

Matthew 22:1-33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 22 verses 1 to 33 But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully and killed them.

The king was angry and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad.

So the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?

And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words.

[1 : 3 9] And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.

Tell us then, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, Why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites?

Show me the coin for the tax. And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said, Caesar's.

Then he said to them, Therefore, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. When they heard it, they marvelled, and they left him and went away.

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, Teacher, Moses said, If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up offspring for his brother.

[2 : 4 4] Now there were seven brothers among us, the first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all the woman died.

In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her. But 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 a 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, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not God of the dead, but of the living. And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

In Matthew 22, Jesus continues his confrontations with the Jewish religious and political leaders, and a number of different sects and parties challenge Jesus at this point. We start to get more of a sense of the politically, religiously, and socially fraught situation into which Jesus was speaking here.

[3 : 51] The parable of the wedding feast follows on from the parable of the wicked tenants. It's still concerned with questions of authority that had been raised in the preceding chapter. The son is the royal bridegroom, and the invitation being sent out is an invitation to a wedding feast, presumably to various officials and rulers.

And the way that the servants are mistreated by those that are being invited is quite extreme. They are even killed in some cases. They're being invited to a wedding feast, and they're killing the people bringing the invitation.

This seems fairly extreme. But it's important to remember that this is a political event. It's the wedding feast of the son of the king, the heir of the kingdom.

And as such, it's a rejection of the son, and an act of treason and insurrection. Many see the destruction of the city that's referenced as AD 70. But given the second half of the parable, with the further set of invitations, Peter Lighthouse has suggested that it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

It's different from the parable as we find it in Luke chapter 14, which comes in a very different context, and does not have a number of the details that we have here. For instance, it's not a king in Luke's account.

[5 : 07] And there's not the second half with the part concerning the wedding garment. It suggests to me that these are two independent parables, and should not be seen to be referring to the same thing.

Luke's account is given in a different context, and we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus, as a teacher that's going around from place to place, would repurpose illustrations and parables, and change them in different ways for different purposes.

I think that's probably what we're seeing here. We should observe how many details the parable of the wedding feast shares in common with the parable of the wicked tenants, which precedes it.

There's a son. There are servants being sent out. The servants are being mistreated, etc. All of this serves to indicate that the two parables should probably be read alongside each other, as belonging together and helping to illuminate each other in different ways.

They're not twins, as we've seen elsewhere, but they certainly do illuminate each other and serve a common theme. For many readers who see the destruction of the city as being the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the second set of invitations are the ones sent out to the Gentiles and to others, perhaps like the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

[6 : 21] That's not necessarily the case. We can maybe see it as one that's given to Israel as it's brought back to the land and certain people, including the tax collectors and the prostitutes, are invited in and there's a rejection of the old Israel that was sent away into exile.

There's a second inspection that occurs at the end of the story, the inspection of the clothing of the guest at the wedding feast. In Revelation chapter 19, we have a reference to wedding garments and talks about the bride making herself ready.

It was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And here there's an inspection of wedding clothing. The man without clean garments is dishonouring the king and presumably willfully so.

There's a sorting process here as the king inspects the guests and there's a warning about presuming upon election. Many were invited. Israel's story is a story of many being invited, but only a few proving worthy.

People were destroyed as a result of their rejection of the prophets, the servants that were sent. And even those that seem to come at this point, prove themselves to be hypocrites, to not have the deeds that conform to the wedding feast that they've been invited to.

[7 : 42] So there's a warning about presuming upon election and there's a reframing then of the concept of election. We see this reframing of election, for instance, in chapter 24, verses 22, 24 and 31.

For instance, in verse 22, And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be cut short.

In verse 24, For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. And then finally, And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other.

This develops. The previous parables challenged the security of the status of Israel and its leaders. Israel may have presumed upon its covenant election that God had chosen Abraham and them in Abraham, but this notion of election, many being called, but few being chosen, is an unsettling of that concept.

Jesus is redrawing the concept of election within this and the previous parable. After Jesus gives this parable, the Pharisees join with the Herodians to trap Jesus.

[8 : 57] The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem and Judea, but supporters of the Herodian dynasty presumably still operated there, and we also know from the narrative of the Passion that Herod was in the city over that period.

