

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew, Chapter twenty-two beginning at the fifteenth verse.

Glory to you Lord Jesus Christ.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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.' ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

This is the Gospel of The Lord:

Praise to You Lord Jesus Christ

The context is the few days after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and before the trial and crucifixion. He has thrown the money-lenders out of the temple, and is preaching and teaching in the temple precincts every day, and going out of the city each night to stay in Bethany, presumably at the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

The leaders of the Jews are determined to kill him, and are searching for a pretext. Jesus talks of "my Father's kingdom" - if they can trap him into denouncing the kingdom of Caesar (Tiberius at the time), ie Roman rule, in front of enough witnesses, that will be enough to get him executed by the Romans.

The Herodians are the party of King Herod, the Jewish leaders in with the Romans, even though the Pharisees generally were not. But Jesus' answer is masterly: "whose head and title is on this coin?" that is, the coin belongs to Caesar, and you give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Which, incidentally, was why you could not pay the temple tax in roman coins, because they carried the image and title of Caesar as a god, you had to change into

jewish or temple coinage, hence the money-changers in the temple courtyard in the earlier chapter.

Clearly they could get no charge of sedition out of this man, so they went away.

The next lot wanted to make him look a fool, or watch him tie himself into logical knots, but once again his answer was masterly. Marrying one's brother's widow is laid down in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, but only applied where the brother had had no children, so it was both a way of providing for the childless widow, and hopefully, providing an heir for the brother's family line. It is called Levirate marriage (from Levi) and is still found in poor countries where women are entirely dependent on the men.

The Sadducees were one of the powerful Jewish sects at the time, an elite, wealthy group who ran the temple services and provided most of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the council which subsequently condemned Jesus to death. Their beliefs differed from the Pharisees in several ways, the most important being that they only accepted the Law as written in the five Books, Genesis to Deuteronomy, and not the extensive oral additions and complications adopted by the Pharisees (and often criticised by Jesus). They also rejected any idea of survival of a soul after death, essentially because this cannot be found in the written books of the Law.

Jesus' answer was therefore particularly devastating to them: "you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God." Because knowing the scriptures – the written books – was exactly what they took pride in! And the phrase Jesus quotes - "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" - is from Exodus 3:6, one of their key books of Law. So once again, Jesus was more than a match for them; they were ones left looking stupid, not Jesus. And of course, for us today, Jesus was re-affirming that there is indeed eternal life after death.

However, Jesus was saying much more than this. The original idea of Levirate marriage was based in the dependence of women on their father or husband, their need for a male guardian and protector. The example given by the Sadducees was completely contemptuous of the woman involved; she was just a parcel, a property to be handed over from brother to brother.

Women as property was certainly the version in the Jewish law, though there were various protections set out. Roman law at the time gave complete power to the father of a family, including the right to punish with death, ie to kill, his wives, children, any dependents – patria potestas.

Unfortunately, this view persists to this day in many countries, and is further supported by passages in the Moslem Quran which states believing men will be rewarded in heaven with numerous virgin brides: that is, women exist only for men's pleasure and use.

Under this scenario, there is no existence or value for a woman as an individual. "This was the way of village life for women. Always the property of someone else. You'd be born somebody's daughter and die somebody's wife." Rainbow Chan of the Weitou people of Hong Kong, in her new show "The Bridal Lament."

Jesus completely rejects this view of women. Throughout his ministry, he gave equal value to women - speaking to them, allowing them to touch and embrace him, including them in his group of followers and valuing their input, eg when Mary of Bethany “sat at his feet”, and in his discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Now his answer to the Sadducees makes it clear that this how it is in God’s eternal kingdom, in heaven, as well as with him on earth: there will be no continuation of the subservient marriages visualised by the Sadducees. And this applies to women as well as men; Jesus’ words were “nor are (they) given in marriage”.

Jesus is saying that women will indeed be in God’s eternal kingdom but not as subservient beings, there purely for the pleasure of a man.

This is the revolutionary message of Christianity – that **all** people, male and female, as in Genesis 1:27, are created in God’s image and **all** are equally valued by God. Paul got it right in his statement which has resounded through the centuries: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” [Gal 3:29]

What then for Christians who hope and long to be re-united in heaven with their deceased husband or wife? My view is that as God is love, and all love comes from God, therefore all love goes back to God. Therefore any relationship based in love will be found in heaven. Relationships based in love are in God’s eternal kingdom in the here and now, and will exist eternally in God’s heaven. Therefore a marriage of love will exist in heaven, as will love of parents for children, brothers and sisters, friends for each other. I even suspect love of pets such as dogs or horses will exist in heaven – bit doubtful about cats! But there will be no place in heaven for relationships based on power, coercion and control; these are sins, and will have to be acknowledged and repented before anyone can enter God’s kingdom.

I finish with a prayer:

Lord God, who created us in love, help us not to be led astray by the smart-alecs who are out to trap and confuse us. Help us to see through your glory to your humanity, and to trust in your wisdom and love as shown in the words and deeds of Jesus, your Son and our Saviour. Amen