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# WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT DOCTRINE

Luke 20:27-40

By

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Luke Lesson 93

## Why You Should Care About Doctrine Luke 20:27-40

We live in a day when doctrine has become an unpleasant word, even among evangelical Christians. Admit it: When you hear the word “doctrine,” does it evoke positive or negative feelings in you? A person who holds strongly to doctrine is viewed as difficult and divisive. Often such people are arrogant, thinking that they are right and everyone else is wrong. They are not usually regarded as kind and loving.

The popular cry of our day is, “They will know that we are Christians by our love, not by our doctrinal agreement.” Thus we are encouraged to set aside all doctrines that divide us and come together on the basis of our common love for Jesus. Tolerance and unity are the most important thing. Look where doctrinal debates have led us, into centuries of shameful division among those who believe in Jesus Christ. Life, experience, and feelings are what matter. Theology is stuffy, dry, and dead.

The main problem with such thinking is that it brings us into direct conflict with Jesus Christ! Luke 20:27-40 shows Jesus in conflict with some of the religious leaders in Israel, the Sadducees, who denied the doctrine of the resurrection and the existence of angels and spirits (Acts 23:8). When they proposed their doctrinal question to Jesus, He did *not* respond, “The important thing, guys, is that we all love God and one another. We’re all Jews; we all believe in the Scriptures. You hold that there is no resurrection, while some of us believe that there is a resurrection. But none of us can know for certain. So let’s just get together on matters where we agree and sing songs that make us all feel good. After all, love, not doctrine, is the main thing.”

Rather, Jesus forcefully refuted their doctrinal error. Mark records that Jesus told them at the outset that they were mistaken, and He repeated at the close of His comments, “You are greatly mistaken” (Mark 12:24, 27). Apparently, sound doctrine mattered a great deal to Jesus! It mattered because He knew that a person cannot hold to serious doctrinal error and be rightly related to the

God of truth. It mattered because He knew that it is impossible truly to love a person who holds to serious doctrinal error if you do not warn him of his error and teach him the truth as revealed in God's Word. Since sound doctrine mattered greatly to Jesus, it should matter greatly to us.

You should care about doctrine because Jesus did and because your life both here and hereafter depends on holding in faith to sound doctrine.

Our knowledge of the Sadducees is a bit scanty and uncertain. We don't know for sure the origin of the group or its name. They were mostly upper class, educated, rationalistic, religious conservatives who held to the supreme authority of the Torah (the first five books of Moses). They rejected the oral traditions of the Jewish rabbis. The high priest and many of his associates were Sadducees (Acts 5:17). In their denial of the resurrection and the existence of angels and spirits, they disagreed sharply with the Pharisees (Acts 23:6-9). Jesus' encounter with them reveals three reasons why you should care about doctrine:

1. You should care about doctrine because Jesus did.

This should be reason enough. Note two things:

A. Jesus taught that there is such a thing as doctrinal truth and doctrinal error, and that truth matters.

He didn't say, "Hey, it really doesn't matter what you guys believe, just as long as you're sincere." He didn't say, "I love you guys! You're my brothers, even if we disagree over this little matter of the resurrection!" He didn't say, "I respect your views. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion." He told them authoritatively that they were greatly mistaken and He set forth the reasons why.

As Allan Bloom pointed out a few years ago in his best seller, *The Closing of the American Mind* ([Simon and Schuster], p. 28), the intellectual community has relegated religion to the realm of opinion as opposed to knowledge. It is simply a matter of one subjective and uncertain opinion versus another. Undergirding this is the view that all truth is relative and that tolerance the chief virtue (pp. 25-27). He said, "The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all" (p. 26). The result of this is that you can have two people holding to oppo-

site views in the spiritual realm and they both can be right, since religious "truth" is simply one's subjective ideas or experience of it.

