

What would Jesus say to Liberals?

Matthew 22:23-33

Preached January 25, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her." Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching. (Matthew 22:23-33)

Dr. Lippy, in your understanding, what is the source of the present day liberal – conservative debate in theology?

Dr. Lippy, how would you characterize a liberal?

Introduction. As Dr. Lippy returns to his seat, let me share a cute story. Once four pastors in a small town were having a theological discussion about a subject on which one disagreed with the other three. He tried desperately to convince them that he was right. Finally, he prayed, "Lord, please send a sign that I am right." Immediately a large cloud appeared, shaded the men and then dissipated. One of the three said that might be impressive except, clouds often form quickly in that area. The dissenter prayed again for a sign. This time another cloud formed, lightning struck and split a tree near them. The other three replied, storms often form on hot summer days. Finally the dissenter asked for another sign. A booming voice from heaven said, "HE'S

RIGHT." The dissenter looked at the three and they responded, "Well, now it is three against two."

Often when it comes to conservative-liberal debate, we want to get others on our side. Most, I think, want to have God on their side as well.

Let's take a few moments to consider what Jesus might say to those who consider themselves to be liberal. In many ways this is tough because Jesus did not deal with the "liberal – conservative" debate that we have today. There are no direct parallels in his time. Yet he did deal with controversies as well as those who disagreed with each other. Looking at these can be helpful.

Responding to the Sadducees.

In our scripture lesson, Jesus addresses a group of people known as the Sadducees. Now, it would be unfair to characterize Sadducees as "liberal." Yet this encounter with Jesus and how Jesus responds can be informative for us as we consider how Christ would respond to "liberals."

The Sadducees traced their history back to the time of the 2nd Century BC. Their party had come into being following John Hyrcanus' dispute with the Pharisees. Their followers tended to be those with priestly connections and aristocrats who lived around Jerusalem. They would often ally themselves with the ruling parties and enjoy the privileges of those alliances.

As a group, they were very conservative in that they essentially only adhered to the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) as being authoritative. If a doctrine was not found in these books, they discounted it. Listen to their description given in Acts 23:8: *The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.* (Since they did not believe in the resurrection - that is the reason they were "sad-you-see.")

Now many in our day would consider lack of belief in the resurrection and angels to be "liberal" ideas. As a whole,

these are common and important in the Bible story of the New Testament. But for the Sadducees, it was not a liberal or progressive idea. Instead, they argued that it was not described in the Pentateuch, so they did not believe in them. Since Jesus believed in the resurrection, they were in dispute with him.

In the biblical story, a group of Sadducees came to Jesus with a question that seems rather odd to most in our time. They set up the scenario – A man who has no children dies. Under the Jewish law, his brother is to marry the widow and raise up children for him. It turns out there are seven brothers and all fail to produce children with her. The Sadducees ask who will be married to the woman in the resurrection.

I am sure the Sadducees asking this question felt like they had entrapped Jesus. They used their logic to set up what seemed to be an impossible situation. All couldn't be married to this woman. (It is interesting to note that a story of a widow being married five times is found in the Apocrypha book of Tobit, a story which would have been known to the Sadducees.)

I believe Jesus' response to the Sadducees is informative not only in this story but in our discussion this morning. The translation in the NRSV seems to be harsher than it is in the original Greek - *You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.* The word from which the translators derived – "you are wrong" (which sounds like fighting words to me) comes from the Greek word, *πλανάω*, where we get our English word, "*planet*" – those lights in the sky that "wander." The Greek word basically means to wander or to be led astray.

Jesus is telling the Sadducees they have been wandering from the right course; they are going astray. He claimed they neither understood the scripture or the power of God. The statement about not understanding or knowing the scripture would have seemed to be a huge exaggeration since most of these had

devoted their lives to the study of scripture. They had read the texts and could quote them. Their question represents a certain level of understanding of scripture. They were not ignorant. Jesus implies they did not fully understand.

They also lacked an understanding and appreciation for the power of God. They tended as a group to put little stock in that which is beyond the human realm.

What Jesus would say to liberals?

I want to take the last few thoughts be the place from which we launch into addressing the question of what Jesus would say to liberals.

First of all, I think Jesus would have some commendations to give to those who are in the liberal camp. I believe Jesus would extol "liberals'" concern and involvement in issues of social action and justice. I think Jesus would be supportive of efforts to change systems and structures that have oppressed people. He would be compassionate for the aliens, those who are suffering and oppressed.

I also believe Jesus would speak positively about the propensity of "liberals" in regards to their openness toward others. Liberals often are willing to invite in those whose lifestyles or thoughts might not meet a certain standard. Liberals are often willing to dialog with people of other faiths and work collaboratively to help make our world a better place. I think Jesus would have a positive view of these matters, after all, he often ate with tax collectors and sinners.

While there would be many other positive words, I believe Jesus would use words similar to those he used with the Sadducees. I believe he would issue a warning about the tendency of wandering or being led astray. (This is an issue even for those who do not consider themselves to be liberal.)

In matters of faith and belief, we as human beings need a lighthouse for reference so that we do not wander in many directions. Jesus here provides two points of reference – understanding the scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I believe Jesus would call liberals of our time to a deeper or different understanding of scripture. Many who would consider themselves liberal theologians read and study the Bible. Often the lens through which it is read is more scientific and critical in nature. While conservatives tend to read the accuracy of a biblical text through the lens of "probably," liberals tend to start with "probably not" as it is written. Both want to discern and mine the message and truth communicated but begin from a different point. While either position is neither right nor wrong, scripture calls for a deeper measure of understanding.

For example, Bart Erhman, a New Testament Scholar at UNC, wrote a book on suffering, entitled *God's Problem*. In it he shares the various perspectives that scripture shares about suffering. I think he has a good grasp on what the scripture says. Yet Erhman claims he has "deconverted" and asserts himself to be agnostic. It seems to me he struggles with mystery, paradox and ambiguity. In all of this, I feel it is fair to say he lacks the type of understanding to which Jesus is referring in Matthew.

One of my seminary professors Arthur Wainwright, in his book *Beyond Biblical Criticism*, asserts beyond scientific inquiry into scripture, faith must play a central role in understanding. He claims that scripture as a "sacred text" becomes a vehicle for divine revelation. He says that Jesus must be the standard for our interpretation. His words draw believers toward the personal encounter and relationship with Christ. Perhaps, this type of understanding is included in what Jesus is saying.

I believe Jesus would call liberals of our time into a deeper understanding of the power of the Spirit as well. While we need to roll up our sleeves and work for reform and transformation, the ultimate works of God can only be done through the working of God's Spirit. God does involve himself in the affairs of humanity through the Spirit. By the Spirit, God has and does work in ways beyond our control and understanding.

Conclusion.

Let's take a few moments to summarize this message. I believe Jesus would commend liberals for their involvement in social justice, having openness toward others of different faiths and lifestyle and using their minds and asking tough questions of sacred text and theology. I then believe Jesus would call liberals to a deeper understanding of scripture by reading it with faith and the heart and to call upon and to trust God's action in our world through the power of the Spirit.

Invitation.

This sermon and the last dealt with subjects that can be touchy for many of us. If we lean toward conservative or toward liberal, it is comforting to hear the commendations. But the critique is not comfortable. (I realize that this version of both is very simplistic and it is bold to suggest what Jesus might say.) Yet I do believe in the power of the Spirit to speak to each of us.

My hope is you will be open to hear that voice of God – whether within, through the proclaimed word, through nature, through interactions with others, etc. When you hear it, I urge you to respond to it.

Perhaps you have heard the voice today. How will you respond?