

March 1, 2020

National Presbyterian Church

## **Following Jesus: "Tough Faith"**

Luke 20:1-44

David A. Renwick

In our sermons through the winter we're looking at the ministry of Jesus through the eyes of one of the four accounts we have in the Bible – St Luke.

And we come this morning to the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, which tells us the story of what happens after Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time -- on the first Palm Sunday: *the Palm Sunday story is told in Luke 19 and we'll return to it in five weeks when we reach our own "Palm Sunday," on April 5.* But over the next month our focus is on the particular events that take place in Luke 20-23, throughout the last week of Jesus' life.

And it's a harrowing week -- even before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion at the end of the week. It's a week in which there is a strong back and forth tussle, offense and defense between Jesus and his opponents, who are mainly the religious leaders of his day who are trying their best to find some reason to get rid of him.

At the very least they see Jesus as a pain in the neck; and at the most, they see him as a danger to their position in society and to the fragile peace that exists between the Jewish establishment and the foreign Roman occupiers.

To them, Jesus was an upstart. He has no credentials or formal qualifications: he hasn't been to seminary, and he knows no one in the inner circles of power. He's not on LinkedIn, and he has no network – AND yet he is he's gathering people around him, and pulling them into his own circle, which naturally creates suspicion with the status quo. Whether Jesus intends it or not, his presence and activities are seen as an attack on their vested interests.

On Netflix at the moment, there's a series called "Messiah" (which is worth watching – though do note that there's plenty foul language). It's about a mystical figure who arises in the Middle East and creates a following. And while there are some significant differences with the real Jesus, what's portrayed really well (in my opinion), is the confusion and frustration, and the fear and anger that this figure causes the establishment.

So there's this back and forth tussle between the religious leaders and Jesus in Jerusalem, and in chapter 20 of Luke there are four sections that describe this tussle: three in which Jesus is playing defense, and one in which he plays offense. . . which Jesus does (as he often did) by telling a story (20:9-19).

The story is about a king leaving a country and renting out his farmland (a vineyard) to tenants who are to be the custodians of the vineyard and who are to pay him with their produce.

But when the king sends his servants to collect the rent, the servants are treated despicably, which is ok for a while because the king is patient . . . until the king sends his son and the

tenants not only beat him up too, but they beat the king's son to death. And then the King gets mad – no more Mr. Nice Guy, but ready now to pass sentence.

And everybody listening knows that Jesus' story is about the religious leaders, especially because the Prophet Isaiah had told a well-known story (Isaiah 5) in which God's own people were described as a vineyard. And you can visualize the lights going on in their minds as Jesus speaks, because in the story

- *If the people were the vineyard*
- *Then their owner, the King, was God*
- *And the Son would be the Messiah*
- *And the tenants were the religious leaders (the custodians of the vineyard), who, everybody knew, were making plans to kill Jesus*
- *Which meant that Jesus was the Son -- the Messiah.*

So this story was not only an indictment from Jesus against the spiritual leaders of Israel *who claimed to be on God's side but weren't*. But it was an indirect claim for Jesus to be the son of the king – the Messiah. And the whole thing making the religious leaders mad; furious enough to take over, and go on the attack, on the offense – again!

And in Luke 20, their offense comes in the form of tricky questions – three of them addressed to Jesus, each trying to get Jesus to say something blasphemous or politically dangerous, so they could go “Aha! Gotcha!”

The first two questions are asked by the chief Priests, who are the guardians of the Temple in Jerusalem (where the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque are now).

- The temple was not only the religious center of ancient Israel but the political and economic center too (think of the dollars generated by religious pilgrimages to various places to this day)

### **Question 1.**

So the chief priests begin the tussle by asking Jesus what seemed to be an innocuous question about **HIS AUTHORITY**:

<sup>20</sup>One day, as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders and said to him,  
**“Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things?  
Who is it who gave you this authority?”**

And they are hoping that Jesus will say something directly about his authority being divine. Jesus has made indirect claims about himself, and more overt claims back north in Galilee, in the country. But this is different. This is now the polarized and charged atmosphere of the capital (as if he were here in DC), and if he answers directly it could be a way to nail him.

But Jesus doesn't answer. Rather, he pushes the question back on his opponents by asking them the same question re “authority,” but with respect to someone else – the greatest religious figure in first century Judaism: John the Baptist!

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered them, “I will also ask you a question, and you tell me:

<sup>4</sup>*Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”*

<sup>5</sup>They discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven (*heaven is a circumlocution for “God”*),’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ <sup>6</sup>But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.”  
<sup>7</sup>So they answered that they did not know where it came from.  
<sup>8</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “**Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.**”

And with that, the first question ends, Jesus is safe, and the story moves on . . . until, of course, these religious leaders come back again with another question.

## **Question 2.**

**In Luke 20:21, Jesus’ opponents change the subject from AUTHORITY to POLITICS.**

They ask Jesus about Taxes, and the mix of Church and State, which, back then as now, was another subject guaranteed to create a furor with pretty much everyone if Jesus put a step wrong.

Which leads me to say something that is both religious and political: **that at National – we pray for all our Presidents and Political leaders** -- it does not matter which party. If you’ve been attending only since Mr. Trump was President, then you need to know that we prayed for Mr. Obama, too, when he was president – and others before him! We do not pray for them because we agree or disagree but because 1 Tim 2:2 says WE ARE TO DO SO!

But -- my point is that the whole thing these days gets soooooo touchy (some people have left because of those prayers, thinking we are taking sides!).

