

# Don't Try to Stay in a Place You're Meant to Leave

A sermon from Luke 20:19–44

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Airports aren't meant to be places you live.

They're meant to be places you leave.

A few months ago, part of my family and I spent a day waiting for a flight home from Changi airport in Singapore. If there was ever an airport where you might want to spend an entire day, it's in Singapore. Before you even get to security, there's a mall that's five stories tall, an indoor waterfall, and a food court with some of the best Malaysian and Chinese food I've ever eaten. Even after you go through security, there are enough coffee shops to caffeinate you almost all the way across the Pacific Ocean, because I tried most of them and I was.

At one point during that day in the airport, I found myself thinking, "I could *live* in this airport!"—and that set me to wondering if anyone has ever managed to live in an airport.

As it turns out, quite a few people have taken up residence in airports over the years.

One of them was a refugee from Iran named Mehran Nasser. In 1988, Nasser was on a flight from Paris to London. He arrived in London without the papers he needed to be admitted into the United Kingdom, so they flew him back to Charles DeGaulle Airport in Paris. But Nasser refused to leave the airport to go anywhere but London—and, as a result, Nasser ended up living in the airport in Paris from 1988 until 2006. In 2006, he was removed from the airport for medical treatment, but after some time in a shelter, he went back to the airport again.

In the end, Mehran Nasser lived more than thirty years in an airport, waiting to go to London.

Which seems crazy—because airports aren't meant to be places you live; they're meant to be places you leave.

For Christians, this world-as-it-is is a lot like an airport. It's an amazing airport; because of that, it's easy to start living like the airport is our final destination—but it isn't. If you're a follower of Jesus, the world-as-it-is is not your ultimate home, and it will never ultimately satisfy your soul. Your destination is this world *after* God transforms this world into a perfect city with God himself at the center of it all—which, in case you hadn't noticed, hasn't happened yet. Enjoy the airport, do good in the airport—but don't forget that the purpose of the airport is to point you to a better destination. The purpose of the airport is ultimately to take you home. So don't try to stay forever in a place you're meant to leave.

In today's texts, two different gangs of religious leaders try to trap Jesus by confronting him with dilemmas that they were facing. In different ways, neither of these groups was able to see beyond

the world-as-it-was. Both of them were, in their own ways, only seeing at the world-as-it-is instead of living for the world-as-it-will-be. They were refusing to look beyond their expectations to welcome the kingdom that Jesus was bringing. Here's the truth that ties together the challenges Jesus gives in response to each dilemma: *Live faithfully in the world-as-it-is by living for the world-as-it-will-be.*

In the first scene, Jesus makes this point by telling the people never to give themselves to the world as it is. In the second scene, he calls them not to give up on the world as it will be. Then, in the final scene, he reminds them that the Lord who ruled in the past is the same Lord who will make everything right and new in the world-as-it-will-be.

## 1. Don't Give Yourself to the World as It Is (Luke 20:19–26)

It's the third day of the week, the day we call "Tuesday." The Jewish festival of Passover is getting closer. Every day, thousands of pilgrims are arriving in Jerusalem for the feast. Every house, every inn, every AirBnB is packed.

Normally, the atmosphere is festive, and some places it still is.

But not here in the temple courts.

Here, it's tense. These confrontations with the religious leaders are setups for an execution. Two days after this dialogue, Jesus will be arrested. The next day, he will die.

The scribes and chief priests strike first. They send spies who preface their question with a flattering prologue:

“Teacher, we know that you speak and teach correctly, and you don’t show partiality but teach truthfully the way of God.” (Luke 20:21)

Ironically, everything the spies speak in this sentence is true. Yet they apparently don’t trust the truths they speak. After all, if they really thought Jesus taught the truth of God, they wouldn’t have been participating in a plan to destroy him.

Then came the clincher: “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (20:22).

Sometimes a question is not a question; it’s a trap.

If you’re a parent, suppose your child comes to you and says, “Daddy, do you *really* love me?”—sometimes that’s a sincere question and the child needs reassurance. But, other times, you know from the tone that the child really doesn’t have any questions about whether she’s loved. There’s another question coming after you say yes, and you know she’s trying to trap you into purchasing something she wants or permitting something she wants.

Sometimes a question is not a question; it’s a trap.

This question was clearly a trap: “Is it lawful,” they asked, “for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (20:22).

