

Jesus' Questions

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, so this morning we're going to do something slightly different. We have been looking through Matthew's Gospel, but I'm going to do something slightly different. If you don't like it, then, well, it's only a week, and we'll get back to normal next week.
- But three or four times a year, what we do in St. Columbus is we have what we call brilliant books Sunday, where we have highlighted, and this occasion it'll be next Sunday, two books that we are keen on people to look at and to have and to read and to use.
- And one of them next week is called Questioning Evangelism. Now, that title doesn't mean that the author is questioning whether evangelism is right, but the author is saying that questions are a good way to share our faith, a good way of introducing ourselves to other people and to opening up discussion about spiritual matters.
- And it's a fantastic book. I'll see a little bit more about it later. It's a really great book by a guy called Randy Newman, not the singer.
- Okay, for those of you who are old enough to know of a singer called Randy Newman, probably not many of you are. But he is an American Christian who is Jewish from New York, and it's a great book.
- [1 : 3 3] And we're going to look for a little while at some of the questions Jesus asked, because he's one of the things he says in the book, because that's the way that Jesus did evangelism a lot of the time.
- And not only evangelism, he just made relationships and built relationships by asking questions. And the interesting thing that for us, I think, you know, we're often, I don't know about you, but I often feel, I'm made to feel very guilty about evangelism and about how badly I do it.
- And we're always told, but it's the greatest news of ever, if you've got great news, you always want to share that and you always want to tell that to other people. And isn't that what you should do with the gospel? And of course, that's right, it is the greatest news, it is the most remarkable news.
- Yet, we know it's the hardest news for us to share, because we know that it's not like telling someone that you've just had a baby or something, or that you're going to get married or you've just won a million pounds, which is great news for it, well, maybe not the million pounds unless you're very generous.
- But we know that that would be accepted by everyone, but we know that there's this, there's a complexity about sharing the gospel, because we know it, while it's the greatest news, it's also, it requires a great deal of realignment of our thinking about who we are and who God is and what we need to do.
- [2 : 4 8] It's not all good news, in other words, and because we know that it makes people feel uncomfortable and sometimes antagonistic. And we know that because it's even difficult for us, if we're honest with one another, to share Jesus Christ with each other, and to share our faith with about how Christ is working in our lives with one another, and if it's difficult for us to share that with one another, it's obviously going to be with difficult people who don't even believe and who don't accept who God is.

And what I don't want to do today in any way whatsoever is make anyone feel guilty about evangelism or sharing their faith or sharing Jesus Christ, because I think if we're honest with each other, as we all look around us, we all feel so scared and so incompetent and so guilty and so compromised.

I simply want to point you to Jesus and to take a few examples from Jesus' life and recognize that this might be encouraging for you to consider.

I'm not suggesting that this is the only way to evangelize or share our faith and that there's a right or wrong way. Certainly, there's not three easy steps to evangelism.

It's liberating to know that we can share our faith in lots of different ways and with lots of different people, and Jesus uses all kinds of people, bold people, frightened people, upbeat people, depressed, Scottish, Presbyterian people, all kinds of people He uses to share the gospel.

[4 : 18] And we're all very ordinary, but we all have an extraordinary Savior in whom we trust and whom we love, who's with us, as Lucy reminded us this morning, and who will encourage us.

So the book that we're recommending you buy next week, and we hope you will do that, it's called Questioning, Evangelism. I went to... I mentioned this, I think, once before here.

I went to hear this guy speak at Charlotte Chapel a few months ago, and I kind of went dragging my feet, to be honest, a little bit. I felt I'd signed up to go, I thought I ought to go, and it was a Saturday morning, lots of things to do.

I went anyway, and it was one of these yes moments, you know, when he's... I'm really glad I came here. This is exact...

You know, when you sometimes get a book, or you sometimes hear something, which is yes, that's kind of what I've been feeling for years, and no one's ever articulated it. But that was one of these moments where this guy really articulated exactly how I felt, and he introduced himself by saying he was rubbish at sharing his faith, and he struggled with it, and he felt guilty about it, and I could immediately sympathise with that, and he got my attention.

[5 : 34] And he went on to explain about the power, particularly in a secular society, in a society where people don't believe and don't have a basis of faith of any kind, particularly, that opening up conversation with questions is a great way of inspiring conversation, which can be difficult in a hostile environment, and even for ourselves as we share our faith and as we share our lives with one another.

The introduction to the book is by a guy called Lee Strobel. Many of you may have heard of him. He was an American journalist who was an atheist and who went out to disprove the Gospel and disprove the truth of the Gospel.