Touchy now, and even more so back there and then, not only within Judaism, but especially between the Jewish people and the Roman occupiers. A word said in the wrong way could have massive consequences, and the religious leaders know this, so they deliberately go on the offense by asking Jesus **if it is Biblically legal to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor** (Caesar)? And Jesus sees the trap within the question . . . and so we read:

<sup>23</sup>Jesus perceived their craftiness and said to them, <sup>24</sup>“***Show me a denarius*** (a common coin). ***Whose head and whose title does it bear?***”  
They said, “The emperor’s.”  
<sup>25</sup>He said to them, “***Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.***”  
<sup>26</sup>And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, ***they became silent.***

So once again, Jesus staves off his opponents: this time by pointing to a coin which EVERYONE uses – including his opponents, even though it has an image on it, the image of the Emperor, as if to say

- *All of us are compromised in this world*
- *We all use the secular currency and economy*
- *We’re all caught between the ideal and the existing:*
- *There’s no clear right or wrong:*

***SO go figure it out: Where do you fit in between God and the secular Emperor? . . . each is owed something . . .***

And SO once again, Jesus silences his opponents, until they come back a third time and go on the offense again.

### Question 3.

This time they ask a question about **THEOLOGY**, and in particular, about the RESURRECTION: the mystery of life after death!

We Modern secular people often believe that “not believing” in something like the resurrection is modern: that people back then were all superstitious, and believed naturally in another world because they were part of a superstitious age; but we moderns *now know better* because we live in a scientific age.

But that’s not how it worked – historically. The fact (according to the Jewish historian Josephus who backs up the gospels in this) is that a group within the Jewish priesthood (known as the Sadducees) believed passionately that *this life* was all there was. And they are the questioners here. They think the Bible (our Old Testament) is on their side, because the Old Testament says very little about a life-to-come. So they thought that they could trip up Jesus – this uneducated country bumpkin –by exposing his lack of biblical knowledge.

So they put Jesus on the spot by asking him about the resurrection (20:27-33). And Jesus responds *by quoting Scripture off the top of his head*, showing up their Biblical ignorance, and causing some of his listeners not to grow angry, but to actually give him a compliment! So Jesus says:.

<sup>37</sup>the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord *as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*.<sup>38</sup>Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him -- all of them are alive.”  
<sup>39</sup>Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.”

And with, the questioning comes to an end, Luke says,

<sup>40</sup>for they no longer dared to ask him another question.

So here we have this series of intellectual attacks and counter-attacks: offense and defense. Each time Jesus is questioned he responds, *not only to defend himself* (which he does), *but to give his opponents something to think about*. HIS MIND WAS SHARP and provided the early disciples with a model that they followed.

- Not only was Jesus a gentle shepherd caring for people
- Not only was Jesus a wise dispenser of good advice
- Not only was Jesus – a lover of God who prayed often

But Jesus *had sharpened his mind for battle to deal with the questioners and skeptics of his day*.

And my challenge to all of us today, especially in this season of Lent, in these weeks leading up to Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection, is for us to do the same: to sharpen our minds for God!

Down below, you’ll see a list of books that will help sharpen YOUR mind as Christians, that will deepen your faith and enable you to live with confidence as believers in this secular age. I challenge you to make a commitment

- To read at least one . . .
- Or watch a video – maybe three videos for one book that will move your mind forward in faith . . .

First Peter 3.15 says it so simply, reflecting on Jesus model of discipleship:

*“Always be ready to make your defense  
to anyone who demands from you an accounting  
for the hope that is in you.”*

Jesus – in the last week of his life was in the firestorm that was Jerusalem, walking into it deliberately and confidently, and he did not wilt. He was no spiritual, or intellectual, wimp, but joined in the back and forth of his day.

LET’S EQUIP OURSELVES to grow in faith and understanding  
And to play our part in our day too.

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See Dr. Renwick’s 2020 Lenten Booklist below

### **STRENGTHENING YOUR MIND FOR GOD**

#### **Dr. Renwick’s 2020 Lenten Booklist**

**Choose ONE – and read! Not sure you can get around to reading?**

- Search the web for shorter reviews and summaries
- Search the web for videos – many of these authors are on video!

#### **Preparation for Lent, Holy Week and Easter**

- The Bible! (*Find daily bible reading notes on the web: read a little every day*)
- The Story, ed. Max Lucado. (*Still have your copy from 2018/19? Read it again!*)
- Bread and Wine (*short, daily readings for Lent and Easter by Lewis, Chesterton, Yancey, Buechner, L’Engle, etc.*), 2003
- Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, N.T. Wright, 2007

#### **Spiritual Growth and Relationships**

- Life of the Beloved, Henri Nouwen, 1992
- The Blessing: Giving the Gift of Unconditional Love and Acceptance, by J. Trent, G. Smalley, K. Stageberg, rev.2019

#### **Why Christian Belief Makes Good Sense in a Secular Age**

- Surprised by Oxford: A Memoir, Carolyn Weber, 2013
- Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father's Questions about Christianity, Gregory A. Boyd, 2008
- Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis, 1952
- The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief, Francis Collins, 2006
- The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism, Timothy Keller, 2008
- Is Religion Dangerous, Keith Ward, 2006

### **Christian Action in a Difficult World**

- The Bible and the Ballot: Using the Bible in Political Decisions, Tremper Longman, 2020 (*Dr. Longman will be back at NPC this summer*)
- Just Mercy, Bryan Stevenson, 2014 (*also: watch the movie!*)
- Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom, David W. Blight, 2018 (*2019 Pulitzer Prize*)

### **Christin History and Impact**

- Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World, Tom Holland, 2019 (*from a secular historian*).
- Resilient Faith: How the Early Christian Third Way Changed the World, Gerald R. Sittser, 2019

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