

October 25, 2026

“Missing the Point”

Matthew 22:34-46

Intro:

There was a growing sense of desperation among the men meeting in the dimly lit back room in the temple district. Something had to be done about this Jesus fellow – His proclamations undermining the power and authority of the religious leaders has gone on for long enough, and something decisive needed to be done. Sure, there was the issue of the religious leaders’ reputation on the line, but there was also a growing concern that radical teaching such as what Jesus was giving would upset the delicate (and lucrative for those who knew how to work the system) balance between the Jews and their Roman overlords. At the moment, the Romans were more or less content to let the Jews alone to manage their own affairs and religion, but that would last only as long as there wasn’t any large scale trouble from the Jewish quarter. For this tentative peace to continue, it was in the best interest of everyone concerned (the “everyone” being primarily those who were in the upper echelons) not to disrupt the current systems of power and influence. Jesus, it seemed, was on a mission to cause as much disruption as possible and the Jewish leaders were not happy about that.

Which is why the meeting was taking place. A plan was needed to take Jesus out of the picture – something that would see him jailed or even executed. And it needed to be done above the law and hopefully in such a way as to keep their own hands relatively clean of the whole affair.

A public stoning would be too obvious and there was no guarantee that the people would go along with it, as Jesus was quite popular among the common folk. No, they would need to do something that would make arresting him seem like the obvious, and only, option. They had to trick him into saying something that was either in opposition of the Romans, or against Scripture and therefore against God. Three lines of attack were decided upon, and the next day the first line was attempted. It was the supporters of King Herod that started things off.

This was a political angle. The question was put to Jesus about whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar – the thought being that if Jesus answered that they should not pay taxes to Caesar, then the Romans would step in and arrest him. If he said the Jews should pay taxes, then the Jewish people would balk at that, and Jesus' popularity would crumble. Jesus saw through the trap and sidestepped it by declaring that people should give to Caesar what is his, and give to God what belongs to Him.

The second attempt came from the sector of the Sadducees – these were more religion-focused leaders. They were the self-appointed keepers and policers of people's faith by deciding matters that were clearly about religion or belief. They stepped up later in the day to ask an over-exaggerated question about marriage in heaven. They themselves didn't believe there would be a resurrection of the dead in the end times, so their question was to try and get Jesus to say something that would be seen as a slap in the face to what the majority of the Jewish people had accepted as truth. The question was: If several men, brothers in fact, because that was the traditional practice for marriage to ensure the continuation of a family line, married the same woman one after the other because they kept dying, then who gets her as his wife in heaven? Jesus saw past this trap as well, and called those Sadducees out for trying to claim expertise in being religious, when they clearly had no understanding of what Scripture – the religious text – said.

This opened up the door for the final attempt to trap Jesus. If he wanted to call people out on a lack of scriptural knowledge, then they would use expertise in Scriptural knowledge to trap him. This was the arena of the Pharisees, and they posed a question that, no matter how Jesus answered, would allow them to point out Jesus' failure to recognize a different part of Scripture that spoke against whatever Jesus said. In effect, this could end up as an endless debate and the longer that went on, the more the crowds would see Jesus as someone who really didn't know as much as they thought. Of course, Jesus sees through this one as well and answers their question of "What is the most important commandment?" with the unassailable reply to first love God and then love one another. Their plan

had been to toss out a counter argument to whatever Jesus said. When that wasn't possible, they were mostly left speechless.

Missing the Point:

It is into the silence of defeat that Jesus puts an end to these pointless efforts to trap him. "What do you think about the Messiah?" – a fairly broad question that could invite all sorts of manipulative desires, but Jesus follows it up immediately by asking, "Whose son is he?"

We are still in the arena of the Pharisee on this one, and they answer with the strength of the traditional and scriptural understanding that the David was the ultimate father of the Messiah. On this point, Jesus and the Pharisees did not disagree. David was seen to be the greatest of the kings in the Davidic line and the Messiah was understood to come from his line, thus making the Messiah the son of David. If the conversation stopped here, it would still look like the learned Pharisees had gotten the best of the uneducated country boy.

But it doesn't stop there. Jesus then asks why David, in the Scriptures, calls the Messiah "Lord" – which is a quote from Psalm 110. All circles of scriptural scholarship at the time attributed those words to David. If this is the case, then why would the son be considered greater than the father? In a worldly context, he wouldn't be. This question is unanswerable for the Pharisees. They cannot conceive of a scenario where the son would be elevated above the father. They also cannot conceive of a Messiah that is different from the one they pictured in their minds. Being the son of David meant that the Messiah would be like David – a mighty king who would conquer and lead the Jews out from under their oppressors (the Romans at this point in time).

But they were missing the point. In the framing of Jesus' question, he opened the door to understanding that the Messiah would be something, someone, different than the great warrior they had been expecting. He would deliver them based on the plans of God, not on the plans of humanity. What Jesus was pointing to was not something completely foreign to Scripture. In fact, this idea of what the

Messiah would be like is threaded all through the law and the prophets. Those who claimed to be experts missed those points because they wanted their own ideas to shape who and what the Messiah was to be.

Conclusion:

Of course, the Pharisees had no answer for Jesus. He had shown them a hole in their understanding. They weren't as "expert" as they thought they were. Similarly, we have to be careful as Christians to also not fall into that same trap. It is all too easy for Christians, especially if we have spent many years in the church, to think that we are experts on everything to do with the Bible and what it means to be a Christian. We have clear lines of right and wrong – with the response of "the Bible says..." ready to our lips. And as often as we might be correct in our understanding, we can also get it incorrect. The Holy Spirit reveals to us the truths that are given in the Bible, but he only does so to the extent that we are ready to understand and integrate those truths into our lives. That is why Bible study and prayer is a lifelong task. Just when we think we have it figured out, God opens up a new layer for us that brings us back to question and to seek God further. How many times have each of you opened up to a passage of Scripture that you thought was familiar, only to find some new revelation in the words? We need to hold our understanding of Scripture carefully, and with humility. We need to be more willing to listen and discern than to lecture and correct.

The Pharisees were trying to use Scripture to trap people and point out where they were wrong. That is not what Scripture, and knowledge of Scripture is for. It is for us to know God and gain understanding of how we are live as His people. So, the next time you find yourself pulling out "the Bible says" to defend your position, take a moment to stop and ask God if there is something here that you do not understand that He is wanting to show to you. As the author of Hebrews points out, "The word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires." (Heb 4:12) Or as Eugene Petterson paraphrases it in The Message: "God means what he says. What he says goes. His

powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey."

Let's pray.