

Jesus Refuses Religious Questions • Luke 20:1–8

If God is a Father and has a Son, who is God's wife? Why do we say when reciting the Apostles Creed that Jesus descended into hell? What is the unpardonable sin?

All interesting religious questions, questions that at one time or another, or many times, have been addressed and answered in sermons or classes here at Wooddale Church. That's because I believe that questions are good and healthy and should be asked and should be answered because that is the way we learn. It's part of openness.

But are all questions legitimate? Can you ask anything that comes to the top of your head? Well . . . maybe. For while all questions are legitimate, they may be asked in inappropriate ways.

There are some people who ask in order to listen and to learn and then there are other people who ask questions primarily to make a point or even to do some harm. We have a long standing practice at Wooddale Church that any anonymous notes or letters are to be immediately thrown away, but like any system there are always a few that get through. The most frustrating are those with questions that can't be answered, like "why do you do that?" or "why don't you do this?" One of my favorites happened several years ago. On the same Sunday after the same service we got two different anonymous notes. One asked why the worship center was so cold and the other one asked why it was so hot! If they had signed their names I would have liked to put them together on a thermostat committee and let them decide the temperature for the room.

Obviously, anyone who asks but won't receive an answer is asking inappropriately. This week watch on television as the news reporters deal with the different presidential candidates. Listen to the differences in the questions that are asked. Some are asked in order to determine positions, in order to help the American people in the decision of casting an informed vote for who will be president of the United States. Others ask tricky questions obviously intended to trip-up the candidate and make that person look foolish. It's those questions that are deemed inappropriate.

Usually Jesus was very open to questions, any questions because Jesus was a teacher. Good teach-

ers like questions because they recognize that many people will learn through a question-and-answer approach that maybe otherwise never would. So Jesus, throughout all of his public teaching, was regularly answering people and inviting them to ask new and different questions.

But there came a day when Jesus refused. It was in Jerusalem on the Tuesday after Palm Sunday, before Good Friday. It was Jesus' last Tuesday before he was crucified. Let's look at the story as it is told in Luke 19:45 through 20:8:

He (Jesus) entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers."

Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find anyway to do it, because all the people hung on His words.

One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders came up to him. "Tell us by what authority you do these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?"

He replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism — was it from heaven, or from men?"

They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven' he will ask, 'Why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet."

So they answered, "We don't know where it was from."

Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Jesus taught like someone who knew what he was talking

about. Jesus had an authority about him. He was a man of authority.

Our family went to a Twins baseball game at the Metrodome. After the game was over we were

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walking to our car through the crowd when this older couple cut across our path. They caught my attention for a number of reasons. In a generally younger crowd they stood out as being a bit older, also better dressed than most, but also different in manner. The man walked and carried himself as if he owned the place. Then I did a double take and realized it was Carl and Eloise Pohlad — and since he owns the Twins I guess it's O.K. for him to look and act like he owns the place! But what's irritating to all of us is when someone acts like he or she owns the place and has authority but doesn't. You want to say, "Who do you think you are?"

That is what these religious leaders were wondering about Jesus. He enters the temple, he kicks out the hawkers who were selling sheep, pigeons and coins and then he stays. He gathered the people around him, started up his classes and began to teach them, with authority, about God and about the kingdom of heaven. Who did he think he was? Where did he get the authority to do this?

The guys who were upset with him came from the religious establishment. It wasn't just one group; it was three groups. The first was the chief priests. In those days the high priest served for a year and then retired. The retired high priests were called the chief priests. Then there were the teachers of the law. They were religious lawyers who specialized in all the intricacies of the Hebrew law. In addition were the elders. Those three groups together made up what was called the Sanhedrin which was the supreme council and governing body of Judaism in the first century.

They figured they were in charge. They had authority. They were the ones who determined what happened in the temple. They were the ones who accredited people to teach and no one had the right to overrule them unless, of course, it was someone who was higher up and the only ones who were higher up were the Messiah or God Himself.

I can understand their being upset. I think about it in terms of Wooddale Church. If some stranger comes in here and starts moving the furniture around and begins setting up classes and teaching about God and never checks with the staff here at Wooddale to find out if that's O.K., you can bet they are going to be confronted. And probably quickly! There will be the pastors and the elders, and if they start moving furniture they will really be in trouble because the custodians are going to confront them! They all would say, "Who do you think you are? You can't just walk in here and change everything

around and set up your own classes. We have rules; we have brochures. You have to get all of this checked out first."