Taxes have never been popular. It’s been said that the U.S. tax code is ten times longer than the Bible but, unlike the Bible,

contains no good news. As hard as it may be to believe, taxes were even *less* popular in the first century than today. The more you learn about the taxes that the people of Judea paid, the more you may see why.

When these spies asked whether God's law required them to pay "taxes to Caesar," the payment in question was the *tributum capitis* or "poll tax." It's important to understand that *you only paid this tax if you were not a Roman citizen*. Citizens of Rome were exempted from paying this tax. By exempting Roman citizens from paying this tax, the Roman Empire reminded conquered nations that they had no power, that they had no representation, that they were not free and they never would be.

The question is intended to trap Jesus by turning him into *an enemy of the people* or into *an enemy of the empire*. If Jesus replies that God's law *did* permit the Roman Empire to require the poll tax, it will cost him his popularity with the people, and they will no longer follow him. If Jesus claims God's law does *not* require his people to pay the poll tax, Jesus will be marked as a rebel against the empire, and he will be executed.

This group of religious leaders was not considering the possibility of a Messiah who might bring a kingdom that's not of this world. They were focused on the power structures of the world-as-was. *It's either Rome in charge, or it's us in charge—and there's no way God's Messiah or God's kingdom is really here unless we rule our land instead of Rome*. One generation later, this assumption would lead to a rebellion against Rome, when the Romans would destroy the Jewish temple.

And so, Jesus is trapped between the power of Rome on the one hand and his popularity with the people on the other.

But Jesus refuses to step into the trap.

Instead, Jesus says, “Show me the money”—or, more precisely, “Show me a denarius” (20:24). I imagine someone pulled one of these coins from their moneybag and tossed it to Jesus.

A denarius was worth roughly one day’s wages—but what’s important about the denarius wasn’t the *value* of the coin but the *image* on the coin. The coin’s image and the inscription was one of the reasons why the Jewish people hated the poll tax so much.

The denarii minted at this time are stamped with the face of Tiberius Caesar, surrounded by Latin text that read: “TI CAESAR DIVI AUG F AUGUSTUS”—“**Tiberius Caesar divi Augusti filius Augustus**”: “Tiberius Caesar, of divine Augustus a son, Augustus.” Tiberius’s adopted father Augustus had been declared a god after his death. And so, every one of these coins carried the image of Tiberius Caesar encircled by the claim that Tiberius was the son of a god.



The true Son of the true God holds a coin in his hand that declares Caesar is the son of a god.

The coin is too small for anyone to see the image, but they know very well what is stamped on the coin. When Jesus asks whose face was imprinted on the coin’s obverse side, there was no hesitation: “Caesar’s.” They hated it, but they knew it was true.

And that’s when Jesus delivers the punch line.

“Well then,” he told them, “give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” They were not

able to catch him in what he said in public, and being amazed at his answer, they became silent. (Luke 20:25–26)

Here's what Jesus was saying to these people who refused to look past the powers of this world: *This coin carries Caesar's image, so give it back to him if he asks for it—but only give him what carries his image, not what bears God's image.*

And what bears God's image?

You do.

I do.

Every human being does, because every human being is created in the image of God. According to the opening pages of the Old Testament,

“God created humankind in his image” (Genesis 1:27).

Here's what Jesus is saying: *Give what you owe to the powers of this world, but never give them yourself.*

And that's the mic drop moment in this text—except microphones hadn't been invented yet so Jesus didn't have a mic to drop, but he definitely would have if he could have, because it says, “they became silent” (Luke 20:26).

Here's the assumption that Jesus challenged: *Some of the people thought the only way God could rule is if Rome didn't.* Thus, as long as we're paying taxes to Rome, God's kingdom and God's Messiah must not be here yet. For God's kingdom to come, they needed to replace the power of Rome over Israel. What Jesus

declares is that God's reign doesn't depend on any human ruler or regime. Caesar may think he rules in Rome, but God is still on the throne—and Caesar isn't able to prevent the kingdom that God is bringing. So go ahead, give your taxes to the powers of this world—but never give them yourself. You can honor Caesar as the emperor of this empire but still reject him as the ruler of your soul.

And that's precisely what the first generations of Christians did.

The earliest generations of Christians refused to give themselves to the powers of this world. They didn't put the support of their churches for or against any emperor. They gave their taxes, they even gave their prayers, but they refused to give themselves to the powers of this world. They gave themselves and their ultimate allegiance to God and God alone—and, in doing so, they changed the world.

