

Why Do You Ask?

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] Holy word. Please keep those words open in front of you. We'll spend some time in them. And as we do that, let's pray together. Father, we thank you as we hear your voice, that we hear the authority of your word. And Father, we pray this morning that as we hear the words of the Lord Jesus, that you would help us to hear them rightly. Help us, Lord, to come to the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth given to him. And hear his voice. Help us, Lord, where he challenges us to receive his challenge and to grow. Help us, Lord, as we hear his words of comfort to receive them and know his peace. For we ask in his name. Amen.

Amen. Well, I wonder, if you could ask Jesus any question, what would it be? It's one of the questions on week one of Christianity Explored, or a variation of it.

It really gets us thinking, doesn't it? If Jesus Christ walked through those doors today, just now, and he came down to the front here, and he said, come and I will answer any question.

What would you ask him? Well, we meet some people in our passage this morning who have the chance to do exactly that. Jesus is right there in the temple. He's even there teaching. What better time to come and ask him a question? So, over they go to ask him, what? We've had some great questions in this section of the gospel so far. What do I have to do to have eternal life? Great question. Who can be saved?

Excellent question. Or perhaps best of all, simply, Lord, have mercy on us. All great questions to ask Jesus Christ, but it's none of those this time. No, these guys have a different question for Jesus. It's there in verse 23. By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority? Jesus, we have a question. Who gave you the right?

[2 : 2 9] As I thought about that this week, it reminded me of an answer that Stephen Fry gave in an interview once when he was asked, what would you say to God if God one day confronted you? And Stephen Fry said, I would say to God, how dare you? How dare you? Now, we might expect that kind of answer from an atheist like Stephen Fry. The surprise here is that the people who asked Jesus that question in the temple that day were at the opposite end of the religious spectrum, the chief priests and the elders of God's people. I guess there are people we know, perhaps, maybe one or two here today, who would point the finger at God and question him over perhaps things like suffering or evil. But there would be few, I think, even today, who would point the finger at Jesus. And yet the chief priests who would never have questioned God do now come to question Jesus. Who do you think you are doing all this?

So who's right? If you could ask Jesus one question, is this the question you should ask? Friends, today Jesus gives us the answer by not giving us the answer.

This is key to understanding this passage. Jesus' non-answer to their question is all the answer they need about where his authority comes from. And in his answer, he exposes their real heart towards him and towards God. We get a glimpse of two kind of heart problems that are growing up together in the hearts of these leaders among God's people. And the first problem we see is that they can't handle the truth. They can't handle the truth. Some of you, I imagine, can hear that being said in the voice of Jack Nicholson in the film A Few Good Men. I won't try to imitate him. It's far too iconic. But his point is relevant here, right? Jack Nicholson, or the character he's playing, is there in the witness box in court being questioned. But he's convinced that even if he told them the truth, they couldn't cope with it. You don't really want to know the truth. He's saying you can't handle the truth.

And in a similar way, with less shouting, Jesus is saying the same to the chief priests and elders. What he reveals to them and to us is that the reason they're questioning him isn't because they don't know the answer. It's because they don't like the answer. And he shows us that in two ways.

The first is by answering their question with a question. See that verse 24, Jesus answered them, I also will ask you one question. And if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. Now, how is he answering them, we wonder? How is that an answer?

[5 : 44] Well, think of it like this. Imagine again in court, the judge asks the person on trial a question, and instead of answering, they say, Your Honor, let me ask you a question, and if you answer my question, I'll answer yours. Right, I don't know, but I guess that that would be considered contempt of court.

Right, it would be saying, wouldn't it, you don't have a right to question me. You don't have the right to put me on trial. You have no authority over me. And that's the message behind Jesus's question here. He's telling the chief priests, I am not the one on trial. You are. You're not the judge of me.

I'm the judge of you. You've come to question my authority, but guess what? You don't have the authority to question me. Let me say again, friends, and it's so important to reinforce this and to get this, that we can ask Jesus any question. There's no wrong question for the Lord Jesus, but we can ask him in the wrong way. Where does his authority come from? That's a brilliant question. It's actually partly the reason why we have the Gospels in the first place, to show us where Jesus really comes from, who he really is. But we can ask him that question in the wrong way. There's a difference, isn't there, between asking, who really are you, Jesus, and who on earth do you think you are?