So these religious leaders come up to Jesus and asked two questions: "Tell us by what authority do you do these things?" and, "Who gave you this authority?"

In most cases, these would be reasonable, good, acceptable questions. But their motives were wrong. Look back in chapter 19, verse 47. "Everyday Jesus was teaching in the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him." They weren't interested in his answers; they were critics who were committed to his destruction.

Besides, this wasn't the first time these same guys asked these same questions. In John chapter 1 they went up to John the Baptist and asked him where he got his authority. In John chapter 2 the same group insisted that Jesus perform a miracle. "Come on, Jesus, do something! Make something dead, alive or something small, big. Do a trick for us as a sign so that we can check you out." They wanted to find out if he had authority and where he got it from.

Jesus had not only heard the question before, but he had also answered it before. In John chapter 10 when they asked him where he got his authority from he clearly explained that he got his authority from God the Father. He even did some miracles to accredit himself and prove he was from God. He said to them, "I and the Father are one." And they picked up stones to kill him. Just as they were putting their arms back to throw the first stones, Jesus said, "Wait a minute, what are you going to stone me for? Which miracle that I did are you going to kill me for?" Their answer in John 10:32 has to be one of the most significant lines in all the New Testament. They answered, "We are not stoning you for any of these miracles, but for blasphemy, because you claim to be God."

They understood fully who Jesus claimed to be and they understood clearly that he was God. No doubt about it. They had asked before. Jesus told them he was God and one who had authority. They had seen his miracles to prove it and this time around they were not looking for an answer. They were asking in order to turn the crowds that liked him against him so that they could kill him. They were on the attack and they refused to believe in him.

By the way, there are still some people like this today, too many unfortunately, who ask questions

to Jesus and about Jesus and get straight answers. They see his miracles but will not be convinced to believe. And sometimes they, too, turn out to be attackers against him.

Jesus was great. He saw right through them. He wasn't afraid of their questions. He was not unwilling to answer, but he had a better way to respond.

When I was in high school, I was on the high school debate team. I don't know that I was very good at it and our team didn't win a whole lot of things, but it was fun going around to the different tournaments at different high schools. When my group wasn't in a debate, you could go and listen to other debates. It was fascinating. Some of the debaters were sort of slow and stupid, but others were so quick, so knowledgeable, they would make you think to yourself, "I wish I could have thought of that!"

I read how Jesus handled these tough questions and I think to myself, "I wish we could have had him on our team — we would have won all these debates!" He is so bright, so alert, so insightful, so masterful. What Jesus did was answer their question with a question. He said, "Tell me, John's baptism — was it from heaven or from men?"

Jesus wasn't trying to be mean or tricky. What he was seeking to do was to force them to deal with the real issue that was behind their wrongly motivated questions. Remember that John the Baptist was Jesus' forerunner. He was a prophet. I think in some ways he was a rather strange character. He dressed in non-conventional clothes; he was sort of an anti-establishment guy; but people just loved him.. He lived out in a desert. He was a shouter — a hellfire-and-brimstone type preacher. People came by the thousands out of the villages and cities to see him and hear him, and when he spoke God grabbed their hearts. He would call on them to repent of their sins, to be publicly baptized as an expression of that and people did it by the hundreds and by the thousands. It was a phenomenon. He also said that his main job was to prepare the way of the Messiah and he announced to all of his followers that the Messiah was Jesus. Eventually, when he was martyred, many of those same people, believing what God had to say, became followers and disciples of Jesus.

What Jesus' critics said about John and about his baptism would determine what they would have

to say about Jesus. So Jesus' question back to them was to find out where they stood and to make them declare it. In the process they switched roles, and this put the other guys in a dilemma instead of Jesus.