So what does this have to do with your life today?

The great thing about today is that no one really struggles anymore with the temptation to give themselves to the political powers of this world. Anymore, we don't have people who think that the kingdom of God depends on getting someone in a political office who claims to support our agenda. No one in our churches ever gets so wrapped up in the political powers of this world that they post anything angry or inflammatory or degrading.

*But, just in case that ever did happen today, this text would be really relevant.*

Because, if that ever did happen today, what this text would be telling is to *pray for your rulers and pay your taxes—but never*



*give your whole selves to the political powers of the world-as-it-is. You are imprinted with the very image of God, so give yourself to God and God alone. Don't give yourself to the powers of this world.*

If you're a Christian, your political party is the kingdom of God, and your most important political statement is your baptism. Each week, when you take the bread and the wine, you declare that you are not giving yourself to the powers of the world-as-it-is; instead, you're waiting on a banquet that's yet to come. Don't move into the airport and lose sight of your destination. Don't give your whole self to the world-as-it-is; look for the world that is yet to be.

## 2. Don't Give Up on the World-That-Is-Yet-to-Come (Luke 20:27–40)

The scribes and chief priests could not see past the powers of this present world—but they weren't the only ones who opposed Jesus. Another Jewish sect known as the Sadducees did too.

The Sadducees gave themselves completely to the world-as-it-is in a different way. The Sadducees had given up on any future world at all. They didn't believe in any eternal kingdom yet to come, and they rejected any future resurrection. As far as they were concerned, when you died, you were dead and nothing about you survived. Since they didn't expect any world that was yet to be, the Sadducees were all about wealth and power and

comfort and cooperating with the Romans. They no longer looked for another world at all.

After the spies from the scribes and chief priests slink away, a group of Sadducees stepped out of the crowd with a riddle that rejected any future resurrection:

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came up and questioned him: “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother has a wife, and dies childless, his brother should take the wife and produce offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife and died without children. Also the second and the third took her. In the same way, all seven died and left no children. Finally, the woman died too. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For all seven had married her.” (Luke 20:27–33)

Well, happy Valentine’s Day weekend.

Each time we read the Scriptures, we say, “This is the word of the Lord” and “Thanks be to God”—but this whole story is still really weird. This is like a mashup between *Wife Swap* and *The Hunger Games*.

Still, let’s try to understand what is happening in this story and why.

In the Old Testament, God allowed for a practice known as “levirate marriage,” in which a widow could bear a legal heir for her deceased husband with her dead husband’s brother. One of the reasons for levirate marriage was to protect a widow and her family by making certain that her husband’s inheritance stayed in the family to be passed on (Deuteronomy 25:5–6). Yes, it made

your family tree look like a pretzel, but it also prevented widows from becoming destitute. This is *not* something that Christians are called to practice today—thank you, Jesus, for the New Testament and thank you for the church, which has the responsibility of caring for widows as a community. In Deuteronomy, God was working within the cultures of the Old Testament to establish structures of justice and equity for widows.

But here's what the Sadducees are trying to do: they want to humiliate Jesus in front of the people by proving that there is no future kingdom or resurrection. They want to show that the world-as-it-is is all there is. What they are trying to do through this riddle is to show that the resurrection of the dead at the end of time is impossible. After all, if everyone is raised from the dead at the end of time, a woman who had been widowed would be married to more than one man—so don't hope for a future world, just settle into the comforts of the airport here and now.

Once again, Jesus refuses to spring the trap.

Jesus told them, “The children of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are counted worthy to take part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. For they can no longer die, because they are like angels and are children of God, since they are children of the resurrection. Moses even indicated in the passage about the burning bush that the dead are raised, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living, because all are living to him.” (Luke 20:34–38)

The solution that Jesus gives is that there is a resurrection kingdom that's yet to come—but, in that world-that-is-yet-to-be, there will no longer be marriage.

That's not because marriage is something defective—the marriage of one man and one woman is part of the natural order of God's good creation, and I highly recommend it. The reason marriage ends in the world-that-is-yet-to-be is because the purpose of marriage has been fulfilled.