The chief priests and elders of God's people are asking in that second way. They're not looking for an answer. They've already made up their mind. They don't think for a second that Jesus has the right to come into their temple and teach or heal or be praised. But Jesus's non-answer to them tells them and us that we don't have a right to treat him that way. We don't have the authority to question his authority. Friends, don't hold him in contempt. Don't try to put him on trial.

If we do that, we will find out in the end that he's the one asking the questions of us, not the other way around. The second way, though, Jesus shows they're not really interested in the truth is by asking them a question that he knows that they won't answer, right? And not that they can't answer, but that they won't answer. So see his question, verse 25, the baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man? Now, if they can answer that question, they can answer their own question. To us, it seems a little bit weird bringing up John the Baptist at this point, but it's actually totally on point. As we heard earlier in Matthew 3, John the Baptist came to point people to someone coming after him who he said was mightier than him.

[9 : 03] I will baptize you with water for repentance, he says, but he who's coming after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire, said John.

And then when Jesus came, he said, this is who I was talking about, the mightier one coming next. John preached Jesus. So think about it. If John's ministry came from heaven, well, Jesus' authority must also be from heaven, from God. But if John's ministry was something he just made up, man-made, then Jesus' authority is therefore only earthly and human. So Jesus is getting the chief priests to have a go of answering their own question. Was John's baptism from heaven or from man?

Now, this should not be a hard question for them. Right, they've had at least three years to think about it. They are meant to be the religious experts in these matters, and guess what? There's only two answers.

It's multiple choice. Either John was a true prophet, or he was a false prophet. But they're so stumped by the question that they need a few minutes to talk together. They discussed it among themselves.

And Matthew gives us a chance to be a fly on the wall of their discussion, right? What's going through their heads and their hearts at this point? Just have a look, verse 25. If we say from heaven, he will say to us, why then did you not believe him? But if we say from man, what we're afraid of the crowd, for they all thought that John was a prophet. Great intellectual theological arguments, these are not.

[11 : 03] Right, what it seems to come down to for them is, which answer suits us better? But the conundrum is that both answers come with, well, inconvenient strings attached. They can't really say that John was a prophet from God, they decide, because then we'd actually have to believe what he said, and repent and change, and crucially, bow to Jesus as king in Christ. But neither can we say that John was a false prophet, they think, because then the crowd would lose respect for them, because they all hold that John really was a prophet from God. This should not be a hard question for them to answer. They're meant to be the theology professors. If anyone should know, it should be them. But it is a tricky question for them, because they fear the consequences of their answer.

They're not answering in good faith, what is the truth? They're answering based on which option will protect their current lifestyle. And in fact, they come to the conclusion that neither answer can do that, it's a lose-lose for them. So they answered Jesus, verse 27, we don't know.

It's a total cop-out. What an embarrassment for people who are paid to know this stuff. Friends, they can't handle the truth. And so Jesus replies, neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. Because their non-answer to him reveals that, well, even if he told them, they wouldn't accept it. There's no point going any further.

And they're not the only ones who struggle with that, are they? If you're not yet a Christian, the truth about Jesus is inconvenient. It cuts across the grain of our lives.

Part of our struggle can be intellectual, if we're still learning about him. You know, if you're right at the beginning of that journey today, if you're just learning about Jesus and what he did and who he is, keep going with that. And if you come across things that challenge you, don't let that stop you.

[13 : 28] Ask someone, get some help, but keep going, press on, keep learning. But if we're honest, the bigger part of our struggle is spiritual, that we resist what we learn about Jesus because the implications, if it's true, would turn our lives upside down and would never be the same again.

And that's a struggle that we can all have, however clever we are. Theology professors, seminary lecturers, sometimes sadly even church leaders.

In fact, the well-known philosopher Thomas Nagel once wrote very openly, very honestly, I want atheism to be true. And I'm made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God.

I don't want there to be a God. I don't want the universe to be like that. Now, who would have thought that the chief priests of God's people in the first century and an atheist professor in the 21st century would come to the same conclusion?

They're asking the questions, but they don't want the answers. They can't handle the truth, not because of intellectual differences and disagreements, but because they have the same heart problem. Their complicity shows that it's not just their problem, it's a human problem throughout all ages. On our own, we can't handle the truth.

[15 : 15] Friends, if you're here to find out about Jesus, it helps. It really helps right at the start to recognize that and pray and ask God that wherever the evidence leads you, that's where you would follow.

