

The Right Kinds of Questions
Matthew 22:34-46
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There are a lot of questions in the Bible. Now, I don't just mean the great existential ones like "What is the meaning of life?" or "What about the dinosaurs," or even "Is there a God?" No, I mean to say that the Bible is full of actual questions that people ask one another and ask God, and even that God asks people. "Where are you?" God asks Adam and Eve in the Garden. "How long will you hide your face?" the Psalmist asks God in his despair. "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples. "What is truth?" asks Pilate of Jesus, and that is to list just a few of them. The Bible is filled with stories within the story, and many of those stories have conversations, and many of those conversations have questions, and so we come to tonight's passage in which the questions are slung back and forth like spells in a Harry Potter movie, or footballs in a Green Bay Packers game.

The Pharisees, having failed once to try to trap Jesus, try again on a less political front than a question about the Emperor and whether to pay taxes. This time, they go straight for the Bible, and ask, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" probably thinking that he had a favorite or two that he might blurt out and that they might be able to jump on. Surely, among the 613 there must be one he thinks stands out. Naturally, Jesus does not take the bait, and offers them, and us, a brilliant reply we have taken to calling the "Double love

commandment”: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And then, Jesus turns around and asks them his questions about the nature of the Messiah, “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” And when they answer with the usual response of David, the King David of the golden years of Israel, he stumps them once and for all, citing Scripture and posing the final question, “Well, if David thus calls the Messiah, Lord, how can he be his son?”

The questions actually began flying in earnest back in chapter 21, after Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Then the interrogation begins. You’ve heard these questions before. The chief priests and the elders ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things? The Pharisees ask, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?” The Sadducees ask, after posing a ridiculous scenario, “In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven brothers will she be?” Everybody is getting their licks in on Jesus. But along the way, Jesus too is getting in his questions. “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” “Whose head is this on the coin, and whose title?” And then on to tonight’s story, in which, as we heard, all the questioning comes mercifully to an end. If there is one thing these chapters in Matthew teach us it is that although there may be a lot of questions in the Bible, not all of them are worth asking.

There is some rather long and complicated history behind both the questions and the answers the Pharisees, and Jesus ask one another, but that will not be our concern tonight. You see, to delve into those specifics would be doing just what Jesus' opponents had been trying to do to him for a long time. You see, they had been asking him questions on the order of the kind of modern Philosophy 101 classes you may have taken in college: "If a tree falls in the woods and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?" Or, "Can God make a rock so big even God can't lift it?" Or, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" questions no more worth asking than, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" These are questions that may occupy some brain cells, but they aren't going to shake up the world. At least tonight's question from the Pharisees about the Commandments gets close to having some real significance for a conversation. But even it, along with those ridiculous ones about whose wife she will be, and should we pay taxes to the emperor, are going to do nothing but maintain the status quo, which is exactly what his interrogators wanted all along.

So what are the questions that matter? What are the questions which will shake up the world? I think we can take our cue from Jesus' questions tonight, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" which have at their core issues of ultimate concern, of life and death. Even if there really were answers to all those other questions, all an answer would yield would be a "victory" for one position or another. There was nothing of ultimate concern in those questions. But

the answer to Jesus' question, and even just the asking of it, leads somewhere. It may pass through some hoops, it might take some interpreting of the Psalms, but if you follow the thread, it takes you somewhere beyond the unraveling of an intellectual sweater! Not every question is worth asking, but some certainly are. And so tonight, I want to take a little time and look at some questions which I think really are worth asking, and I hope they will seem as much "issues of ultimate concern" to you as they do to me.

The first question is this: If, as it is generally agreed upon by the vast majority of scholars and believers, if it is true that Jesus was "countercultural" in his own time, and that his message is timeless, how are we being countercultural in our own time? What are we really doing in our lives or in our church that distinguishes us from those who do *not* call Jesus their Messiah, who do *not* know that he is God's son, not David's? If you put us in a police lineup, would anyone pick us out as the Christian, or would we be unrecognizable among all the other nice, friendly, even generous suspects standing beside us? Jesus *was* the Son of God, but that is not the reason he stood out in a crowd. He stood out because he spoke out, because he reached out, because he stepped out in faith, and lived in a way which challenged the culture around him. Think you are high and mighty? You must enter the kingdom as a child. Think you deserve a medal for keeping the commandments? Give away your wealth and follow me. Think you know just how the kingdom of God works? Anoint my body with perfume worth a fortune even

though the money could have gone to the poor. Jesus doesn't go against the grain just to be contrarian, just to carve out his niche as a local Rabbi. He does it because the grain must be roughed up if the life he came to bring is to be open to everyone. A question worth asking yourself just might be, "Have I made anyone angry at me by following this Jesus?" As Daniel Berrigan used to say, "If you want to follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood."

Which raises another one of those questions worth asking: "How far am I really willing to go in following this Jesus?" By and large, Christians in North America don't pay much of a price for their faith. There may be some scorn in some of their circles, maybe some good-natured ribbing from some atheist agitators, but rarely are we truly persecuted because of our faith. That sort of exalted status, as members of a faith frequently cited as the very basis for the birth of the nation (may the Canadians among us forgive me), often leads us to the conclusion that our faith is generally supposed to lead us in the direction of greater and greater happiness, and, in certain formulations, greater and greater wealth. There may be unpleasanties in life, but they will not be because of our faith, *per se*, but rather, the luck of the draw or the lack of faith of our neighbors. It will not occur to us that suffering is at least as likely, *or at least should be at least as likely*, as bliss, if we are going about the practice of our faith in the right way, maybe even that countercultural way. Now, it may reasonably be argued that the point of Jesus suffering was so that we wouldn't have to, and that may be true in some kind of

cosmic sense. But the Bible tells a different story in the day to day, a story that involves as much persecution, imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom as joy, peace, and harmony. The paradoxical truth is that the whole range of these experiences exists side by side in the Christian life, if we let them, and if we ask my final right question of the evening.

And that question is: “*For* what are we saved by this Messiah, who is not David’s son?” We often frame the question of salvation as one of “saved *from* what” but the more important preposition here is “*for*.” You’ve probably met Christians for whom the question of their eternal destination is so settled that they simply settle. They settle for living in an unjust world. They settle for making enough money, for being good people, for going to church, for not breaking the Ten Commandments. The question of their salvation resolved, they ask no other questions of God or the world, or even themselves, and so live out their lives in a world basically focused on their own lives and families and churches, and maybe the PTA, but only because their children are in the school. In a sense, they live all the Commandments except the two most important ones. But all of that is based on asking, with respect to their salvation, “*From* what have I been saved?” and the only answer to that question, really, is hell. Being saved doesn’t save you from heartache or tragedy or loneliness. It doesn’t save you from becoming unemployed or developing a disease or being a victim of crime. But if you ask, “*For* what have I been saved?” the range of answers is endless and exciting and challenging, and

maybe even dangerous. If you don't ask the right question, you'll never know you could save a child's life, or paint a great masterpiece, or start a revolution. The right question is where life really begins.

So often the questions we ask come from a place of weakness: "Am I good enough?" Or they are self-justifying: "Why should I help if no one else is?" Or they are disingenuous: "What could I possibly have to offer?" None of these questions becomes the believer any more so than the weak, self-justifying, and disingenuous questions the Chief Priests, Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees asked Jesus so many years ago. May God help us to ask the right questions, that the answers we receive may lead us to love God ever more deeply with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.