And in doing so and looking at the evidence, he became a believer, he became a Christian, I think the book is called The Case for Faith, at least that's one of his books. And he writes the introduction to this book that we're looking at, that we're hoping that you will read yourselves.

And he introduces it by saying the power of questions. He said he gets a lot of emails and a lot of emails from people asking questions, maybe after he's done a talk or something like that. And he got this email late one night, which just said, if God is so loving, why does he allow so much pain and suffering in the world?

And you know, he'd heard that question so many times and he was tired and he was weary and he thought, well, am I going to answer that aggressively? Or will I take ages to answer theologically and go through all the different reasons why he's suffering is in this world?

[7 : 14] And he chose not to do either of these things on that occasion. And he chose simply to ask a question. I said, have all the questions in the universe, why did you choose that one?

And the guy who'd written the question, the first question was very aggressively sort of worded. And when he got this response, the second response, Lee Strobball says, the answer was, the tone of the email was completely different, the anger had gone.

It became a sincere discussion. He opened up about the reasons why he felt these things were so difficult to answer. And it just opened up a much more fruitful and helpful discussion with the asking of that question.

And it's interesting in the gospels, we find that Jesus asks many more questions than he gives answers. It's not really what we like, is it?

We like things black and white. We like all the answers. We like it A, B and C and we like steps and everything clear cut. But Jesus is, to be precise, Jesus asks 307 questions in the gospel.

[8 : 31] And he has asked 183, what's recorded of course, 183 questions of which he only answers three with straight answers.

Asking questions is central to Jesus' life and teaching, because Jesus is the personification of wisdom.

And wisdom very often isn't black and white. Wisdom is about understanding and about learning and about growing and about being challenged. It's not about giving trite, easy, orthodox, painless answers, factual truth to people we don't know and understand.

Wisdom is often for us deeper than that. It is often opened dialogue, challenged preconceptions and got people thinking.

And that is, I believe, the value of asking questions. And it's a great book to read to help you to consider asking questions.

[9 : 39] I was hugely inspired and encouraged and motivated and I believe gained great wisdom from it. It will always, it will also make you laugh, which is a great thing.

But we want to be equipped to share our faith. And so I want just very briefly to consider these passages, not going into any depth on them, but just to look at the fact that Jesus asks questions in his interactions with people.

Not always believers, not always unbelievers, but he used questions so much. The first reading that we took that Katrina read was from Matthew chapter 8 and at verse 23.

And that's the story of Jesus in the storm. And the disciples who knew him and who loved him and who trusted him by this point are fearful for their lives. They're afraid. And so Jesus asks the question of them when they're in the boat, you know, do you not care for us that we're perishing?

And then he answers them, not by saying, yes, of course I care for you. He says, why are you so afraid? So he asks the question, well, why are you so afraid?

[10 : 55] Now it may have been at that point a rhetorical question, but it's recorded for us and it would have made the disciples think at that moment and at least moments beyond that. In the storm, this question, why are you afraid?

It asks the question, well, why are you afraid? Right, you're in the boat here with God the Son, the one who is sovereign over creation.

And I've, I'm in the boat with you. He said basically, he said, it's crazy for you to be afraid. What is there to be afraid of? Now he asks that question because he knows we're all afraid.

We're all afraid at various points and various times and in various ways. And Jesus asks the question to encourage us to be reminded of how powerful Jesus is and who it is that we have as believers in our lives and who we have as believers in our hearts.

You know, who is it or what is it that is more powerful in your life that makes you afraid and makes you underestimate who Jesus is in you and for you?

[12 : 05] His person and His promises. Who do we think Jesus is? Who is it that we have entrusted our life in our heart to? He's kind of, some kind of middle of the road sort of country singer or something.

Is he someone that drifts in and out of our life as someone insignificant and powerless? Do we believe that he's powerless? Do we believe that he's insignificant? Is he not able?

Do we think it's kind of theory that he died on the cross and gave himself to death and rose, gave himself into life by rising from the dead on the third day and ascending into heaven?

Are His promises for us, are they just empty promises about His return and about the new heavens and the new earth and about His being with us and caring for us?

Why are we afraid? He wants us to ask that question. Or the temple tax in the next section in Matthew chapter 17, the second passage that Katrina read, he asks Peter, what do you think Simon?

[13 : 16] What do you think? When the Pharisees came with this request about whether Jesus paid the temple tax, Peter, what do you think? What do you think? It's a great question, isn't it?

Peter, have you worked out what it means to be a follower of me? Have you worked out what rights you put to the side and do something not necessarily to offend people?

What do you think, Peter? What battles, Peter, are you going to fight? What are significant to fight and what are not?

