

# HOW CAN WE BE THE PEOPLE OF GOD: THE SADDUCEES

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**Text:** Luke 20:27-38 (also Matt. 3:7-9 ff; Acts 5:17 ff; Acts 23: 6-8)

**Introduction:** Second in a four part series on the question “How Can We Be the People of God?” My approach is to look at the teachings and practices of the four major sects of Judaism in the first century, A.D., to see how Jesus responded to them, and to look at parallel movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and evaluate how we should respond. Previously, we examined the **Pharisees**, who were legalists.

**I. The Sadducees:** Today we are going to examine and evaluate a powerful group called the **Sadducees**.

- A. **Origin:** Like the Pharisees, the Sadducees probably find their **historical roots** during the time of the Maccabean Kingdom, which can be dated from around 167-142-63 B.C. They probably arose during the time of John Hyrcanus (reigned from about 134-104 B.C.). The Sadducees were closely identified with the priesthood and the temple. This identification would continue through the New Testament period.
- B. **Who were the Sadducees?**
  1. Zadok, high priest of King David?
  2. The **Sanhedrin** was the absolute religious and political authority among the Jewish people in Palestine. The Sadducees along with the Pharisees dominated the membership of this organization. More on this later.
  3. They were **wealthy aristocrats, property owners**. Some may have been **priests**, the rest would have been **wealthy laymen**. They were small in number but great in influence.
  4. **Beliefs and Practices:**
    - a. **The Sadducees accepted only the Torah or the Law for religious authority.** They, unlike the Pharisees, rejected the authority of the Prophets and the Writings, as well as the oral interpretations of the accepted Hebrew religious writings.
    - b. **The Sadducees denied the resurrection of the dead, rewards and punishments in the afterlife, belief in angels and demons, etc.** Why? Because they did not believe that these things were taught in the Law. [The Sadducees were sad you see because they didn't believe in the resurrection]
    - c. **The Sadducees believed in the freedom and the responsibility of man.** They taught that “**all things lie within our own power.**” They believed that **God is responsible for the good, but not the evil** in this world. **Men are responsible for their blessings, and any misfortune they bring upon themselves.** What happens to us is because of our own decisions and actions. We are well-to-do because we have earned our status; the same holds for others.
    - d. **The Sadducees were closely attached to the Temple and the priesthood, which was responsible for the temple and the sacrificial system.**
    - e. **Political and social beliefs:**
      - i. **The Sadducees were collaborationists and compromisers – they were willing and able to get along with whomever was in control of the nation of the Jews, including Rome.**
      - ii. **Sanhedrin:** The Sadducees, along with the Pharisees, were dominant members of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the **ruling council of the Jews** during the time of Roman control. The name came from the term for “**seventy,**” which was the number of members of the council, along

with the president. The Sanhedrin exercised **absolute religious authority in Palestine**. They also were given **great political authority by Rome** with one major exception, capital punishment. Rome reserved that for herself, which explains why the Sanhedrin took its case against Jesus to the procurator Pontius Pilate, and which explains why they couched their charges against Jesus in political rather than religious terms. But the Sanhedrin exercised executive, legislative, and judicial authority.

- iii. **The Sadducees benefited from the rule of Rome – economically, politically, and socially. They were given great authority – but they were expected to keep the peace in order to maintain their favored status.**
- iv. **The Sadducees were able to use Rome for their own benefit. A good example is the arrest and trial of Jesus.** The Sadducees and the Sanhedrin wanted to get rid of Jesus. He was a threat to stability in Palestine with what they considered to be too radical ideas. Therefore, they arrested and tried Jesus on religious grounds, found him guilty, and then determined to use Rome to rid themselves of him. They took him before Pontius Pilate and made political charges (sedition, treason, and insurrection) against him. He was convicted and executed by Rome as a threat to the Roman Empire.