This thinking permeated this church eight years ago when I came here. One elder (no longer here) told me that the title of a sermon booklet that I had written, "What the Bible Says About Abortion," was arrogant. I asked him why and he said, "Because we can't say what the Bible says about anything." I was a bit stunned, but I countered, "Really? Can't I say that the Bible says that adultery is wrong?" He responded, "No, you can only say, '*I think* that it's wrong.'" I tried to clarify by saying that we have to express biblical truth in love, showing compassion to the woman with a problem pregnancy or to the person who has fallen into adultery. But, I told him, the bottom line must be firm: Abortion and adultery are wrong. No, he insisted, we must keep our options open and not be dogmatic about such matters.

I have encountered this in others since then. People have left the church because they don't like it when I point out the doctrinal errors that are infiltrating the church. They've said, "Why can't you just be positive?" The answer is that Paul stated that the job of an elder is not only to exhort in sound doctrine, but also to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9).

I am not saying that we are to be cutting or unkind in blasting those who disagree with us. Paul said that "the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition" (2 Tim. 2:24-25). Also, we need to be careful to distinguish core, central doctrines from those that are more peripheral. Clearly, holding to the deity of Jesus is far more important than whether one holds to a pretribulational rapture!

Some doctrines are so important that to deny them is to deny the Christian faith. These would include: the inspiration and authority of Scripture; the Trinity; the deity of Jesus Christ; His substitutionary atonement; His bodily resurrection from the dead; His bodily return; that we are justified by grace through faith apart from works; and the future judgment.

Other doctrines are important because they have a strong effect on how one lives the Christian life, but they are not on the

level of heresy. I would put Calvinism versus Arminianism in this category. Holding to the Calvinistic view of God's sovereignty in our salvation dramatically affects a person's view of God and of human nature. It affects how we deal with suffering, how we evangelize the lost, our doctrine of prayer, and many other practical issues. But those who hold to the Arminian view are still, for the most part, men who have been born again by God's sovereign grace, even though they think it was by their free will! We must treat them as brothers in Christ, not as heretics.

Some doctrines are not worth wrangling over at all. We've all met Christians who want to debate minor issues that have no practical significance. They want to prove that they are right and everyone else is wrong. While it's fine to discuss such issues in a spirit of love, to get angry or divide from other believers over minor doctrinal differences is sin.

Jesus viewed the doctrine of the resurrection as a core issue. To deny that God raises the dead is to deny the doctrine of future rewards for the righteous and punishment for the wicked, which removes the major incentive for holy living. It is to deny the faithfulness of the covenant-keeping God, whose promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob clearly were not fulfilled in their lifetimes. Thus we make God out to be a liar. It is to deny hope for those who have lost loved ones or for those who suffer terribly in this life. As Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15, if we deny the resurrection of the dead, then Jesus is not raised and our faith is utterly worthless. We are still in our sins. Thus Jesus taught that there is such a thing as doctrinal truth and error.

B. Jesus shows us that the source of sound doctrine is not human reason, but Scripture properly interpreted.

Both the Sadducees and Jesus held to the authority of Scripture. They begin by quoting Moses and Jesus answers them by quoting Moses. But these men gave undue emphasis to human reason, which led them to disregard certain Scriptures; and they underestimated the power of God to raise the dead and give them a whole different existence in heaven. Mark 12:24 quotes Jesus, "Is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures, or the power of God?" In Luke 20, Jesus deals with

their not understanding God's power in verses 34-36 and with their not understanding the Scriptures in verses 37-38.

The Sadducees' error was based on some wrong assumptions. They wrongly assumed that life after death would necessarily be just like life now. Thus they took the Mosaic allowance for a brother marrying his deceased brother's widow to raise up offspring for him, and wrongly applied it to life in the resurrected state. They wrongly assumed that people will marry monogamously in heaven, just as they do now. Based on their assumptions, the idea of a woman having seven husbands in heaven was logically absurd. But their assumptions were wrong.

These men underestimated God's power to raise us from the dead and to give us new bodies that will not be subject to sin and death. Jesus says that in the resurrection, we will be like the angels in two aspects, that we will not marry and that we will not die. Also, like the holy angels, we will not be able to sin. Thus we will come into the full sense of being "sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" (20:36). We are already children of God through the new birth, but we can't grasp the full import of that until we receive our new resurrection bodies in heaven.

