

Hypothetical Questions

Several months ago, just to see if I could shake the bushes a bit, I rented a booth in a flea market and put up a sign, “Free Bible Study.” Seven people expressed a fleeting interest, and nothing ever came of this effort. But an eighth person entered the booth and said something that stuck in my mind.

He began, “I have a question, and if you can answer it, maybe we can talk more.”

“OK,” I said, grabbing my Bible. “Shoot.”

“Could God ever make a stone that was too heavy for Him to lift?”

At this point I realized the joke was on me, and I ended the conversation as quickly as possible.

It points out the fact that not every question is a serious question. Growing up, teachers always insisted that there is no such thing as a stupid question. But I guess that’s only true when the asker has a sincere desire to learn.

Sometimes a person will ask a question with hidden motives. Sometimes it is simply to hear himself talk, to prove his own intelligence. In Luke 10:25, a man asked the seemingly innocent question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Nine times out of ten, this would be the sort of question a teacher would love to hear and respond to, an indication of an open-minded and sincerely searching student. But, in this case, the man asked the question not because he sought the truth, but because he wanted to “put Jesus to the test.” Jesus was thus a little briefer than usual, and forced the man to answer his own question, saying, “What is written in the Law?” The man answered appropriately, “You shall love the Lord your God . . . and your neighbor as yourself” and Jesus pushed him to follow through. But the man hadn’t accomplished his real mission—making himself look smart—so he wasn’t done. “Wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus presented the Good Samaritan scenario, and once again made him answer his own question, “which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor?” (v. 36), and this time left him with a profound challenge—“Go and do likewise!” Jesus, the master teacher, had the ability to turn even harassing, self-serving questions toward the truth!

Sometimes the motives are more sinister, to entangle the teacher, to obfuscate truth under a layer of what-ifs and hypotheticals. On one occasion (John 8:6), the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman whom they had caught in the very act of adultery, and reminded everyone present of the rules of the Law to have her stoned. They asked Jesus for a ruling, hoping to put Him in a difficult situation. They didn't want enlightenment—they wanted “to have grounds for accusing Him.”

Jesus didn't play their game. He never played this game (see similar situations in Mark 8:11–12 and Luke 11:16). He simply “stooped down, and wrote with His finger on the ground.” Now, there's speculation as to what Jesus must have written. I couldn't prove it, but it's my opinion that He listed the names of several other sins that, according to the Law, were also worthy of death by stoning. Simple things such as disobedience to parents (Deut. 21:21), letting the name of God vainly slip out (Lev. 24:11–23), lying and stealing (Josh. 7:25), and ignoring the Sabbath (Num. 15:36). Sins which most everyone had committed. When Jesus straightened up and said, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her,” they all began to leave! Jesus did not deny the truth of the Law—indeed, the Law says she should be stoned (and, by the way, so should her partner have been, Deut. 22:24). But this became an opportunity, for all who wanted to see it, that every person stands rightly condemned, that every person deserves death in the sight of God, and that mercy and forgiveness are available through Jesus Christ.

Another example: Toward the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, “the Pharisees went and counseled together how they might trap him in what He said” (Matt. 22:15). They had no desire to learn; they had already made up their minds. They even collaborated with the Herodians (v. 16), who, normally, were their arch-enemies. They first slathered the trap with flattery, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful ... and defer to no one,” knowing that they were about to ask Him an unwinnable question that was designed to get Him in trouble with one of two parties—either the Jews or the Romans: “Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” This question was literally a powder keg, for Roman taxation had sparked a bloody revolt only a few years earlier, and continued to inflame the Zealot resistance.

Jesus didn't walk into the trap. He “perceived their malice and said, ‘Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?’” He made them answer the question

themselves, by pointing out whose image was on the coin, and said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” In other words, their drama was manufactured, their dilemma unnecessary. The intersection of the political realm and the spiritual realm can be an overlap rather than a collision (see Paul’s lengthy discussion in Romans 13). One can and should discharge his duties to government and still be faithful to God. With that one simple statement, both parties were forced to see reason. “And hearing this, they marveled, and leaving Him, they went away.”

The Sadducees tried it, too (Matt. 22:23–33). Now, the Sadducees insisted that there was no resurrection, and no life after death. They constructed an elaborate situation which, in their minds, proved there could be no such thing. They presented to Jesus the situation—a woman legally married to seven different brothers in succession. “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her?” It is an utterly absurd situation that would never actually happen in real life. Jesus’ answered, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God.” They needed to spend less time coming up with crazy situations, and more time trusting God and investigating His word. By the end of all this, no one “dared from that day on to ask Him another question” (22:46).

I say these things less to warn us of the danger of antagonistic questioners (though, if you are going to preach, you’ll deal with them sooner or later) and more to warn us of the danger of creating in our own minds silly questions to avoid the force of God’s word. Beware the *reductio ad absurdum*—the ridiculous question that gets us no closer to the answer. Many times I have been presented with the following: “So, a guy has a Bible study, believes in Jesus, confesses his faith, and wants to be baptized. He’s climbing up the steps to the baptistery, and an earthquake strikes at that very moment. A cinderblock comes out of the wall and hits him on the head, and he dies, literally at the edge of the baptismal water. Will he go to heaven?” That’s an utterly preposterous question that gets us no closer to knowing what must I do to be saved. The appropriate response is: “What does the Scripture say about the role of baptism in salvation?” and “Do you really so doubt the power of God, that He would allow something like that to happen?”

Beware also (again I emphasize, mainly in our own search for God’s will) the kind of question that grasps for straws. “Is drinking just a little *really*

sin?,” or “Where does the Bible say I *have* to go to Wednesday night Bible study.”

Now, it’s not that God faults us for deep investigation. In fact, we are told to “put to the test” both preachers and spirits (1 John 4:1, Rev. 2:2). Ask questions! Ask many questions! Ask hard questions! But always our motivation should be to discover truth, not hide from truth.

—*John Guzzetta*