What do you think? He wants us to be thinking. He wants us to be thinking, believers, when Jesus asks questions, he wants us to sit up.

He wants us to consider, oh, why are you afraid? What do you think? He pushes it back into our court. You know, I think that's one of the...

[14 : 12] And don't take me wrong on this, don't take me wrong on this. But I think this is one of the negative things about church. It's so passive, isn't it? He says, I'm blabbering on here and you're just all sitting and you're maybe a million miles away.

And it's also passive. But yeah, he's saying, what do you think? And he's saying, why are you afraid? And he's throwing it back to you. He's throwing everything back into our court so that we're not mindless or unthoughtful in who we are.

He wants us to, as believers, to work out our faith. He's examining in his word our hearts to see where our idols are, what we're afraid of, where our confidence lie.

When the storms come, what are the challenges that we're willing to put in Jesus' place? Are we willing to grow and learn and develop confidence?

Are we talking and walking and sharing? And intentionally encouraging one another to do that, which is our theme for the year. I really hate the thought of sermons or the books we read or the Bible being old hat.

[15 : 25] Not challenging you to think. I really hate the thought of you being, and me being thoughtless, mindless Christians, not responding to the questions of Jesus, trotting out the same old orthodox truths that are as dead as dodos to us, because they're meaningless.

Looking at the Word of God is a dry textbook and not the living Word of God. And Jesus says, what do you think? And he says, why are you afraid?

And I speak into Christians. And he also speaks to unbelievers, doesn't he, in different ways. Matthew 19, the third passage we read. He's speaking to this rich young man, and he says, why do you ask me about good?

And one of the other gots is, why do you call me good? Challenging question, isn't it? Why do you ask me about good? Because he knows that the rich young ruler at this point has his own definition of goodness that he's coming to Jesus with.

You know, Jesus says, well, what do you mean by that? What do you mean by good? So the rich young ruler kind of trips off this question, probably fairly insignificantly, you know, you know, and Jesus says, well, what do you mean by that?

[16 : 51] What is your definition? What's your standard? And if I'm good, he says, and then I'm God, because that's the ultimate definition of goodness.

And if I'm God, do you listen to who I claim to be and what I claim to say? Because ultimately, Jesus is better than us, obviously, infinitely, could see that this rich young man was deluded.

He didn't really want to know about what he needed to do to get eternal life. He believed he had eternal life, that he'd kept all the laws, and that he was good, that his wealth was a sign of God's blessing on him, and that he was good and he would get to heaven.

He didn't really, he wasn't really thinking through the question he was asking, and Jesus knew that his trust lay in his own goodness and in his wealth.

So Jesus said, well, you're some guy. You've kept all that. Oh man, you're amazing. You're a great guy. Now go and sell all that you have and follow me.

[17 : 58] Because the question opened up the reality that he didn't understand goodness, and he didn't understand Jesus, and he was self-righteous.

And we need to come to terms with that whole thinking. If you're not a Christian here today, that whole thinking about goodness, we very often, even subconsciously will trust in our own goodness and how we've lived our lives.

Because we compare ourselves maybe to others, and because we've had a great life and a happy life. But God says that he's the standard of goodness, and he says that nobody's good enough for getting to heaven.

Now that's bad news, isn't it? Jesus says that, and that's why he came. Because he came to be good enough in our place because he's God, and yet to die is the bad guy in our place, incurring our punishment, separation and death.

So we need to recognize the significance and the bigness of these things and ask again, well why are you afraid of not coming to Jesus? What is it that's more important to you than coming to Jesus?

[19 : 10] What's holding you back from deciding to follow Jesus and put your trust in Him? Is it that He's not good enough? Is it that there's other things that you're more afraid of?

It's good to ask questions. And then the last section is where Jesus, it's a kind of classic in Matthew 21, where his authority is challenged by what authority does he do these things?

And Jesus answers that question with a question, and he says by what authority, the baptism of John, where did it come from?

Did it come from heaven or from man? So in this occasion, Jesus doesn't even give an answer to their question.

He answers their question with another question. He didn't even debate what they were saying. Why? Because he knew they weren't interested genuinely in where his authority came from.

[20 : 17] They wanted to trip him up. They wanted to trap him. They wanted to expose his claims. They had closed minds.

He knew that they cared more about their position and their popularity than the truth. So he wasn't willing to answer their question.

Coming back to the great book of the Bible that speaks about wisdom is Proverbs 17 verse 14. The beginning of strife is like letting out water so quick before the quarrel breaks out, or Proverbs 26, 4.

Answer not a fool according to his folly lest you be like him yourself. So the Bible in its wisdom reminds us that there's times where we don't get into arguments with people if we feel and if we sense and if we discern that they're simply there to trip us up.