These religious leaders who were supposed to be so smart and so articulate were unable to answer him. They had to huddle. They whispered to each other and one of them said, "What we ought to do is say, 'He was from heaven.'" Another one said, "If we say that, then Jesus is going to say, 'If John was from heaven, why didn't you believe in him?'" Then what are we going to do?" Somebody else said, "We can't say that; let's just say that he is from man. John the Baptist, he was a charlatan if there ever was one — God had nothing to do with him, it was all a fake. Let's just go out and say that." Somebody else said, "If you go out there and say that, all these people who think he was a prophet from God are going to kill you. You say it, I'm not going to say it!"

And so they went back and forth. It was a great tragedy, not only the words they said, but the process they followed. For there isn't a hint that they were seeking after the truth. There is no indication they wanted a right answer. They weren't seeking after God. All they wanted to do was to get their own way and to come up with some kind of politically appropriate answer so they could deal with the opinions of the crowds that were surrounding them.

There is a heavy warning there for us. When we grapple with tough issues, with questions of truth, with whether or not a message is from God or

is a human message, with issues of baptism and how to deal with who Jesus is and what he has to say — we need to avoid just giving the po-

litically acceptable answer. Our greatest concern shouldn't be what our parents have to say or people from church, or those at work, or our circle our friends. Our concern must be, are we seeking after God? Are we hungry for the truth?

Do you get the irony of this? These are the guys who said, "We are the religious authorities. What authority do you have?" You know the type, the ones who have all the answers. They really had no answer at all. They couldn't answer a basic, religious, spiritual question. Even after they consulted with each other, they couldn't come up with an answer. It was a pathetic thing. And by admitting that they

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didn't have an answer, they affirmed that Jesus did have the answer, that he spoke with authority and knew about that which he spoke. They lost and Jesus made his point. He proved his case. So everyone knew there was no need for Jesus to say anything more. He simply said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I'm doing these things."

Before we leave this, I'm concerned that somebody might leave here with the wrong impression. You might leave with the impression that Jesus dances around tough questions and doesn't really want to answer them. That is simply not the case. The New Testament is loaded with examples; read them for yourself. There have been thousands of examples where Jesus has fielded the toughest questions of all. He is not afraid of any question, nor does he lack any answers. He is deeply concerned that he gets to our motives and to our relationship with God and to the real bedrock issues.

Let me tell you, I've had my share of questions. My guess is that everybody has. Religious questions, spiritual questions, private questions, things that don't really quite make sense. I'm grateful that I've received a lot of answers from God, in the Bible or from the counsel and wisdom of Godly Christians. But I still have a few questions. I don't know that I can physically take a list to heaven, but I have several that I'm not going to forget to ask when I get my chance. But understand where I'm coming from — I'm not a skeptic or someone on the attack. I'm not out to get Jesus, I'm not out to put down God. I believe Jesus is who he claims to be. He is God. He is the Saviour. He has authority. I don't doubt that at all. I have my doubts and questions about some other things, but I'm absolutely committed to him. And it's out of that that I question and still seek the answers.

Several years ago, a man came to see me. He said he wanted to ask me some questions and we talked a very long time about the Bible, the Koran, the teachings and claims of Jesus and of Mohammed. This man was very smart — extremely knowledgeable and articulate. He knew his stuff. And it was for me both a stretching and interesting experience. But after a few hours, it was rather obvious that we were really going nowhere. And so I said something that just flabbergasted him. I said to him, "We've been talking for a long time and this could go on forever, so I'd like to suggest something. I'd like to suggest that you, right now, become a Christian. And here is what I suggest you do. Right now, pray and tell God that you've been

wrong and that you're sorry and that you believe completely in Jesus and you're asking God to forgive you because of Jesus. Tell him that you promise from now on you will be an ardent follower of Jesus Christ. I invite you to say it and talk to God now."

I wish I could describe to you the expression on his face. It wasn't really anger, he was absolutely astonished that I would say that to him. When he finally spoke he said, "No. I just can't do that." And while I was saddened by his answer, I guess I wasn't surprised.

The point is that questions are O.K. and doubts are O.K., but sooner or later we've got to quit asking the questions and make a decision. We can't just ask questions and linger in doubt forever and ever. We've got to decide for ourselves, do we believe Jesus or don't we?

What do you say? You don't have to tell me, but please tell God. I invite you, as I invited him to do, right here, right now, tell him you've been wrong. Tell God that you believe in Jesus and promise God that you will be an ardent follower of Jesus Christ from now until forever, because it is the best decision anyone can ever make.

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