And if you get stuck on something or you're afraid about what it would mean for your life if it was true, share that with a Christian friend or someone you know. Pray that God would take away that fear and instead give you the courage and the integrity in your heart to search for the truth, whatever the consequences it brings. Friends, Jesus does challenge us, but none of us want to be the kind of person who is too afraid to know the truth.

And brothers and sisters, if you know someone who's having a hard time with the gospel and can't get past this or that question, well, a good question to ask is, why are you asking?

Why are you asking? Now, you might not want to say that to them straight away, but even just ask in your own head, why is this person keeping asking this question? We might come to the realization that the issue is actually not up here, but in here.

Sometimes we can go round and round, can't we, explaining the same things, having the same conversations over and over with our friends and family and others, and we wonder, why don't they get it? Sometimes there are intellectual hurdles people have to the gospel, and of course, our faith is credible, and we can give an answer for the hope that we have.

[16 : 59] But friends, the chief priests remind us today that no one is neutral when it comes to Jesus. We're either open or we're closed to him, and more often than not, if someone's reached a dead end with the gospel, you can be sure that it's not because there isn't an answer to their question.

It's because they don't like the answer that the gospel gives. Whether that's down to fear of having to change the way they live, fear of losing other people's respect, perhaps fear of facing up to things that they would rather not think about, there is no wrong question for Jesus, but there is a wrong way to ask. And this is it. Keep refreshing the page, because we don't like what it says, and hoping that the next time we ask, the answer will come back different. We can sound super open, can't we? But really, in our heart of hearts, be closed.

Why do you ask? That's the first problem with the chief priests. They can't handle the truth about Jesus, and so therefore we find they won't do God's will. This is on to our second point this morning. Having not answered their question, Jesus now goes on to tell them a story or a parable.

Let's hear it again. What do you think, he says? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answered, I will not. But afterwards, he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, I go, sir, but did not go. Two sons, two responses. Interesting, isn't it, that neither of them do what they say they'll do. But in the end, one of them does what the father has asked and one of them doesn't. And if the chief priests struggled with the question about John the Baptist, well, Jesus' next question is even easier, verse 31. Which of the two did the will of his father? Right, this is a no-brainer, isn't it?

The first, they said. Obviously, it's the son who, even though he said no, later changed his mind and did what his father had asked him to do. And so the question behind the question, which son are the chief priests and elders most like? Well, I'll tell you who you're not like, said Jesus, verse 31.

[19 : 38] Jesus said to them, truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before ye. We thought last week, didn't we, about how vineyards and fig trees were often symbols of God's people. Notice the dad in the story sends the son into his vineyard to work.

So when Jesus is saying that the prostitutes and tax collectors have gone into God's kingdom first, well, he's comparing them to the first son who went into the vineyard before his brother.

Like him, the people Jesus is talking about are people who said no to God at first. Tax collectors because they lived by working for an occupying power, the Romans, prostitutes because they lived by selling their bodies for sex. But I take it that Jesus is using these people as examples of people more generally who the chief priests would automatically have ruled out of entering God's kingdom at all. But actually, says Jesus, people like that have been changing their minds and coming into God's kingdom after all. After saying no, they've then come in.

Whereas the chief priests and elders of God's people, by contrast, are the kind of people who said, yes, father, of course, I'll go straight to the vineyard and do whatever you say. These are people who would never have dreamed of saying no to God with their mouths. But in fact, says Jesus, after saying yes to God, they've never actually taken that step and done it. They've given the right answer, but they did the wrong thing. And so Jesus is comparing the chief priests and elders to the son who, by their own admission, didn't do the will of his father. That is a shocking thing to say. Now, what is Jesus basing that verdict on? Well, he says back to question one. It's time for exam review, if you like. For John, verse 32, came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Right? The crowd, says Jesus, were streets ahead of these so-called religious experts when it came to John the Baptist. Right? People that the chief priests looked down upon had spent generations saying no to God. But when John said repent, they did. They believed him.

And not just in an intellectual sense or a verbal sense, but in a practical and a real sense. And by the way, that's such an encouragement for those of us here this morning who've come from backgrounds, lifestyles, families that perhaps have spent generations saying no to God and why God is not welcome. But for however long that was true, Jesus says by believing the message about him and turning to him for forgiveness and new life, you are the son who did what the father wanted.

[23 : 08] You are doing God's will. What a wonderful encouragement for us. It's a wonderful promise to you, if you're still saying no to God, that the door to his kingdom is still open to you. There is still opportunity to change your mind and go in and work in his kingdom and do God's will.