In this and the following two challenges, what we see is a challenge to Jesus' authority and the jockeying for power that exists in Jerusalem at that time, with different parties vying for dominance.

Tax for Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question. To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy and the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land, and the Denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Tiberius Caesar being the Son of God.

One way or another, it seems, Jesus is caught. Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and revolutionaries against Rome, or he will seem like a compromiser with Rome, and his answer to the question, however, is a profoundly shrewd one.

First of all, he asked them to produce a coin, and this isn't just a visual aid, it's something more than that. They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession.

[10 : 09] The Jews have their own coinage, but they clearly have one of these coins, these coins with a blasphemous statement, an image on it, they have one in their possession. And Jesus' answer is an incredibly wise one.

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. Perhaps one thing we should observe is that it is an ambiguous statement. To some, it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him.

To others, pay your taxes. But there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There's a willingness in Jesus' teaching to be dispossessed of such items.

The opposition between God and mammon may be playing out here. In Jesus' teaching concerning the temple tax as well, Jesus just does not get into fights about paying money.

The concern for money that the Pharisees and others display is a result in part of the fact that they serve money, that they are in bondage to the love of money.

[11 : 13] But there's probably more going on. First of all, there are dues to be paid, both to Caesar and to God. And Jesus' statement suggests that we need to recognise both and distinguish between them.

The coin is Caesar's. And so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, it's something that is for services given. What did the Romans ever do for us?

Well, the aqueduct, the sanitation, the roads, the irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, safety and public order, all these sorts of things. And the expectation that you render back to Caesar something in exchange for that is perfectly reasonable.

That doesn't mean a legitimization of everything that Caesar is doing. Rather, the sense of giving back can indicate a sort of non-investment in that whole economy, that you're giving back, you're not actually participating in the same way, you're not investing yourself in this.

You're invested in the kingdom of God, so you're prepared to give money back to Caesar. Jesus escapes a trap, but he also makes some important theological points. He treads a line between compliance and resistance.

[12 : 26] Rendering to God what is God's places clear limits upon what you give to Caesar. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Other people have seen some sort of opposition between the image of Caesar on the coin and the image of God on human persons.

You don't render persons and ourselves to Caesar. Now, I think that's a bit of a strange reading, but it's possible, and it certainly is something that's true in principle.

Our section ends with a challenge from the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. They present this strange case based upon the practice of the Leveret commandment, the commandment that when a man died, his brother would marry his widow in order to raise up seed for him.

And so this is a convoluted story of some really strange, bizarre situation that arose when a woman ended up marrying seven brothers after each other, after each one died.

Now, there's a much less extreme version of this scenario in Genesis chapter 38 with Tamar, Ur, Onan, and Shelah, and also Judah in that situation.

[13 : 34] Each one of them are involved with her in some way, and we might well ask, in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges the idea that resurrection is just a sort of revivication, a return to and an extension of our existing forms of life.

We will be like the angels. The angels don't marry. They're a non-procreating living host, and they endure, they don't die. However, marriage is given to fulfil the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and also to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death.

There is a presumption here that marriage is ordered in its very institution towards procreation, and when procreation is no longer an end, marriage ceases to exist.

The Leverett law is dealing with the problems where marriage fails to raise up seed. It's dealing with the problems of marriage in the face of death, and marriage more generally is dealing with a pre-eschatological situation where there is still a need to fill the earth, where there is still the reality of death to deal with, whereas in the resurrection there's a new principle of life.

There's a new principle of generation, or rather, regeneration. No longer marriage. We are not born to a husband and a wife in the regeneration, in the event of the resurrection.

[15 : 00] Rather, we are reborn from the grave, and as a result, this new principle of regeneration leads to a completely different form of society. We can maybe see the law of the Leverett against this backdrop.

Jesus then appeals to God's statement to Moses in Exodus chapter 3 that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And it seems to be a strange argument for the resurrection, but it seems to me that the point is he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And as a result, there is the assumption that they have some continued existence to him. Indeed, the action of the Exodus is being done in part on their account for their sake.

What does Jesus' teaching in response to the Sadducees have to teach us about the purpose of marriage and also how the reality of marriages here and now in this age might be transposed into the reality of the new creation and the resurrection?

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