I must be honest in saying that the thought of being celibate, like the angels, never used to get me excited about heaven. I've often said to Marla, "How can heaven be heaven if I can't be married to you?" Being married to her is the best thing that's ever happened to me, except for my salvation. I was thinking about this in the context of thinking about Paul's words about marriage. He says with reference to the one flesh aspect of marriage, that he isn't talking about marriage, but rather about Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). It dawned on me that he is saying that the marriage relationship, and especially the one flesh aspect of marriage, is the closest earthly picture that we have to our union with Christ, which will be consummated in heaven. I don't mean to be crude, but rather reverent, when I say that if you think that marriage, and particularly sex in marriage is wonderful, it's just an earthly picture of how much more wonderful it will be to be intimately joined to our heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. You may have to take that by faith, but that's what God's Word promises!

The Sadducees erred because they were rationalists. If something went beyond human reason, such as God's power to raise the dead and give them a whole new existence, they didn't accept it. Rationalism limits knowledge to man and the power of reason. Believing in God and His supernatural power is not irrational, but it is supra-rational. It transcends human reason. The way we know the truth of Scripture is first by being born from above by God's power so that we come to know Him and then by submitting our reason and our will to God's revelation in Scripture. We must hold to all that God's Word reveals, even if it doesn't fit with our finite reasoning, or we will fall into serious doctrinal error. Rationalism undermines God's power; faith in His Word affirms it.

In verses 37-38, Jesus shows how the Sadducees did not understand the Scriptures. He takes the incident of Moses at the burning bush, where God reveals Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These men had all been dead for centuries when God said that to Moses. It would be ridiculous for God to say that He is the God of men who ceased to exist at death! If the patriarchs had died and ceased to exist, then God's promises to them would be null and void. But, as Jesus explains, God "is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Those who have died in faith are actually living with God, awaiting the day when they will receive their resurrection bodies. They "all live to Him" (20:38), which means, as Calvin explains, "that believers, after ... they have died in this world, lead a heavenly life with God" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "Harmony of the Gospels," 3:53).

Again, the point is not to set aside human reason, but rather to subject our reason to God's revelation in Scripture. We must know the Bible as Jesus did. This means thinking carefully about Scripture, as Jesus did to infer the doctrine of the resurrection from that portion of Scripture. But we must not exalt our reason above Scripture nor try to force Scripture into our logic. You should care strongly about sound doctrine because Jesus did.

2. You should care about doctrine because your life here depends on holding in faith to sound doctrine.

I can only touch on several aspects of this:

- A. You cannot be in submission to Jesus Christ and knowingly hold to false doctrine on core matters.

The Sadducees were in opposition to Jesus, not in submission to Him. They are challenging His authority, trying to humiliate Him in front of the people. But Jesus clearly asserts His authority and lordship in His confrontation here, as well as in the next section, where He takes up the offense and challenges them with a question. The Sadducees were the supposedly educated ones, but Jesus, the untaught carpenter from Nazareth, boldly refutes their error in a way that makes even some of the scribes (Pharisees, no doubt) remark, "Teacher, You have spoken well" (20:39).

Invariably, the person who knowingly holds to doctrinal error on core issues is hiding behind a smokescreen of some supposed difficulty in the Bible so that he does not have to submit to the lordship of Christ. I say "knowingly" because there is a difference between the babe in Christ who may be in error or confused by some difficult doctrine because he is untaught and the false teacher, who actively promotes error even though he knows that he is deviating from orthodox doctrine. With the former we must be gentle and patient; with the latter, we should be much stronger, since the man knows better. But invariably, the false teacher is not in submission to Christ as Lord. It follows that ...

- B. Holding to false doctrine stems from sin and results in sin.