Many good gifts that come to us through marriage—partnership, procreation, the raising of children. And yet, none of those is the primary purpose of marriage. The primary purpose of marriage is to be a living picture that points to the perfect communion of Christ with his church. That's why Paul wrote these words to the Christians in Ephesus:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. ([Ephesians 5:31–32](#))

When God created marriage in the beginning, the love of Christ for his church was already part of God's plan, and God designed marriage as a living picture of this love. At the end of time, when all the resurrected people of God live in communion with Jesus, the love of Christ for his people will fulfill the purpose of marriage once and for all. And every Christian will share together in perfect and complete love for all eternity—and that's why a woman who had seven husbands poses no problem for a future resurrection, because there will be no more marriage in the world-that-is-yet-to-be.

*What's more, Jesus tells the Sadducees, Moses described the Lord as "the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." Remember: Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were the patriarchs in the book of Genesis from whom the Israelite people descended. And so, if God is the God of the living and God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, then Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are somehow still alive.*

The result would have been another mic drop moment, if Jesus hadn't just dropped his mic a few seconds earlier and if mics had been invented at this time.

Some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well."  
And they no longer dared to ask him anything. (Luke 20:39–40)

The first group of religious leaders wanted the world to change, but they had given themselves so completely to the power structures of this world that the only change they could imagine required the removal of Rome's power. The second set of religious leaders had given up on a new world and decided to settle for the comforts of this world. Both of them, in different ways, had moved into the airport—trying to stay forever in a place they were meant to leave, instead of looking for a new world that is yet to be.

### 3. Don't Forget that the Same Lord Who Ruled in the Past Will Still Rule at the End (Luke 20:41–44)

As the scribes and Sadducees stepped back, silent, Jesus spoke and asked them a question:

“How can they say that the Messiah is the son of David? For David himself says in the Book of Psalms: ‘The LORD declared to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. David calls him Lord. How, then, can the Messiah be his son?’” (Luke 20:41–44)

Every Jewish religious leader who expected a Messiah agreed that the Messiah—the long-awaited king of Israel—would descend from David, the great king of Israel. These same religious leaders also thought that David was talking about a Messiah yet to come when he sang about “my Lord” in Psalm 110.

The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” (Psalm 110:1)

And so, Jesus asks them, *If the Messiah is a descendant of David, how can the Messiah also be David’s Lord? That would mean that the Messiah was both before David and after David, both a son of David and yet greater than David.* The religious leaders had no answer—but Jesus himself *was* the answer. As God the Son and the Son of God, Jesus was *before* David in every way. As the son of Mary, Jesus descended *from* David. The answer to this dilemma is the sentence you spoke at your baptism: “Jesus is Lord.”

According to Jesus, the Messiah they were awaiting to rule on the earth has already been ruling from the heavens. The reason why we can be confident in a kingdom that is yet to come is because

the same Lord who will bring that kingdom at the end has always ruled and always will rule—and that Lord is Jesus.

And yet, the religious leaders refused to recognize him. Some of them wanted a Messiah who would set up an earthly regime here and now. Others didn't believe in any future eternal kingdom at all. Both of them, in different ways, had settled into the world-as-it-was and didn't want the kind of kingdom that Jesus brought.

And so, their murder plots continued, and before the week was over, the Lord of all creation was stapled to a cross. There, he did what he came to do—he took the punishment we deserve for our rejections of God's way. Then, three days later, he proved there would be a resurrection, not through an argument with the Sadducees but through an empty tomb.

## What Does This Mean for My Life?

### ***1. Will you still trust Jesus when he doesn't deliver what you desire? (Luke 20:19)***

“The scribes and the chief priests,” Luke tells us, “tried to seize [Jesus] that very hour” (20:19). And what had Jesus done that caused them to try to seize him and even to plot to kill him? Simply this: Jesus wasn't the sort of Messiah they wanted. The religious leaders wanted someone to affirm them and exalt them. Instead, Jesus opened the doors of his kingdom to the poor, the outcast, the nations—to anyone who would trust him and submit

to his rule over their lives. The religious leaders only wanted Jesus as long as he delivered what they desired.

*When Jesus didn't deliver what they desired, they decided he needed to be destroyed.*

What about you? What do you do when Jesus doesn't deliver what you desired? How do you respond when the thing you wanted and hoped for doesn't go your way? How about when following Jesus requires you to give up something that hurts to let go?

You and I might not plot to kill Jesus, but we do sometimes try to push aside his lordship. When he doesn't deliver what we desired, our worship may diminish so that we no longer live in awe of our great and beautiful God—and that diminishes our joy and our love for those around us.

