” He was not only there to ***see*** the angels, He ***created*** them in the first place. Case closed on the existence of angels.

Second, Jesus says people in heaven are “***equal to angels***”. He doesn’t say they are angels. So in what sense equal? ***They cannot die anymore.*** God has the ***power*** to make it that way. Jesus doesn’t address the issue of sexual identity. But He does tell us there is no marriage. The need for marriage to originate and sustain family life will no longer exist. People will live forever; there will be no need to repopulate, and no need for families. It’s one family!

Now, for some the idea there is no marriage in heaven is a welcome thought. For others, like myself and Patty, it's hard to get our arms around the idea of an ideal existence without marriage. I'm sure others of you feel the same. But we must not fall into the same trap as the Sadducees and **limit the power of God to make everything wonderful**. Heaven is a sinless place where real, genuine love, like we've never known, predominates. ***Take the most glorious marriage moment you've ever had, multiply it by a million times and you'll just begin to realize what heaven is like all the time***. Furthermore, there is nothing to indicate that we can't be together there; just not married. Listen – ***you won't be there two seconds and this will be a non-issue. If God can make marriage great enough here in this broken environment that we don't want to leave it, imagine what it must be like there***. He wouldn't remove something except to make infinitely better. Trust that! Don't underestimate God's power.

Conc – Author and speaker, Ravi Zacharias who represents Jesus in high places says this: ***“During the course of nearly 40 years, on every continent, I have seen the most hardened criminals touched by the message of Jesus. I have seen ardent followers of radical belief systems turned from being violent, brutal terrorists to become mild, tenderhearted followers of Jesus Christ.”*** He speaks of nations trying unsuccessfully to ban Christ: ***“For example, China. In the middle of the 20th century, after destroying all of the Christian seminary libraries in the country, Chairman Mao declared that the last vestiges of Christianity had been permanently removed from China, never to make a return. On Easter Sunday in 2009, close to half a century later, the leading English language newspaper in Hong Kong published a picture of Tiananmen Square on page one, with Jesus replacing Chairman Mao's picture on a gigantic banner, and the words "Christ Is Risen" below it. It is estimated that the church in China is the fastest-growing church in the world. I have had conversations with young students in one of China's most prestigious universities who were eagerly asking their questions about Christ, some confessing that their faith in Christ is now the most remarkable thing about their lives.*”** [Less than a million Xns when Mao came to power – today near 100 M, more than communist party]. Don't underestimate the power of God to save, raise and change in your life either. ***Don't imagine there's no heaven.*** That would not only be fatally wrong; it would make you sad, you see! Let's pray.