But by contrast, the chief priests themselves, who'd spent generations saying yes to God, well, they heard John calling them to repent and they didn't. And in fact, we heard earlier that John saved some of his strongest preaching for the religious experts like them. You brood of vipers, he said, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come, bear fruit in keeping with repentance.

And do not presume to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father, look at our background. Boy, have we come from a family that said yes to God. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children from Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

But guess what? Even after hearing that, they did not run from God's anger. They did not change their lives. They did not bear good fruit. And above all, they did not recognize and bow to and follow the one John preached, Jesus Christ. They said what they thought God wanted to hear, but they didn't do what God told them to do. And even when they saw everyone else turning and believing, says Jesus, you did not afterwards change your minds and believe him. And so he shows them, doesn't he, that their first answer, we don't know, is really just an excuse for them not to do what John said they ought to do from God. And so as with the fig tree last time, and as with the farmers in the story next time, the people who were supposed to be at the heart of God's kingdom are found not to be doing what God wants them to do. So brothers and sisters, what does God want us and them to do differently?

Well, the clue is in the text. What does the first son do in order to do the father's will? The first son, it said, changed his mind and went. Whereas the chief priests did not change their minds and believe.

[25 : 58] Friends, what does God want? God wants change. Change. And not only of our minds, interesting that word, changed their minds can also be translated regret or repent. And I think it was the preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones who said that when we hear the good news about Jesus, it gets pulled first from our minds into our hearts and then through our hearts out into our will. So friends, repentance does start with a change of mind. A new understanding or a fresh recognition of what is true, but it doesn't stay there.

That change of mind becomes a change of heart. We feel differently now about ourselves, about our situation, about what we've done or not done, said or not said, believed or not believed. Our allegiance shifts from the lies that we've told ourselves to the truth that God has spoken. And in turn, that change of heart becomes a change of will. We don't just think differently. We don't just feel differently, but we now act differently. We live differently. We speak differently. We behave now in light of the truth.

And so that change that God wants, that repentance, it takes our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, our whole person to give ourselves over to him and his will. Imagine driving a car, you know, you see a bend coming up in the road or you see a stop sign. But unless you do something with that information direction and change direction or speed, you're heading into danger. And so you see it, you clock it, and you turn the steering wheel, which diverts the car. Or you notice it and you put your brake, you put your foot on the pedal that breaks the car and slows it down. What we know with our minds, we must press into our hearts until it changes the direction of our lives. Jesus reminds us there is zero point in knowing it all and not doing anything with it.

If our lives are still speeding over the edge of the cliff, well, what was the point in seeing the stop sign or the turn in the road? And that's vital for us all to grasp, Christian or non-Christian, baby Christian or lifelong Christian, because this is where the rubber hits the road with our faith.

Not do we believe it or say it, but do we do it? If I pulled the threads of what you know in your head, would I see those same threads running through your heart and tugging all the way at the other end in your life?

[28 : 56] We would all have some loose threads, and there would be other threads that are frayed, and there would be other threads that maybe had broken and needed to be repaired.

But if most of them don't pull all the way through or there are lots missing, then we're in real trouble, because we have not yet properly believed and repented.

You have long you've been a Christian. That's our daily task in our prayer and our living, to believe the gospel and therefore to bring our whole lives into line with what we know is God's will, because he's told us that in his word.

And of course, we do that by faith in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. But friends, the sharper point, and where we need to land this morning, is for those who know the truth very well, but like the chief priests, like that son, haven't actually gone into God's kingdom yet.

As it was back then in the temple, so it is now in Bon Accord, that people come in one week, believe the next, and enter God's kingdom before others who have sat in churches their whole lives.

[30 : 11] What do they know that you don't know? The whole point is that it's not about what they know, but it's that they come open and ready to accept what they learn about the gospel and about the Lord Jesus.

They are more ready and willing to change. Friends, don't be the son who says yes and doesn't go in. Don't be a person who looks and sounds like they respect God, but doesn't actually do what he says, which is not a call to try harder and to do better, but it is a call with John in the wilderness to repent and believe the message about Jesus, who died for our sins and was raised to give us a right standing with God.

Friends, if that's you today, it's time to change direction. Turn and trust him and follow him and enter his kingdom.

Let's pray for that together. Let's pray. Thank you.