If they're there to expose what we believe in a sarcastic or negative way, and that for us needs wisdom.

[21 : 25] We need discernment and insight and not stark quarrels. You know, we can win an argument and lose the battle because it can sometimes just make people more antagonistic because we expose their folly sometimes, or God exposes their folly in His Word.

We need to be gracious and loving and also wise enough to step back and question sometimes help us do that. Okay, so I want to finish just by asking the question, why are questions so good?

Why is it that questions are good and important? Because questions help us, in the first place, questions help us to understand the way of wisdom. Okay, that it's not always just about techniques and it's not about black and white, it's about discernment.

And wisdom is about discernment. Verse 4, verse 7, the beginning of wisdom is this, get wisdom and whatever you get, get insight.

So insight and discernment is important and questions often help us to do that because they open up genuine conversation.

[22 : 40] They occasionally will help us to move from always being on the defensive as Christians, to be on the offensive. When someone asks a question, don't we often feel immediately on the defensive?

I'm not so sure about that. But if we ask a question, if we ask them to define what they mean or why they say what they say, it changes the whole dynamic of the conversation and the direction which is going.

Questions remind us that the gospel is in a formula, a simple passing on a fact. The gospel, what is the gospel? What do we do when we're sharing the gospel? We're introducing one divine person to another person who's not divine.

That's what we're doing in the gospel. We're introducing people to one another, Jesus and the next person, the person beside us. That's what the gospel is doing.

It's not telling people a set of facts primarily, it is introducing them to a person and a person who loves them, who can change their hearts as he's changed ours and our minds and who will touch each one of us differently.

[23 : 53] You're all unique. We are all unique today and God deals with us uniquely and differently in our lives. There's no one formulaic way in which God deals with us. We're not machines.

We're made in the image of God uniquely. We're not machines and so God deals with us differently. And He uses you and I to ask questions, to get to know people, to love them, to share with them, to ask questions of one another as believers in the same way.

Sometimes we're starting with those people who don't believe that God exists at all. They don't believe He's a person, a divine person, and we know our own natural antagonism and hostility towards God because of the sin in our hearts.

By nature without Christ we're blind and obstinate and it's implausible truth for many. Remember that. You know, 100 years ago you could share your faith differently because there was a, there wasn't a plausibility gap because people believed.

They might not have, or people believed the facts. They didn't believe it personally but they believed in heaven and hell and God and Satan and all these things. But there's a much bigger plausibility gap today because you're starting from, with most people they don't believe at all that there is a God so we need to draw them closer.

[25 : 24] You know, if I say to you today, absolutely, Nessie, Nessie's the one. Nessie exists in Loch Ness Mon, he's the Loch Ness monster and he exists and he's a big, big 250-foot monster and he chomps up people all over the place and he's a big angry beast.

Now there's an implausibility, there's an implausibility gap. He's like, no, I don't think so. I think that's just made up. I think you're just pretending that that's the case. Not really, it's just myth.

Because there's a big gap, isn't there? Now what would make it more likely to believe in that kind of monster-chomping Nessie? Well if you maybe had photographs of them or if there was sonic recordings and you heard sounds of an unusual sound from the water or you had an eyewitness account of someone whose life was changed on the banks of Loch Ness because they saw this monster, it would bring the implausibility gap, it would close it.

Now we need to do the same with the gospel because there's an implausibility gap. I'm not comparing the gospel with Nessie, okay? But I was an example, okay?

But what we need to do, you know, if we say someone, you need to believe in Jesus Christ or you'll die. But if they don't believe in Jesus or God or in spiritual truth, we need to draw them closer.

[26 : 46] We need to talk about the historicity of the gospel. We need to talk about the evidence for the gospel. We need to speak about, sometimes, about origins, about creativity, about justice, about love, about hate and the answers to these things.

We need to share our own experience of what God is doing and has done in Jesus Christ and it brings the plausibility gap closer.

Second Corinthians 10 verses 3 to 5, say, for though we walk in the flesh, we're not to wage war according to the flesh, weapons of our warfare are not the flesh but a divine power to destroy strongholds.

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ. So there's this battle, there's this intelligent work involved in sharing our faith and bringing people closer to the reality of what we believe.

It's not simply telling them facts and waiting for the magic of the Holy Spirit to convert them in some kind of pseudo mystical way. God uses us and He wants us to use who we are and our brains and our minds as well as prayer, of course.

[27 : 59] And so if someone says to you, I think all people are basically good, what's a good response to that? Maybe just ask the question with one word.

