

THRESHOLD
BIBLE STUDY

QUESTIONS JESUS ASKS

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“What do you want me to do for you?”

MATTHEW 20:32; MARK 10:36; 10:51; LUKE 18:41

Questions Jesus Asks

One of the signs of a good teacher is the ability to ask provocative questions. When the minds of students are triggered by a good question, they want to probe the subject more profoundly. The good teacher asks questions that guide students toward a deeper truth, one that the students will hold all the more resolutely because it has not been presented to them as ready-made but drawn out of their own minds by the joint efforts of teacher and students.

As we turn the pages of the four gospels, we notice that one of the most striking characteristics of Jesus' ministry is the way he continually asks questions of those he encounters. Jesus has a question for everyone he meets, for every occasion, for every experience. He is a master at asking the kinds of questions that motivate his listeners to want to learn more, to probe more deeply, and to draw closer to him.

The questions Jesus asks in the gospels do not demand quick and easy answers. His questions are evocative, multilayered, and intensely personal yet also universal. Through his questions, Jesus evokes new understandings, helps his listeners see different perspectives, draws people into relationship with himself, and seeks to change their lives.

It is significant that the word *question* contains the word *quest*. Good questions send us on a quest, a journey for something valuable. The goal of a good question is not just more information but a transformed outlook. There are considerable rewards in spending time with the questions Jesus asks.

While Jesus asks many questions, he gives very few direct answers to these questions. Often he answers a question from his listeners with another question. He understands that there is value in pondering the question itself. Jesus asks good questions, unsettling questions, questions that bring his listeners from a secure place of immediate certitude to a state in which they are not at all in control, a place where the grace of God can have an impact.

This unsettled state, free from easy answers that provide security and closure, is most often either ignored or fought against by the majority of people. This is why we have paid little heed to Jesus' questions and emphasized instead his seeming answers. We have made Jesus a teacher of dogmas rather than a messianic prophet, a suffering servant, and a compassionate savior.

The questions Jesus asked are obviously not posed for his own benefit but rather for the benefit of the people being asked. His questions penetrate their hearts and probe their motives. Jesus wants his listeners to reconsider their own assumptions, preconceived ideas, biases, and prejudices. Through his questioning Jesus wants to open up new creative possibilities for his listeners. Jesus doesn't necessarily want answered questions; he wants transformed persons.

One of the questions that Jesus must have asked often is "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked it of both his closest disciples and those he healed. The question reveals Jesus as a savior who doesn't demand to be waited on but who desires most to serve us. Jesus asks this same question of all of us who read the gospels. By asking us what we desire from him, Jesus draws us into a deeper relationship with himself and invites us to follow him as his disciples.

Reflection and discussion

- What are the characteristics of a good teacher?

- In what ways does Jesus manifest these characteristics?

Questions and More Questions

Jesus' pattern of asking many questions reflects the Jewish rabbinical tradition. A good rabbi knows how to ask questions. The rabbinical teachings of the Jewish Talmud are sparked by questions that require wisdom and discernment. The Passover Seder, a ritualized re-experiencing of the exodus from Egypt in word and symbol, is structured around five questions that are traditionally asked by the youngest child at the table. The questions, beginning with "Why is this night different from all other nights?" form a way to remember the story of Israel's beginnings in a personal and unforgettable way.

There is a humorous saying among Jewish people about their tendency to ask questions: "Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question?" The answer: "Why shouldn't a Jew always answer a question with a question?" This fondness for asking questions comes with the history and culture of Israel, and it forms an ideal instructional method for every generation, from the young to the old.

A survey of Jesus' life from the four gospels indicates that Jesus asked questions at every stage. His first questions in the gospels, when he is twelve years old, are directed at the teachers in the temple. Jesus asks more questions of his parents when they find him in the temple, thinking he was lost. Jesus uses questions to invite his chosen disciples to follow in his way, and like a good rabbi he forms them as disciples using the methodology of asking questions. Even on the cross, Jesus addresses a question to his Father: "Why have you forsaken me?" And the risen Jesus continues to ask questions: "What are you discussing as you walk along?"

Some of Jesus' questions seem simple and straightforward: "How many loaves do you have?" But on further reflection, the questions are far more profound than they seem at first. Other questions are rhetorical, meant to be left hanging without a direct answer: "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Some questions present a challenge to the listener: "Could you not stay awake with me one hour?" Others evoke answers that at first seem quite obvious. When Peter tries walking on the water and then begins to sink, Jesus asks, "Why did you doubt?" Many of Jesus' questions probe the understanding of his hearers and provoke an interior search: "Who do you say that I am?"

The suspicious crowds and opponents of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees, the Sadducees and religious leaders, all issue many pronouncements. They think they have all the answers. But like a good rabbi, Jesus uses questions to break open the stony hearts of those who would follow him. His questions reveal his great love for his disciples and his desire to lead them into the mystery of God.

Answers close conversations; questions open them. Easy answers give us a sense of finality. So, rather than provide easy answers, Jesus asks hard questions, the kinds of questions that take us beyond the obvious to something deeper. He answers questions posed to him with better questions, a practice that bewildered his opponents and encouraged his disciples. He doesn't hit people over the head with answers they cannot comprehend. Instead, he gently invites people to discover for themselves deep truths about God and the life God desires for humanity.

