

The Gotcha game: Luke 20:27-38

by [F. Dean Lueking](#) in the [October 28, 1998](#) issue

When Jesus took his place in the temple, he became the target in a deadly game of "Gotcha."

Those who owned the power rightly perceived Jesus as a threat, and came at him with entrapment questions about his authority. Aided by spies who helped build an atmosphere of hostility, they pressed the loaded question about taxes to Caesar, yes or no. Jesus answered the questions with questions. He had no illusions about the end point of this hypocritical religious hardball. The cross was out there on the horizon.

Next came the Sadducees, with a Gotcha ploy that, ironically enough, turned on a belief they rejected, the resurrection of the dead (cf. Mark 12:18, Acts 23:8). No matter. Any turf will do when the goal is to destroy the opponent.

The Sadducees came out of the priestly cast in ancient Israel, and over time gained control over the rituals in the Jerusalem temple, a position which also made them power brokers in affairs of state. When the temple was destroyed in 70 a.d., they disappeared without a trace.

This was their game. They asked Jesus about the hypothetical widow of a man with seven brothers. When he dies, she marries a brother. When *he* dies, she marries another brother, and so on, one after another. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?

That clincher question was asked with a deliberate slowing of the words, each one poison-tipped. It was spoken with eyes narrowed, arms folded in an accusatory pose and an unmistakable sneer across the face. Gotcha is not a game; it's a weapon.

Jesus answered evenly, speaking important truth about the earthbound nature of marriage which will give way to the greater life promised to the children of the resurrection (that beautiful phrase, lost on those with no ears to hear). He added testimony from Moses, who in the presence of the burning bush confessed the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the living, "to whom all of them are alive"

(v. 38). That is who God is, Jesus says, the God in whom and for whom death has lost its sting forever.

This quelled the Gotcha game temporarily, but it soon resumed in the Upper Room, the Garden, before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, and finally at Golgotha, where the powers of darkness no longer slunk around in the temple but slugged it out with Jesus in the battle on which hung the destiny of the world. Redeeming love won that cosmic conflict. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone upon which the whole household of faith is built-then, now and always.

To the great, tragic shame of the church, however, the Gotcha game still goes on. Every time it does, Christ is crucified anew and his body, the church, is wounded.

Martin Luther, who spoke from experience, had a word for this demonic spell the Gotcha spirit casts upon the soul. *Anfechtung* has no real English equivalent. The Irish speak of the "black hole" of spiritual despair. It must be experienced to be understood. It is a powerful, unrelenting grip on the soul that would defy God's own strength to break it loose. *Anfechtung* still attacks, even in the places meant to be holy: the church, the congregation, the denomination, seminary faculties, administrative staffs, clergy gatherings, parish meetings-wherever power is used to control and destroy the sister or brother for whom Christ died. It is a terrifying reality, and deadly beyond measure because it tramples down the sacred in order to "defend the truth."

Power gone amok in the church was the subject of a classic paragraph written several decades ago by William Dixon Gray, a Presbyterian pastor, when he was caught up in the midst of church battles. Although I cannot find the passage now, the essence of it has stuck with me: So it's power you want in the church? The godless power to accuse, manipulate and destroy? Then take it. Revel in it. Play its deadly game. Win its hollow, temporary victories. And when you have played its destructive force to the hilt, then suffer its awful consequences coming back at you, the desperate holding on at any cost to what you thought you had secured but which has turned to ashes, leaving in its wake not joy and freedom but the burden of guilt over those you hurt and ruined . . . But why not truth at the outset, and the love which bears, believes, hopes and endures all things? Why not the mind of Christ for the church of Christ and the work of Christ? Why not Christ's authority, which establishes the work of your hands, instead of your own power, which destroys by your hands?

Jesus' responses to the Sadducees were brief. I learned a lesson from that part of the text when passing through a long, hard season of being caught in the Gotcha game. Supportive friends and family kept a four-minute rule. On no day, regardless of how outrageous the Gotcha game became, would more than four minutes be given over to "the problem." I recommend the four-minute rule, lest the Gotcha game become all consuming, fatal to soul and body alike.

The ending of this chapter of Luke is somber, as befits the warning against the malady of Gotcha in the church. The solemnity of that day in the temple must not be lost on those of us who would have ears to hear, who would live under the word, who would bear with the church in its dark side, penitent over our own sins, holding on for dear life to the gospel which delivers us from Gotcha to glorious freedom as the children of God.