**Summary: The Sadducees were wealthy, powerful, aristocrats. They were conservative in their approach to religious matters, including their commitment to the Mosaic Law only, and support of the Temple and the priesthood. They collaborated with the Roman government and aggressively defended their positions and possessions.**

- a. The Sadducees answered the question **“How Can We Be the people of God?”** by saying don’t rock the boat. **Cooperate with those in power, i.e. Rome, and keep religion simple. They called for compromise for the sake of security.**
- b. They also sought to use power for their own benefit. They worked with Rome. Rome was good for their religion and their religion was good for Rome. They kept the peace for Rome and prevented any forms of radical religion from spreading. At the same time they believed that what was good for them was good for God. **In the end, however, when revolt against Rome took place, they were held accountable by Rome and disappeared from the scene.**
- c. They also believed that **God helps those who help themselves**. They used power and influence to become rich. Then they determined that despite their unethical practices, God must truly be blessing them.

- III. **Response of Jesus: Jesus had little good to say about the Sadducees. He would have joined with John the Baptist who in Matt. 3:7, who referred to both the Pharisees and the Sadducees as “a brood of vipers.” They claimed Abraham as their father but at the same time were guilty of not bearing good fruit and of deceiving the people.**
  - A. **One of the major misunderstandings of the Sadducees was concerning the Kingdom of God.** They saw the **kingdom as earthly** but Jesus taught that His kingdom was **spiritual and found in the hearts of his followers, not in political power and authority.**
  - B. When the Sadducees tried to entrap Jesus on a theological question related to the Law and Levirate marriage during the week prior to his arrest, Jesus replied that the Sadducees didn’t really understand the law that they claimed to accept. He pointed out that God was the God of the living and not the God of the dead. Again, his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in which he placed the attitude and the motive behind one’s actions as a higher ethical standard than the law, he demonstrated the superiority of His approach to religion and faith.

**CONCLUSION:** It is difficult to identify any contemporary group with the Sadducees in terms of every characteristic. At the same time there does exist those who demonstrate some important parallels. I suggest that those in our society who have a combination of spiritual and civil religion seem to be close to modern day Sadducees.

A. Many in today's modern evangelical movement fit this description. They profess and practice a rather conservative faith. They love and defend the Bible, as defined by their own interpretation. They simplify their faith in terms of easily identifiable principles – Biblical authority, conservative theology, traditional family values.

B. At the same time they have adopted a civil religion. They believe in a theocratic society, where religion and politics are united. The government is encouraged to and expected to defend and promote the teachings of the church. The politicians can depend upon the support of the faithful to stay in power. Volatile issues such as abortion, and gay rights provide energy for both groups. At the same time issues like flag burning, patriotism, prayer in the public schools, and display of religious teachings and symbols are also promoted with great fervor.

C. Interestingly, more often than not, traditional ministries and programs of the church are neglected or minimalized: Evangelism involves not only conversion but identification with either a particular religious movement or political party.

The danger is that the line is blurred between religion and politics, the church and the state. Historically, this has happened in both political parties in our country. The church almost subtly becomes an arm of a particular political party. As such, it loses its prophetic voice. It overlooks the flaws, failures, and fallacies of the politicians. It practices selective literalism, selective ethics, and selective criticism.

D. A prime example of this is my old, long-time denomination, Southern Baptists. I was attracted to and supportive of its many important distinctives, such as freedom through faith, the right and responsibility of each believer to interpret and practice the teachings of the Scriptures, the responsibility to confess one's faith in life, ministry, and theology, and religious liberty and separation of church and state.

This all changed in the late 1970s, and SBC leadership did a 180 degree turn on almost all of these issues. Freedom was restricted when beliefs and practices went against the pronouncements of the leaders. Orthodoxy became a substitute for what a friend of mine calls orthopraxy. True Biblical interpretation rested in the hands of the select ministers and leaders. The Lordship of Christ was replaced with the orthodoxy of the elect. And separation of church and state was attacked as being heretical and dangerous. Religious liberty was restrained to include primarily for a narrow group who identified with the leadership. The priesthood of the believer was replaced with the priesthood of the pastor. And there are examples where membership in a congregation depended upon whether one held the correct political views.

E. I remind you that Jesus told us that His kingdom was not of this world, it was spiritual. I remind you that he called us to be people who freely expressed faith. I remind you that he condemned those who would identify their faith with politics. And, I remind you that he rejected the use of political power to achieve spiritual goals.

F. Final thoughts. In this series, it is easy to point out the flaws of past and contemporary groups in answering the question "How can we be the people of God?" What we must constantly remind ourselves of is the importance of answering the question with a consistency in light of the teachings and examples of Jesus.