Reflection and discussion

- Why is asking questions an essential part of the ministry of Jesus?

- What characteristics create a good question?

Growing in Faith through the Questions of Jesus

Often we leave a conversation in which questions have been exchanged feeling noticeably connected to the person with whom we were speaking. The questions have created a sense of mutual curiosity. We realize we share interests and the questions deepen those shared interests. Frequently we recognize that we are attracted not only to the topics of interest but to the person with whom we share the interest. We realize that questions build closeness between people.

Some people believe that the more questions about the Christian religion they can answer, the more faith they possess. But faith is not about having the right answers. It begins by pondering important questions and letting them lead us into a conversation with Jesus. Maturing faith is characterized by a growing relationship and intimacy with Jesus. In prayerful conversation with him, people learn to let go of fears, trust more completely, discern God's will, and walk in the path of discipleship.

The experience of Christian faith is not just a matter of intellectual belief; it includes loyalty, allegiance, assurance, confidence, and faithfulness. It is the free commitment of one's mind and will to God in Jesus Christ. So if faith is this type of relationship, then the best way of deepening it is through dialogue and conversation, the type of exchange that the Christian tradition calls spiritual reflection and meditative prayer. And through this kind of activity we not only grow in our intellectual belief, but more importantly, we come to share more deeply in divine life.

Because this type of growth in faith is so central to Christian discipleship, the evangelists writing the gospels have preserved these questions of

Jesus not only as a matter of historical record but for our benefit as well. Jesus wants us, as readers of the sacred texts, to ponder these questions. And through this meditative process, he wants to challenge us, teach us, heal us, free us, and guide us.

The type of questions Jesus asks indicates that self-awareness is essential for growth in faith. For this reason, Jesus asks questions that promote this awareness, helping the listeners become more acquainted with their own depths and their deepest desires. Jesus was most interested in repentance, their conversion of heart. And in order for this inner transformation to occur, the hearers must reckon with their own conception of reality and examine it in light of what God has to say.

If people are to encounter God in their own actual lives, rather than in religious fantasies and intellectual abstractions, they need to become increasingly more acquainted with their own depths. Jesus was relentless about getting to the heart of people, helping them reflect on their most basic needs, and most often he does this through probing questions: “What do you want me to do for you?” “What do you want?” “Do you want to get well?”

Jesus helps us to understand that discipleship is a journey. He holds back shortcuts, encouraging his listeners to explore their own thoughts so that when arriving at an answer they’ve brought the muscle built by the journey. He does not lecture us; rather, he invites us to listen. He does not demand our attention; rather, he summons us to follow. He does not condemn us; rather, he guides us in his path.

Reflection and discussion

- In what ways have I experienced questions leading to a deeper relationship?

- How do the questions of Jesus lead us to meditative prayer?

Questions Lead to Prayerful Conversation

One of the most alluring things about Jesus is there is always more to learn and discover. Every time we prayerfully enter into the gospels, we discover new insights, overlooked details, and renewed challenges that keep these narratives about Jesus fresh no matter how many times we read them.

Looking at the questions of Jesus is a wonderful way of encountering him anew in the gospel stories. Each question allows us to go deeper into understanding the life of Jesus, not only to understand who he was for his original disciples but also who he is for us today.

The kinds of questions Jesus asks most often are open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. As you study these questions Jesus asks, reflect on the question itself, not just seeking an answer. There is no better way to deepen our relationship with Jesus than to enter into conversation with him. And there is no better way to enter into conversation with Jesus than to grapple with the questions he asked throughout his ministry.

Throughout this study, we will grow to understand the value of having a savior who is not an answer man but who draws us into relationship with himself through questions. Take each question Jesus asks into prayerful conversation. Don't give in to the ego's need for closure and satisfaction. This is particularly difficult for people who have grown up assuming that the purpose of religion is to give people clear and certain answers.

Throughout this book, the commentaries on the Scripture passages offer a brief reflection on the questions Jesus asked. For each text, the comments speak about the context of Jesus' question, its meaning for Jesus, and its meaning for us today. But these observations are only starting points for

our own reflection. The key in every instance is to sit with Jesus' question, let it sink in, and allow it to touch our hearts and lead us closer to him.

As we begin this study, let us hear Jesus ask us this question: "What do you want me to do for you?" As we begin to respond to this question, we heighten our expectation of his transforming power within us. We open our lives more unreservedly to his call to discipleship and to a richer relationship with him.

Reflection and discussion

- How do open-ended questions lead to good conversations?
- What do I want Jesus to do for me in this study?

Prayer

Lord our God, the source and the goal of all my quests, send your Holy Spirit to guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I begin this study of your inspired Scriptures. As I examine the questions asked by your divine Son, help me to sit with the questions, being patient not to seek quick and easy answers. Help me to realize that Jesus is asking these questions of me, seeking to move me to a place beyond my secure certainties, a place where you can penetrate my heart, probe my motives, and renew my life. As I ponder these questions, lead me into conversation with Jesus, drawing me closer to him and increasingly forming me into his disciple.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1

1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide name tags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
 - What drew you to join this group?
 - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
 - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?
5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:
Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study of the questions Jesus asks. You inspired the biblical authors to express your word as manifested to the people of Israel and most fully in the life of Jesus. Motivate us each day to read the Scriptures, and deepen our understanding and love for these sacred texts. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.
6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don't feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week's group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.