Jesus goes on (20:46-47) to confront the sin of the scribes, which included both the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were proud, they loved receiving adulation and honor, and they posed as religious men, but they were greedy, selfish hypocrites who would face God's severe judgment. Was their false doctrine of the resurrection a cause of their sin or a result of it? Probably both, since false doctrine and sin always get entangled together. But doctrine always affects life. Just a few days after this encounter with Jesus, these Sadducees sided with the Pharisees in condemning Jesus to death. Their sin of refusing to submit to Jesus' teaching on the resurrection in part led to their sin of killing their Messiah! Sound doctrine produces spiritually healthy Christians. False doctrine is both a cause of and a covering for all manner of ungodliness.

- C. Our motives for wanting to know sound doctrine are important.

These men did not come to Jesus with a sincere doctrinal question which they wanted to get cleared up. They just wanted to make Jesus look bad to the crowd, and so they contrived this unlikely story about the woman and her seven husbands. Even the Pharisees who commended Jesus for answering well were not submitting themselves to His lordship. Rather, they were commending Him because He happened to agree with them on this point! Their motives were not right.

The only valid motive for wanting to know sound doctrine is so that we can know and glorify God better. Sound doctrine should lead us into a deeper love for Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us on the cross. We should never want to know doctrine so that we can proudly prove that we're right or display our great knowledge. In fact, the more we truly know sound doctrine, the more humble we will become, because we will realize how great God is and how little we are! We should care about doctrine because Jesus did and because sound doctrine affects our life on this earth. Finally,

3. You should care about doctrine because your life hereafter depends on holding in faith to sound doctrine.

Jesus is not speaking here about the resurrection of the wicked, but only of the righteous. He says that some are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead (20:35), implying what elsewhere is taught explicitly, that some do not attain to it. The wicked will also be raised, but for judgment and eternal punishment (John 5:29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20).

In our text, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all men who knew God personally because of His grace. God counted them righteous on the basis of their faith, not their works (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4). Scripture never teaches that these men or any others were worthy in themselves of heaven. They were worthy only in the sense that God imputed His righteousness to them by faith.

The point is, our very hope of eternal life hinges on holding to sound doctrine about salvation and about the promises of God regarding the life to come. If we mistakenly think, as many professing Christians do, that we attain eternal life by our good works,

we cannot have hope, because we can never be sure that we have done enough. But if we believe in Him who justifies the ungodly, our faith is reckoned as righteousness (Rom. 4:5). That is the only basis for solid hope about the life to come.

### Conclusion

I offer three concluding applications:

(1) *Don't buy into the current trend to sacrifice core biblical truth on the altar of love and unity.* We must be kind and gracious in our manner and we must not quarrel over minor issues. But we do not truly love others if we compromise the core truths of the gospel for the sake of unity. Biblical love cares enough to warn about false and damnable doctrine.

(2) *Work at deepening your theological understanding.* The word "theology" scares the average church member today, but it should not. Remember, Paul didn't write Romans, the high water mark of New Testament theology, for seminary students. He wrote it to strengthen a congregation of normal believers. If they could wrestle with Paul's theology, so can you! Other than the Bible, the best book that I've read is Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Sure, it takes some mental effort, but it's rewarding and quite practical.

(3) *If you do not understand the basic truths of the gospel, don't pretend that you do.* Talk to someone who can help you today! Your eternal destiny is at stake. If you believe false doctrine about how to get to heaven, being sincere won't help you on judgment day. Many in false cults are sincere, but dead wrong. Everyone on board the airliner that recently crashed into the Pacific believed in the soundness of that plane, but they perished because it was faulty. If you believe in a faulty way to heaven, you won't make it. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). You should care about doctrine because Jesus did and your life here and hereafter depends on holding in faith to sound doctrine.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is sincerity in spiritual matters not enough? Why must we believe in the truth?
2. Since there are so many different doctrinal views, how can we know who is right?
3. Jesus said that the world will know we are Christians by our love. Is doctrinal truth less important than love and unity? Why/why not?
4. What are some ways that believing false doctrine affects a person's life and behavior?

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