Really? Do you really believe that? Do you really believe that all people are basically good? And then maybe you'll find that that's not the case and that they'll divide out and they'll make judgments.

And then you say, well, on what basis do you make the judgments? And so it goes on. And it's simply trying to encourage people to dialogue and to discussion.

Or can I give you just one example from the book? Just maybe to encourage you. It's a good book. He has in the book a lot of theoretical discussions or discussions he's had.

And he asks this question, I've got the right page, sorry. Yeah. A non-Christian asks the question, I can't believe you're so intolerant as to believe that Christianity is the only way, Christian.

[29 : 06] What's so bad about intolerance? Are you crazy? It leads to hatred and racism and how could you be so ridiculous? Well, you sound pretty upset.

Well, of course I'm upset. Actually, you sound intolerant. What? You sound intolerant of my intolerance. I'm not intolerant.

Everyone's intolerant of something. We have to be. Wouldn't you say that you're intolerant of some things? I would hope so.

And I think it's just that ability to discuss and question and open the hearts and sometimes the irrationality of unbelief.

So it's a way of wisdom. It contributes to the way of wisdom. It also helps us to understand others, as I've mentioned. We're image bearers. The people we know and love that aren't Christian are not projects.

[30 : 05] They are people to love and to respect and to care for and to share our lives and our faith with. See, Jesus is with the women at the well.

He was dialoguing. He was discussing. He was respectful. Shockingly so to His disciples. He was interested. Now, if you come this evening, I'm going to show a 10-minute video this evening of Mez McConnell's conversion.

Mez is a church planter in Nidrae and has started what's called the Charity 20 Schemes, planting churches in the most socially deprived areas of Scotland.

And that's the other book we're selling next week. It's this book and also Mez McConnell's latest book, which is called Creaking on the Stairs, which speaks about his abusive childhood and his response and his battle to forgive.

But he says that he was converted because he was wild and he was in prison and he was visited in prison by two Christians who traveled 80 or 90 miles from their church to visit him and who came across as people who were interested in him and didn't see him as a project.

[31 : 27] And that's very powerful. And I think not only does it help us to understand others, but it helps us to win people. Romans 12, 20, it's the last verse I put up.

If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing, you'll heat burning coals in their head. It's different. It's loving those who maybe persecute or are difficult to us.

And we aim to win people. Now, on Wednesday night when you discuss this, I've written it's on your, it'll be on your bulletin sheet as well.

The questions that are not Christian questions, they're questions from a very famous book about how to win friends and influence people.

Dale Carnegie in 1936. Nine principles of how to win friends and influence people. Now, you look at these principles. Most of them can be our summary of Romans 12, 20 about doing the opposite of what people think.

[32 : 33] And we can learn from the common grace and wisdom of others. Because not only are people resistant, not only are people resistant of the truth, they have a false image that we need to break down.

Sometimes that image is deserved. And then the last thing I would say about the importance of asking questions is because they will, I guarantee they will drive you to prayer and the word.

They will drive you to learn more because you will be asked questions in return and you will have relationships with spiritual input that you haven't had before. You will be driven to read Proverbs, to study Jesus, to pray for wisdom, to pray for people, to pray for understanding, to believe and to trust and to take your fear to Him and find courage and peace and passion.

Don't give up the fight. Keep learning and keep growing and don't be afraid of what Jesus has for you in a short life that we're here, very short life that we're here. If it's an easy life you want, well, you can leave anytime because it's not going to be that for us as Christians.

It's a battle in the here and now. It's not following Jesus if we want an easy life, but it is life to the full and in the future it's life that is unimaginably spectacular.

[33 : 52] So keep, I pray, for myself and for you that we're driven to prayer and we're driven to the word by asking the questions that will open up people's lives and hearts.

And if you're not a believer today, again, can I ask you to take the claims of Jesus really seriously, put all other things aside that you regard as more important until you've asked your questions and been open to His answers.

And I guarantee when you're open to Him, He will reveal Himself to you and you will find Him to be the greatest and only Savior that is. We're all praying for you.

That's for our heads. Father of God, we ask that you would be with us, that you would help us, that you would teach us, that we would learn, that we would be equipped to follow Jesus and to follow His example.

Give us that sensitivity, that courage, boldness and yet beauty and simplicity and humility and winsomeness that is going to make a difference in this world today, which is very antagonistic to what they perceive the gospel to be and what they perceive Jesus to be.

[35 : 05] So help us to be able to share Jesus with one another, which will help us to be able to share Jesus with others who don't know you, especially by being interested and loving and asking questions and seeking to know what are the issues in people's hearts and lives.

We ask it in His precious name. Amen.