Jesus is just as much Lord when life delivers everything you desired as when everything falls apart. Jesus is just as worthy of worship when your dreams come true as when they don't. Jesus is just as good when he calls you to let something go as he is when he floods your life with every blessing you hoped for. What will you do when Jesus doesn't deliver what you desired?

## ***2. What are you giving yourself to? (Luke 20:25)***

“Give back to the emperor what is the emperor's,” Jesus said, “but give back to God what is God's” (Luke 20:25). His point was that, since we are created in God's image, our lives belong to God alone.



So what are you actually giving yourself to? In what are you investing your identity? Are you giving your deepest self to things that are passing away? What is it that's capturing your heart right now?

Some of you may be struggling with investing your identity in politics. There are Christians who can only be at rest if their preferred person or party is the one that's dominating the White House and the Capitol and the courts. What fills their social media feeds is either support or resistance directed toward political parties and leaders.

Have you ever considered how little appears in the New Testament about specific political events and leaders? There are a few exceptions, and still today, Christians ought to speak to specific acts that are right and wrong. But don't invest your identity in political parties or systems. For the most part, New Testament authors say to pay your taxes and to pray that the emperor will let Christians live in peace (1 Timothy 2:2). Don't give yourself to powers that are passing away.

But that's only one of the places where we sometimes invest our identities. What causes anger or rage to rise within you, if that thing is challenged or threatened or critiqued? That could be something to which you're so committed that you're giving that person or belief or practice what you should give to God alone.

### ***3. Do you long for a world-that-is-yet-to come? (Luke 20:34–38)***

The Sadducees had given up on a world that's yet to come—and so do we sometimes, even if we don't say it. We get comfortable

in the world-as-it-is, and we forget that this world will never ultimately satisfy us. Passing pleasures may numb our inner aching and scrolling on our phones may distract us—but, underneath it all, there is an ache for something more. That ache is what John Mayer was hinting at in his song “Something’s Missing”:

“I’m dizzy from the shopping mall.

I searched for joy, but I bought it all.

It doesn’t help the hunger pains

And a thirst I’d have to drown first to ever satiate.

Something’s missing

And I don’t know how to fix it.

And I don’t know what it is at all.”

—John Mayer, “Something’s Missing,” 2003



That ache is a reminder that there is no perfect satisfaction here —but every good thing in this world is intended by God to point us to a world-that-is-yet-to-be.

This yearning for the world-that-is-to-be does not blind us to the needs of the-world-as-it-is. In fact, it does the opposite. Our yearning for the perfect justice and righteousness of the world that’s yet to be causes us to be passionate about justice and righteousness here and now. One of the places that makes that

clearest is the African American spirituals of the late nineteenth century. **A recent study identified three key themes in these spirituals:** songs of sorrow, songs of praise, and songs of hope. The songs of hope were the ones about the heavenly kingdom that was yet to come—but here’s what I found fascinating in this study: *The songs about a kingdom yet to come were the very songs in which they encoded messages to help them to escape from enslavement.* Focusing on a future kingdom didn’t cause them to give up on seeking justice here and now; instead, those very songs that focused on a future heavenly kingdom became coded messages by which they set one another free. Yearning for future justice causes us to seek justice here and now. Longing for future holiness and freedom from our sin causes us to seek holiness here and now.

The world-as-it-is is not your final destination. It’s an airport that aims you there. It’s an airport filled with both brokenness and beauty, but it’s not your ultimate home. Now, this analogy is far from perfect—and here’s the primary problem with it: Unlike an airport, you don’t leave this world to go to your destination. This world will be transformed and your destination will come to you. That’s what John hinted at in the closing chapters of Revelation:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:1–4)

*Do you yearn for this world-that-is-yet-to-come?*

If you're a follower of Jesus, this is your future; this is your destination.

Mehran Nasserli lived in the Paris airport for more than thirty years, holding on to hope that someday he would make it to London. He never did. Four years ago, in 2022, he died in the Paris airport, still waiting for his future home.

But that will not be you, if you are a follower of Jesus. Your future does not depend on governments and passports and visas and immigration offices. Your future depends on a sovereign king who guaranteed your future through his own resurrection from the dead. He will not leave you. Someday, he will raise you, he will satisfy the yearnings that this world never could, and he will bring your eternal home here to you.