

Uncomfortable Questions

Various Texts

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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I

Jesus is the answer. That's a message you might hear from other Christians, read on bumper stickers, or see on billboards. At least one contemporary Christian singer and songwriter, Andraé Crouch, wrote a song called "Jesus is the Answer." A couple of years ago, Thomas Nelson publishers released a book called *The Jesus Answer Book*. About a month ago, I ran across a graphic on the internet that insisted Jesus is the answer to your worries, job problems, broken heart, depression, money troubles, cancer, bullying, addiction, anxiety, divorce, loneliness, and death. Jesus is the answer: it's a simple, catchy slogan. Whatever troubles you or ails you, go to Jesus the answer man, and he'll wave a wand and magically fix all your issues.

It all sounds nice, but there's at least one small problem with this: it doesn't match the Jesus of the gospels.

If you go back to the four gospels and start counting the number of times people ask Jesus a question, you'll find out that people ask him 183 questions. Let's take some of the questions people ask Jesus in the gospel of Matthew:

- Jesus, where are we going to get enough bread to feed all these people? (15:33)
- Jesus, why couldn't we cast that evil spirit out? (17:19)
- Jesus, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? (19:16)

People do indeed ask Jesus a whole bunch of questions. Yet here's the kicker: Jesus directly answers only 8 of those questions. People ask him 183 questions, but he gives only 8 direct answers. The rest of the time he responds to questions:

- by answering indirectly (e.g., Matt 9:14-17),
- or by telling a parable (e.g., Lk 10:29-37),
- or by ignoring the question (e.g., Matt 8:28-30),

- or by asking another question (e.g., Jn 3:9-10).

I wonder why we think of Jesus as the answer man when he directly answers so few questions.

If Jesus is not an answer man, then what could we call him instead? Based on the evidence in the gospels, what shall we say about Jesus? I offer a simple proposal: that we call him a lover of uncomfortable questions.

Calling Jesus a lover of uncomfortable questions would match the evidence, because in the four gospels Jesus asks 307 different questions. 307 questions!¹ That means he is 38 times more likely to ask a question than he is to give an answer. In his personal and public ministry, Jesus was a question man most of the time. He was quick to ask probing questions and slow—very slow—to give answers. He loved to engage people by asking them questions. Very often, Jesus’ questions are crafted to make people think about their lives in new ways.

II

Let’s see if we can get a sense of Jesus’ questions. _____ and _____ will come now and read for us a short selection of the many questions Jesus asked.

- What are you looking for? (Jn 1:38)
- What do you want me to do for you? (Matt 20:32; Mk 10:36,51; Lk 18:41)
- Who do you say that I am? (Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20; Matt 16:15)
- Why do you think evil in your hearts? (Matt 9:4)
- If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? (Matt 5:46; Lk 6:32)
- Do you want to get well? (Jn 5:6)
- Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? (Matt 6:27; Lk 12:26)

¹ Martin B. Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), xvii-xxv.

- Are you not of more value than [the birds of the air]? (Matt 6:26)
- Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? (Mk 4:40)
- Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and don’t do what I say? (Lk 6:46)
- Will you give up your life for me? (Jn 13:38)
- Do you know what I’ve done for you? (Jn 13:12)
- Do you love me more than these? . . . Do you love me? . . . Do you love me? (Jn 21:15-17)

III

Let’s take just one of Jesus’ questions from John 1:38: “What are you looking for?” Imagine for a moment that Jesus comes over to visit you in your home or in your dorm room. The two of you sit down with a glass of milk and a plate of chocolate chip cookies. Half way through his first cookie, Jesus pauses, looks you in the eye, and asks, “What are you looking for?”

How would you respond? This is Jesus asking the question, after all, and you know better than to try telling him a lie or a half-truth, because you know he would see right through it. You want to tell him the truth, so what is that truth about your life? What are you actually looking for, deep down?

- more money?
- acceptance?
- security and survival?
- affection and esteem?
- power and control?²

If Jesus were sitting in my living room, his question would make me squirm. I would like to say something that sounded spiritual, or at least something that had theological integrity—you know, something like “I’m looking for world peace” or “I’m looking for more faith” or “I’m looking for divine beauty.” And yet something tells me

² These last three come from Thomas Keating, who calls them our “emotional programs for happiness” that prop up our false self and divert us from our true self. <http://www.centerfortheworkingpoor.org/faith-and-poverty/centering-prayer-as-divine-therapy>, accessed September 29, 2017.

that's not how I'd answer. More likely I'd blurt out something superficial and selfish like, "More money for retirement" or "More time for a relaxed pace of life." At the very least, his question would make me think long and hard. What is the central desire of my life? What do I want more than anything else? That's a really good question, Jesus. What am I looking for?

IV

As far as I can tell, the church has not come to terms with the fact that Jesus asks so many questions and gives so few answers. If Jesus asks pointed questions, what does that mean for us? If Jesus is quick to formulate penetrating questions and slow to answer, might that mean that we will end up living with uncomfortable questions rather than easy, pat answers? What would it mean for us to become a people with many questions, rather than a people with many answers?

One advantage of asking thoughtful questions is that they can open up the conversation. Some of you know that I work part time as a spiritual director. If the person lives in this area, I usually meet with them in my study at home, and if the person lives elsewhere in the country, I meet with them by video call, such as Skype or Google Hangouts. Either way, I notice that when I ask the person a well-crafted, open-ended question, it opens up the conversation. Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?" is exactly that kind of question. Other examples might be:

- What are you spending your life for?
- How are you staying true to your calling?
- Who is God to you in this situation?

Questions like these invite more thought and conversation. They take us to new places; they make us consider possibilities we hadn't thought of before.

By contrast, answers shut down the conversation really fast. If I hand out answers—if I tell the other person what to think or how to act—then the other person starts to shut down. Sometimes I can see it in their face or hear it in their tone of voice. I try not to hand out answers because I know it's not a good approach. But sometimes I

forget my better self, or I lose patience, and give in to the temptation to think I can fix the other person by dishing out answers. When that happens, I try to recover by finding another good question to ask.

I suspect this is why Jesus asks so many incisive questions. He wants to engage people in reflective, thoughtful ways. He wants them to uncover truths they've been missing. He wants them to recognize realities they've been ignoring. He wants them to imagine possibilities they've never considered before. Rather than shutting down people's lives with too many answers, his missionary strategy is to open people up with an abundance of questions.

From spiritual direction I've learned something else too. When you ask someone a question, that means you have to be quiet and listen for their response. Perhaps this is another reason why Jesus asks so many questions: because it gives him a chance to be quiet and then listen carefully for your response. When Jesus asks you a question, he pauses to wait for your answer. He wants to know what you're thinking, what you're feeling. He wants to hear what you have to say.

V

Instead of going home today with nice, pat answers, neatly packed away in a box and tied up with a ribbon, maybe you'd like to go home with some questions. Here are three questions that Jesus asked. Perhaps one of these questions will grab you and open up your life in a new way. Maybe you'd like to live with one of these questions for a while, so see what the question does to you.

- Who are you looking for?
- What do you want Jesus to do for you?
- Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?